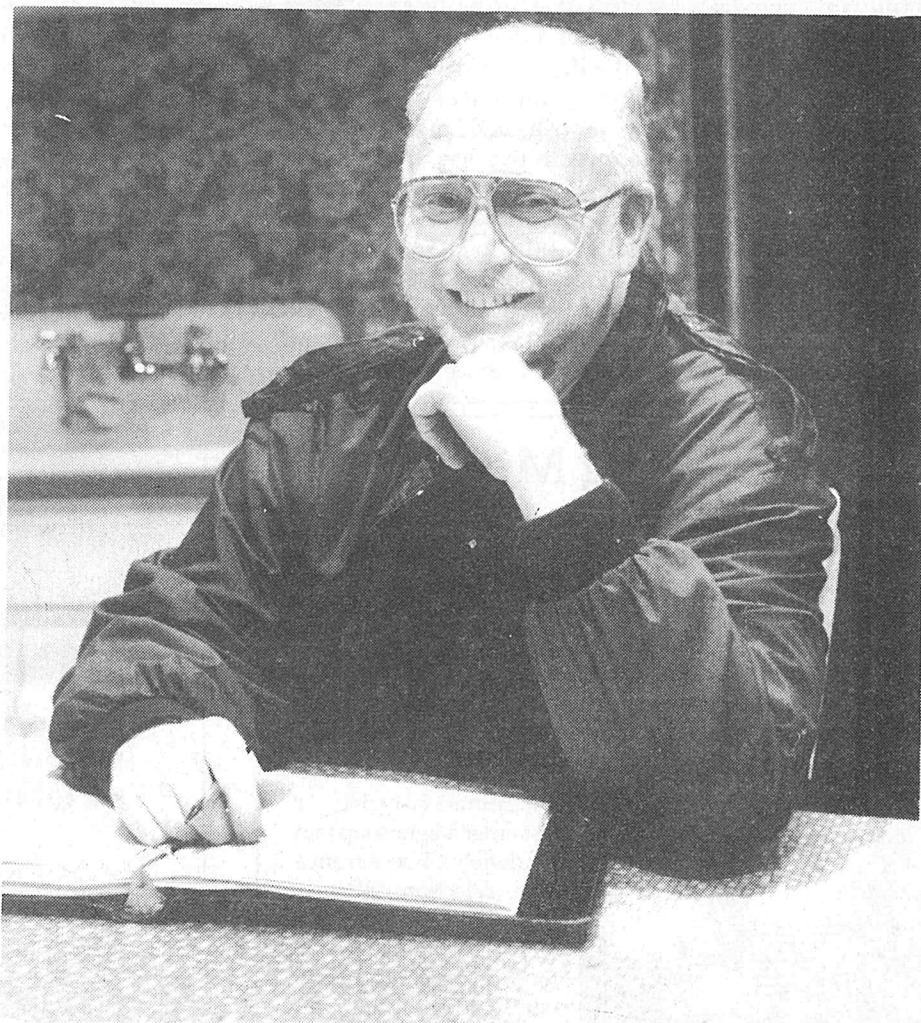


The Effects of Staten Island on a Pulitzer Prize- Winning Playwright



Gerry Goodstein

*In Amulets Against the Dragon Forces,
Paul Zindel conjures up memories of his
highly singular childhood*

by Gerard Raymond

Dewhurst, "There is no place for anti-Semitism, racism, or anti-homosexual attitudes in *New York* magazine, and you won't find any."

Initially, Papp also called for Simon's dismissal, but apparently he's reneged a bit. His position as a civil libertarian is well known. "No, I don't want to see him fired. The man is too unimportant. Anyway, it's out of my hands. It's not producer vs. critic anymore. It's much bigger than that. It's a societal issue and society has to take a stand on whether it'll tolerate obnoxious statements like Simon's without responding.

"I'm not advocating anything, but people who object could be involved in civil disobedience demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns, or they could boycott advertisers. That's a democracy...frankly, I could keep Simon from the theater. Not that I would. He's too small."

