

WILD AT HEART

John Guare, Jez Butterworth, and Larry Kramer on mad men.

BY JOHN LAHR

Once upon a time in the early sixties, Fourteenth Street in Manhattan was the Maginot Line between two warring worlds: the hidebound commercial Broadway theatre uptown and the new theatrical culture growing in the petri dishes of Village cafés and storefronts. So great was the divide that, until about 1968, the *Times* had no regular coverage of the louche and lively downtown goings on. Of the scores of playwrights who caught the new Off Broadway wave, only a few had the craft and the cunning to travel beyond it. John Guare was one of them. The era was increasingly belligerent, but Guare's edgy, imaginative storytelling never lost sight of the notion of entertainment. "I'm not so much interested in how people survive as in how they avoid humiliation," Guare wrote. "I think avoiding humiliation is the core of tragedy and comedy and probably of our lives." Onstage and off, Guare's method of avoidance was a charm offensive that kept the world both at attention and at arm's length, signalling his aim to please and to conquer.

The word "charm" comes from the Latin *carmen*, or song, and it's no accident that "The House of Blue Leaves," Guare's breakout play, which ran for more than three hundred performances Off Broadway in 1971, opens with a prologue in which its cruel and dreamy hero, a zookeeper and wannabe songwriter named Artie Shaughnessy, sings a medley of his cheesy ditties. In David Cromer's robust new revival (at the Walter Kerr), Artie (Ben Stiller), in this scene, is provocatively planted with his back to the audience—a way of refusing the character's charm and emphasizing his lack of control. Artie's debasement is palpable. He calls for a spotlight, but he doesn't get one. The wish to shine and to be seen is a very particular part of the American dream. The need to transcend the self fills Artie with expectation and desperation. "I'm looking for Something/I've searched

everywhere," he sings. "I'm looking for something/And just when I'm there,/Whenever I'm near it/I can see it and hear it,/I'm almost upon it/Then it's gone." Guare's accomplishment is to capture the bright effervescence of his characters' desires, as well as the punishing dark fact that everything they want seems to be worthless.

"The House of Blue Leaves" takes place in 1965, on the day that Pope Paul VI is coming to New York and will be passing through Sunnyside, Queens, where Artie lives. "I haven't seen so many people, Artie, so excited since the première of 'Cleopatra!'" Artie's downstairs neighbor and inamorata, Bunny Flingus (the droll and daffy Jennifer Jason Leigh), says, as she tries to roust her man out of his sleeping bag on the sofa. "It's that big. Breathe! There's miracles in the air!" From the looks of Artie's cluttered, derelict apartment, where there are bars on the windows and the whiff of collapse is in every dusty corner, a miracle may be needed. Fame is the blessing that Bunny and Artie are hoping for. They plan to ditch Artie's wife, marry, and head for Hollywood, where Artie's producer friend will get his songs into movies. "Our whole life is beginning—my life—our life," Bunny exults, adding, "Oh, Artie, tables turn." Artie's son, Ronnie (Christopher Abbott), also plans to turn the tables on his own nonentity—by blowing up the Pope. "I'll show you all," he tells the audience as he prepares his time bomb and anticipates the press coverage. "I'll be too big for any of you." Guare's characters' imaginations have been entirely overrun by the imperialism of the famous, whose success demeans and defines their every ordinary moment. "When famous people go to sleep at night, it's us they dream of, Artie," Bunny says. "The famous ones—they're the real people."

"Why shouldn't Strindberg and Feydeau get married . . . and 'The House of

Blue Leaves' be their child?" is how Guare explained the stylistic merging of the savage and the farcical in his own work. The savage, here, is represented by the soul-murdered Bananas Shaughnessy (Edie Falco), Artie's chronically depressed wife and the victim of his gargantuan ambitions. Pale, dazed, her unkempt blond hair hanging to her shoulders, Falco's Bananas haunts Artie as both an indictment and a destiny. She's a terrified and terrifying presence. On her haunches, playing at being a dog, she tells Artie, "I like being animals. You know why? I never heard of a famous animal. Oh, a couple of Lassies—an occasional Trigger—but, by and large, animals weren't meant to be famous." The grates on Artie's windows are intended not so much to keep people out as to keep the suicidal Bananas in. In one terrific scene, Artie shoves tranquilizers into her mouth. "I'm a peaceful forest," she says, "but I can feel all the animals have gone back into hiding. And now I'm very quiet. . . . But once—once let me have an emotion? Let the animals come out?" Guare's comic world is a kind of human zoo. During the course of the evening, the animal in almost everyone comes out; Guare's characters, caged in their desperate habitats, survive not by playing dead but by devouring one another.

