

TIES THAT BLIND

Families in free fall in plays by Nick Payne and Lisa D'Amour.

BY JOHN LAHR



Enter Nick Payne, a strapping British playwright at the beginning of a great career. Still in his twenties, Payne exudes none of his generation's glib nihilism. His voice is quiet and quirky, his imagination bold. His plays aspire to intellectual and visual astonishment, combining curiosity and compassion into satisfying puzzles, which bring together public concerns and private griefs in order to explore the irony between the realms. His play "Constellations" (which was staged at the Royal Court, in London, earlier this year, and is being remounted on the West End in November) is a brilliant metaphysical meditation that touches on science, cancer, death, and ro-

mance. Now Payne is making his American debut, with a 2009 work, "If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet" (at the Laura Pels), which uses the front-page issues of climate change, obesity, and school bullying as paths to a deeper inquiry into *Homo sapiens'* self-destructiveness. In addition to the luck of talent, Payne has had the luck of collaboration with the director Michael Longhurst, who matches his playful rigor with an inventiveness all his own.

As the audience arrives, a curtain of rain is pelting down into a glass tank that extends, moatlike, along the front of the proscenium. Center stage, the usual paraphernalia of family melodrama—chairs, tables, beds, bureaus—have been tipped over and

crammed together, in a sort of Rubik's Cube of clutter, as if the entire set were about to be shipped to another location. (From the pile, the actors grab what they need to set each scene.) A fifteen-year-old named Anna (the excellent Annie Funke) wanders around the idiosyncratic set in school uniform, sneakers, and backpack, then sits down in a chair upstage and waits for the show to begin. When it does, what we hear about is not Anna and her problems, which are at the heart of the play, but her father's obsession with saving the planet.

George (the expert Brian F. O'Byrne) is writing a book called "How Green Are Your Tomatoes: The Carbon Footprint of Practically Everything." He's a fanatic. "A latte a day, for instance, equates to roughly the same CO₂ as a sixty-mile drive in an average car," he says. "Everything, you see, everything counts a little more than we think." George preaches the gospel of eternal vigilance. In his self-absorption, however, he pays no attention to his family or to the toxic emotional footprint he is leaving on it. "George, I miss you," his wife, Fiona (Michelle Gomez), a buttoned-down schoolteacher, tells him. "And I understand why you're doing what you're doing and I understand the time it takes. But there's a bit of me that's starting to worry." Fiona, too, is an absent presence. Caught up in a school staging of "War of the Worlds," she doesn't recognize at first that her daughter—who has recently transferred to the school—is being bullied. (Anna has been suspended for two weeks for head-butting a girl who poured custard in her shoes.) "Have I single-handedly turned my only child into an antisocial, overweight loner?" Fiona asks. No, the play makes clear, she's had help from her husband. When they are both called to account, the indictment comes from George's deadhead younger brother, Terry (Jake Gyllenhaal), who returns from a year and a half of wanderlust to crash at their house, and forms a friendship with Anna. "That girl has been criminally fucking neglected!" Terry shouts.

As Gyllenhaal superbly plays him, Terry is a bearded, feral soul, who sidles into view in a gray knit cap and a yellow T-shirt, at once heartbroken and hapless. "I, I. I fuck things up. And it drives me mad," he says. He's full of good intentions and bad advice. (He suggests to Anna that she tell her school tormentor "that if she gives you any more grief, I'll be taking

Funke and Gyllenhaal, as niece and uncle, in "If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet."

shits on her doorstep for the next month and a half.") He can't mobilize thought; he is clueless—a state that is betrayed by his syntax. His sentences, like his life, have no direction or resolution. "Prb'ly shoulda rung or something, but," he says when he sees Anna (whom he addresses as "Hannah") for the first time. "Phone was fucked and I thought, by the time I've arsed around getting change for the fucking. You know the phone, and that, thought I might as well just."

Terry is a kissing cousin of David Mamet's feckless idiot Teach, in "American Buffalo." (When Terry talks about the guy his ex-girlfriend has taken up with—"And fuckin', fuckin'. Richard fucking . . ."—you can hear echoes of Teach's famous entrance: "Fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie.") Gyllenhaal parses every piquant note of Terry's paradoxical nature, keeping his danger and his decency in balance. In unboundaried moments, Terry offers Anna beer, condoms, and a joint, and lets her slip out on a date. At other times, he seems to have a more adult purchase on reality. "What's y'daughter's favorite subject, George?" he asks his brother. "What's her favorite meal? Favorite film, favorite band. Any of it. Stab in the dark, George. Need to think about what y'doing."

In a finely pitched, toe-curling scene, in which George struggles to make contact with Anna over an Indian meal—"It was recommended, you see. I'm told they source everything locally"—he excuses himself from the table to take a business call. Anna walks out of the restaurant and into the next scene, upstage, where she proceeds to undress and lower herself into a large tub of water. Anna sinks under the water and stays under for a long time; when she comes up for air, she tries to slit her wrists. As she does, water starts to sluice downstage into the long tank. At this point, "If There Is I Haven't Found It Yet" turns from play to parable. The stage fills with water; the characters slosh, ankle deep, through the mess they've helped to make.

In the course of the evening, the characters occasionally toss a prop or a piece of furniture, without explanation, into the tank at the front of the stage. (The night I saw the show, a stool, a sabre-toothed-tiger skull, a flour cannister, an orange, a ketchup bottle, a bike, and pages of manuscript bobbed in the water.) At the finale, as George begins to read from his book—"Everything that follows is dedicated in its

entirety to my wife and daughter"—the spectacle of sodden detritus below him works as a thrilling metaphor of the trail of destruction that man leaves in his capricious passage through time.

The title of Lisa D'Amour's sharp, satirizing comedy "Detroit" (well directed by Anne Kauffman, at Playwrights Horizons) refers not to the city but to the state of collapse that it embodies. Here four suburban next-door neighbors get acquainted over a patio barbecue—during which the patio door won't close, the umbrella collapses, and nothing else in life is working well, either. Kenny (Darren Pettie) and Sharon (Sarah Sokolovic)—who met in rehab and don't yet have furniture—are being hosted by Mary (Amy Ryan), a paralegal, and her forlorn husband, Ben (the droll David Schwimmer), who has been laid off by the bank where he worked and is apparently setting up a Web site and a financial-planning business. Through energetic palaver about medical problems, cooking, and entertainment, the characters begin to reveal the fragility of their identities: we're looking at a collection of lost souls trying to dummy up a destiny for themselves.

At another get-together, the couples start to dance. As the boom box pulses, the fun develops, by degrees, into a frenzied and sidesplitting saturnalia. Spinning, kicking, hopping like dervishes, the couples are urged onward by the rhythm and the release of the dance, to which the ensemble fully commits itself. (Ryan is particularly hilarious as she bops and swoops maniacally around the stage.) Kenny and Ben start chanting "I'm feeling, I'm feeling . . ." Ben continues, "I'm feeling like telling the truth." In chorus mode, the others answer, "Tell it, baby, tell it. Tell it, baby, tell it." Ben replies, "I have no Web site. I have no business cards. I have no plan, I got nothing! Nothing, nothing, nothing!" And Kenny and Sharon swirl around him, singing, "Ben's got nothing, Ben's got nothing." Sharon adds, "When you are at zero, anything can happen." Sexual boundaries are broken, furniture is smashed; finally, in one ecstatic and incendiary *coup de foudre*, Mary and Ben's dream of the good life goes up in smoke. The suburbs once personified the American dream. A dream, "Detroit" seems to be saying, is something you may be forced to wake up from. ♦