Papp's wrath is not exclusively targeted at Simon. When the reporter points out that *Daily News* reviewer Howard Kissel also objected to Patinkin's performance on the grounds

that Patinkin "often sounds very Jewish which helps neither the verse nor the play," Papp says, "He said *that!* Let me get ahold of that paper." Let me get a hold of that paper: [Rustling of pages can be heard in the *did* say it. The man is a schmuck! Let me spell that for you. S-C-H-M-U-C-K. Schmuck. You know, when the *Daily News* hired him, I wrote to the publisher to tell them what a poor choice he was. Kissel writes things like that because he's frustrated. Nobody listens to him."

Told of Papp's comments, Kissel responds, "Well, I'm glad to know I was hired despite his letter." Regarding his *Winter's Tale* review, he says, "When a performer's style or speech calls attention to itself, it's just inappropriate. Patinkin's inflections were at times very Jewish and inappropriate to Shakespeare. But then, given the weirdness of the whole production, in which anyone was allowed to do almost anything, it all fits." As for Papp's "schmuck" remarks, Kissel adds, "No one has done more to lower the standard of Shakespearean performance than Joe Papp. Since I've been saying

this for many years, I'm not surprised at the vehemence of his remarks. I find him amusing."

Kissel's amusement is not shared by Papp, who says, "My problem with all of them, and that includes Frank Rich at the *Times*, is *why* these reviewers are not held to the same level of accountability as the reporter covering, say, Peking. Theater is *news*. Reviewers are reporters, not stars. Yet they're treated as stars. They're the *only* ones on a newspaper or magazine who do not even have to reflect the publication's viewpoint."

"I disagree," Kosner retorts. "I can tell you that at *New York* magazine John and the other reviewers all meet the standards we set forth: intelligence, conscientiousness, seriousness of purpose, and attentiveness. As for reviewers not being obliged to conform to the magazine's viewpoint, not true! At *New York*, we have no particular viewpoint!"

"You know what I'd like, what I'd *really* like," Papp says. "I'd like to see all the reviewers in New York put in a room, the doors sealed permanently. And then let them all talk each other to death forever." □

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“For me, the biggest tragedy has to do with time affecting the ability to love.”

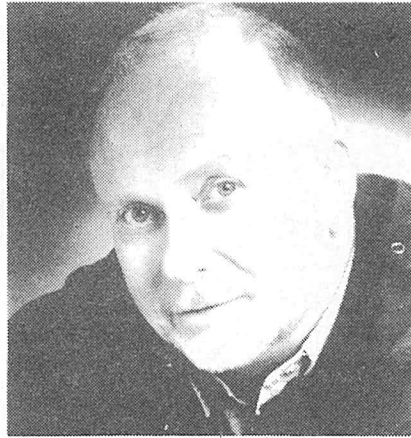
I was really born to be a playwright,” says Paul Zindel. Like Chris, the 16-year-old protagonist of *Amulets Against the Dragon Forces*, his new play which recently opened at Circle Rep, the young Zindel would make up stories using marionettes and statuettes. During his lonely childhood on Staten Island in the '40s, and as a mature playwright, author and screenwriter today, he realized “the thing that keeps me alive is storytelling. That’s how I problem-solve. When I looked back, I was happy to see I was making a little stage on which I was doing everything that a playwright would be doing. Here was somebody who was trying to create his own heaven, which is what happens each time when you begin a play.”

Zindel has worked a long time to seek this particular heaven. Some of the characters and events in *Amulets Against the Dragon Forces* were first encountered in his young adult novel, *Confessions of a Teenage Baboon* in 1977; an earlier version of the play, *A Destiny on Half Moon Street* (also known as *The Party Begins at Midnight*) was first produced at Florida’s Coconut Grove Playhouse in 1983. In each of these several incarnations, the story remained distinctly autobiographical.

Zindel’s mother Beatrice is the inspiration for many of the central characters in his books and plays. A domineering woman, she was abandoned by her husband, a New York policeman, when Zindel was two years old. *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, produced in 1971, immortalized Beatrice as the cynical and bitter Beatrice “Betty the Loon” Hunsdorfer, who vents her frustrations and unhappiness on her two teenage daughters. In *Amulets*, the young boy’s mother, Mrs. Boyd, is a practical nurse who, like Beatrice, travels from place to place looking after the terminally ill. Mrs. Boyd cannot forgive her husband, also a policeman, for the infidelities which led to their divorce.