Jez Butterworth's "Jerusalem" (sупerbly directed by Ian Rickson, at the Music Box) is a hymn to the wild at heart, in the form of an English Lord of Misrule named Johnny (Rooster) Byron (Mark Rylance). Rooster, a sort of Green Man living in a trailer at the edge of a wood, an anarchic Arden, has taken up residence in his own swashbuckling fantasy of self. For him, life is more or less a permanent festival. His escapades—the dope he deals, the booze he drinks, the parties he throws, the tall tales he tells—have drawn around him a merry band of the dead-headed young, whom he lovingly addresses as the "minions of my kingdom." No wonder the local authorities and the new owners of the estate he's camped out on want him gone. "Hear ye. Hear ye," Rooster crows from inside his trailer as council nabobs tape an eviction notice to the door. "With the power invested in me by Rooster Johnny Byron, who can't be here on account of the fact he's in Barbados this week with Kate

Moss, I, his faithful hound Shep, hereby instruct Kennet and Avon's and all those sorry cunts on the New Estate Rooster Byron ain't going nowhere. . . . Now kiss my beggar arse, you Puritans!" Will he win or lose? That's the dramatic issue, but it's not the point of the play.

From the moment the hungover Rooster emerges from his trailer to blink at the bright new day, in a Second World War helmet and goggles, with a megaphone in hand and a klaxon hanging from his belt like a pirate's sword, we sense that we are in the presence of a kind of demi-urge. Resplendent in tattoos and bling, Rooster staggers bare-chested through his morning ablutions, which include doing a handstand on a rain barrel to wet his head, and dancing to a blues record while he mixes and chugs down his version of a health drink (milk, vodka, egg, a twist of speed). A Dionysian force of nature, a kind of poet of the primal, whose revelry is pitched not just against authority but against the tedium of convention, Rooster is one of the most sensational creations in English drama of the past twenty years. He is the essence of the phallic, the merry Andrew, the ring-tailed roarer: a whirlwind of eloquence, whose idiom taps deep into the linguistic and spiritual folk roots of England. Take, for instance, his contention that all the males in his family are born with teeth:

Thirty-two chompers. And hair on them's chest. No wailing nor weeping. Talkin' straight off. This one, me, he sits up, wipes dew from his eyes and calls, "Mother, what is this dark place?" And she replied, "'Tis England, my boy. England."

Toward the end of the play, Rooster gives his six-year-old son some Falstaffian advice: "Don't listen to no one and nothing but what your own heart bids. Lie. Cheat. Steal. Fight to the death. Don't give up." As he gears up for his final battle with authority, he beats on a drum to summon

his mythic forefathers. "Rise up! Rise up, Cormoran. Woden. Jack-of-Green. Jack in Irons. Thunderbell. Buri. Blunderbor, Gog and Magog." The scene plays not as delusion but as protest and prayer. "Come, you drunken Spirits. Come, you battalions. Come, you giants!" he incants as the trees rustle around him.

Rylance's deep and daring performance, which he premiered in London,

revival of his pathfinding 1985 play, "The Normal Heart" (at the Golden, under the crisp direction of George C. Wolfe and Joel Grey). "The Normal Heart" is a war play, a powerful piece of propaganda—a sort of "Watch on the Rhine" for the plague years—and this is both its asset and its limitation: the play is important to the social history of its times rather than to theatre

history. In a war, the rules of conventional civility no longer apply, and Kramer's lacerating, raging, volcanic voice is part of the subject of the evening. As Flannery O'Connor once said, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures." Kramer is certainly loud, and the figures he draws are startling beyond belief. At the time that the play begins, forty-one men have died of AIDS; today, Kramer estimates, there are seventy-five million infected and thirty-five million dead.

The current production is distinguished by David Rockwell's gorgeous white-box set, with ghostly headlines and statistics about the epidemic embossed on its walls—a sort of Braille of barbarity. Joe Mantello plays Kramer's surrogate, Ned Weeks, an activist and the founder of an H.I.V. advocacy group

(Kramer co-founded Gay Men's Health Crisis, in 1982), and he invests Weeks's roaring protest with a seductive vulnerability and humor that make it almost palatable. A tip of the cloth cap, too, to the spirited Ellen Barkin, as the starchy, embattled doctor who goads Weeks to pressure the gay community into abstinence. "I don't consider going to the baths and promiscuous sex making love," she tells him, one force field to another. "I consider it the equivalent of eating junk food, and you can lay off it for a while." ♦



Menagerie à trois: Stiller, Falco, and Leigh in "House of Blue Leaves."

in 2009, defies the tropes of critical language. It is unprecedented, really. You could position it somewhere between acting and athletics; its mesmerizing, sensual recklessness, however, has to be witnessed to be understood. Rylance makes you believe not only that giants exist but that he is one of them. And he is.

"This is a war for which there is no general," Larry Kramer writes of the AIDS epidemic, in a letter that is handed to each member of the audience at the end of the latest, and best,