Like the young Zindel, the boy Chris

solely feels the lack of a father—a piece of his life that can never be replaced. “When I grew up,” Zindel says, “I was the outsider. I was the only kid whose family was divorced.” Today, divorce carries less of a stigma. Now 53, he feels that time (and the changes it brings about in its passage) is the most important element in his play, set in 1955. “When I look back, exploring elements of myself and look at what I sometimes call the inspirational homonculi of these characters, one of the tragedies is that time has determined who they are, what they do, and how they feel. For me, the biggest tragedy has to do with time affecting the ability to love and be intimate. Time creates the fashion of how we love and our sexual behavior.”



Such changing fashions have affected the plot of *Amulets*. In *Confessions of a Teenage Baboon*, the character of Mr. Dipardi, the shipyard worker who hires Mrs. Boyd to nurse his dying mother, is a hard-drinking man who likes the company of teenagers. He rehabilitates a street kid named Harold and attempts to be a father to Chris. In the play, Harold is a street hustler whom Dipardi has picked up and taken under his wing. A homosexual suggestion in the novel has been made explicit in the play.

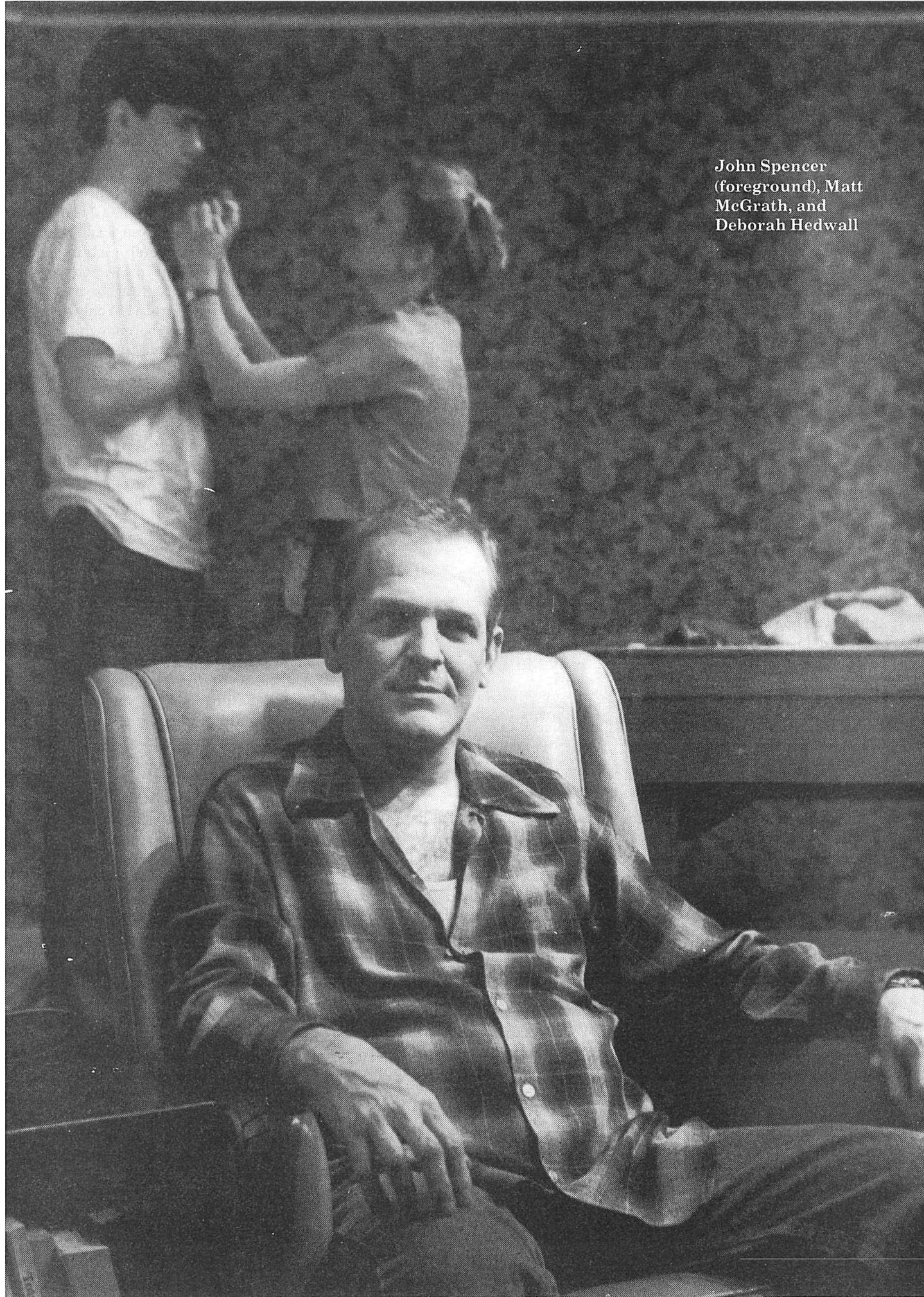
“I knew that I would eventually want to deal with these themes for an adult audience,” he says. “There was, probably, a great amount of personal fear tied into this. I was not ready to face whatever I had to face in myself in order to write that way. Here’s where time and the changing fashion of sexuality can be a friend. I can now talk about my own

dimensions of homosexuality, and because I insist on my own dimensions of heterosexuality [Zindel has been married for the past 15 years and is the father of two teenagers], it lets me go back and look at this in a way that is comfortable and exciting for me. Hopefully, it brings a truth not only to me, which would not be enough to write a play about, but transcends that into some sort of lesson learned for the viewer as well. I hope there is something universal about this little boy going through this labyrinth, this rite of passage and connections with these people. The last line of the play is, ‘It’s all in the timing m’boy.’ If I was born now, I’d have fewer hang-ups in the sexual areas than I did.”

Amulets deals with young boys hustling on Stuyvesant and Hyatt Streets on Staten Island circa 1955. “This is something I wanted to write about, because there was a sexual behavior, a sexual culture, on Staten Island which I had never seen before on stage. On Staten Island every Friday or Saturday night men and women would go to a bar; as the evening went on, some of the men got women and took them out in cars or whatever—they didn’t usually go home, everything was done outside—and then whoever was left over, people just made do. There was no conversation about it the next day, whether you went home with a sailor or with someone’s father, it just was taken for granted. Now the difference in my play is that Harold is staying a little bit too long with Dipardi—he’s cooking for him, and when you do that, that’s against tradition.”

Judging from Zindel’s stories, Staten Island, which Chris describes in *Confessions* as “a sort of geographical version of a detached retina,” must be one of the most eccentric corners of the earth. In *Amulets* Chris declares that “if Margaret Mead had first come to Staten Island, she wouldn’t have had to spend all those years studying the bizarre behavior of pygmies in Borneo,” adding that he spent 30 years there. “It

John Spencer
(foreground), Matt
McGrath, and
Deborah Hedwall





Loren Dean and Matt McGrath

was a big piece of my life and therefore it was what I knew.”

In college, Zindel attended a conference at which playwright Edward Albee spoke. After taking a course with Albee, who became his mentor, he wrote his first play, *Dimensions of Peacocks*, in 1959. It was the precursor of the story which grew into *Confessions of a Teenage Baboon* and *Amulets Against the Dragon Forces*. He wrote two more plays before *Gamma Rays* was written in 1962. In the interim, he had a much publicized falling-out with Albee. “This is first time I have really understood it,” Zindel remarks, “because it has now happened to me with other young writers who came into my life. What happens is that a young writer selects a mentor. You want to be like that person. You want to love that person. Your mentor is God; Edward Albee was the God of the Universe at that time. But when you become educated and insightful and

more informed you find that your God was created from other ashes—he didn’t leap full-blown. And so, when I read Eugene Ionesco’s *Jacques ou la soumission*, I saw where *The American Dream* [Albee’s 1961 play] came from. And then you find that you can’t be like anybody else; you have to look for your own fingerprints, your own signature, and then you grow up.”

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, the play that would give Zindel his own identity, was eventually produced by the Alley Theater in Houston in 1965. On the strength of it he received a Ford Foundation grant to become playwright-in-residence at the Alley Theater. He spent a year there, taking a sabbatical from teaching, and learned the nuts and bolts of playwriting.

A television version of *Gamma Rays* in 1966 led to a new development in Zindel’s career: Charlotte Zolotow, a children’s book editor at Harper and Row, was struck by the


two teenage sisters in the show and suggested to Zindel that he work in the field of young adult fiction. “Writing about teenage protagonists suited me,” he says, citing Noel Coward’s admonition that one should pop out of a different hole every time. Zindel’s first novel, *The Pigman*, was published in 1968 and was an instant success. When *My Darling, My Hamburger* came out the following year, he became a leading author in a rapidly growing young adult market.

Zindel drew on his experience as a teacher, along with his Staten Island background, for his teenage novels. Now that he has quit teaching, he misses the fresh supply of material his students provided. “You miss out on the imagery and the energy that they have. I don’t miss out on their slang because I never used it. Slang only lasts two or three years. So I create my own form of language by using hyperbole and bathos, which gives the effect of slang, but which

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isn't." With his most recent young adult novel, *A Begonia for Miss Applebaum* (1988), Zindel says his son and daughter, aged 14 and 12, "are just reaching the age when their material is now starting to affect my writings."

Zindel considers himself primarily a playwright but found the young adult genre a convenient means to try out the stories he had to tell. "In a sense it was something that Tennessee Williams did in his short stories. Working in another form lets you initially live with themes in the plot in the form of a beginning sketch." He points out that if he only had the theater as a means to tell stories—and "I must tell stories; that's how I stay sane"—he might have starved.

The fate of *Gamma Rays* demonstrates the risks of having a single profession. "Brooks Atkinson flew down to see the play when opened in Houston in 1965. He wrote a review in the *Times* stating that my play was elliptical. That was the nicest thing he said about it. In 1970, the play opened [with Sada Thompson] in New York with one sentence added to it, no other change, and it won the Pulitzer Prize."

His next play, *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*, which was produced on Broadway in 1971 with Julie Harris, Estelle Parsons, and Nancy Marchand, was classified as a hit by *Variety*. Since then, Zindel has not had comparable success in New York; such works as *The Secret Affairs of Mildred Wild* and *Ladies at the Alamo* had disappointing runs. In the mid-70s he went to Hollywood, where, among other things, he wrote the screenplay for the expensive and disastrous film of the Broadway musical *Mame* starring Lucille Ball. Among his other screenplays are two for director Andrei Konchalovsky, *Maria's Lovers* (1984) and *Runaway Train* (1985), and the 1985 television adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*. Although the money was good in California, Zindel claims he was "damaged" in the process: "Films are so collaborative, and you can no longer approach your work from a

central truth of yourself. You have to also consider the truths of the producer, the star, and the director. After your first draft, you end up becoming a stenographer. This process is very destructive." Three years ago, Zindel returned to New York, having realized that "you have to use money to support talent. Now I only write those things that I want to write, that I am directly connected to."

The most personal of Zindel's works has an off-the-wall aspect so outrageous that it can only be true. In *Confessions* the novel, Chris tells the reader: "One of the first things I learned about Life: it's not always like you read about in your local newspaper. It's more like what you read in the *National Enquirer*." Zindel agrees. "I found that to be absolutely true. You always think the person at the next table is normal. All you have to do is visit other people, let them talk for a little while and you discover how unique they are and the strange things they do in their houses. It's unbelievable." In *Amulets* a dying old woman viciously bites people who try to help her; a mother makes her 16-year-old son urinate in a milk bottle. Zindel acknowledges the "outrageous audacity" of his stories. In this play, "all the elements are true. Some things may have come from other parts of the world, or I have found images somewhere else, but as I coalesce them into these characters, the concentration of truth is disturbing"

With *Amulets Against the Dragon Forces* Zindel feels he has finished the story that he has carried around for 30 years "in the very best way I could." Having finally perfected a heaven, he can now put it to rest. "As a mature writer I know that the heavens are temporary and I have to move on. I'll now be going after the next paradise." Will his new paradise also be located on Staten Island? Zindel will not disclose anything about the new play he is now working on, but he confirms that *Amulets* marks the last time Staten Island will be featured in his work. "The people I now have to write about don't live there." Has he worked through all the permutations of Beatrice? "Yes, this is the last time you will see Beatrice in action!" □

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