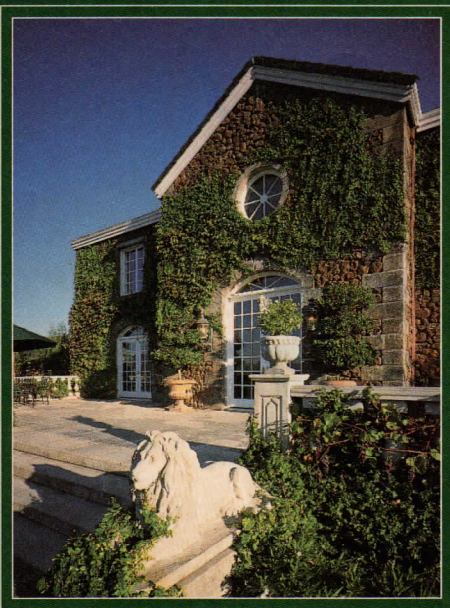


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# PERFORMING ARTS

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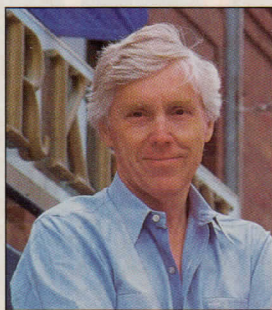
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# Richard Greenberg's Hurrah premieres at SCR

by Gerard Raymond



KEN HOWARD

*The Triumph of Love* (1997) adapted by Richard Greenberg  
stars Tom Beckett and Patrick Kerr.

Playwright Richard Greenberg smiles affably when he's told that his characters talk better than most people do in real life. "Conversation is drama," he exclaims. "I want to exercise articulateness. That's one of the pleasures of the theater." Anyone who has followed Greenberg's career from his early success, *Eastern Standard* a decade ago, through to his current *Hurrah at Last*, which premieres this month at South Coast Repertory, will acknowledge the New York-based writer as one of the most witty and articulate playwrights of the contemporary American theater. Those who may have complained that he was perhaps too clever by half in the past, may discover a new depth and complexity under the elegant surfaces of his latest work.

"I think a more complicated sense of life

has crept into Richard's work over the last several plays," says Jerry Patch, dramaturge at South Coast Repertory Theater. *Hurrah at Last* is the fourth Greenberg play to receive its world premiere at the Costa Mesa theater. South Coast first commissioned Greenberg to write a play for the company in 1987. The playwright, then 28, was only a few years out of the Yale Drama School and had yet to make his Broadway debut with *Eastern Standard*, but he already showed a particular talent which interested the artistic directors of the theater. "For 35 years we have been producing new work which has been very much about the use of language — playwrights such as Tom Stoppard, David Mamet, David Hare, and Simon Gray," says Patch. "Richard has his own voice, but he's [another such] intelligent writer who handles language very precisely. So

he fits our mold very well."

For an insight into Greenberg's current play its useful to know something about a significant autobiographical detail, which the writer blithely describes as an "interruption" in his life. In conversation, Greenberg is chatty and amiable, but he has a tendency to be somewhat offhanded about serious issues. (This habit annoyed a number of critics of his early work, in which, for instance, the highly articulate protagonists of *Eastern Standard* confront issues such as AIDS and homelessness with insouciant wit and seeming flippancy.) "I got sick for a minute," says Greenberg referring to a bout he had in 1993 with Hodgkin's disease, a cancer of the lymphatic system, which in the playwright's case had a happy ending.

In retrospect, Greenberg reckons that the disease struck him at an opportune moment. "The whirli-gig of *Eastern Standard* was fun, and I had several plays after that, but when you're so busy, it's hard to assimilate everything you're learning," he explains. "So I'm a big advocate of getting interrupted, but it's not the best way to get a vacation," he quips. When pressed for more details, he admits that he wouldn't want to go through the experience again. "I was too exhausted to be scared, so it wasn't frightening, but it was hard." It started with him feeling "really rotten," but his doctor could find nothing wrong with him, he says. "I had all these theories about what was going on with me. For a while I thought my friends were being annoying and I was just tired of them. Then I put it down to this one play that I saw, and thought I couldn't be in this town where this play could happen." Eventually, he tested positive for Hodgkin's and found himself hospitalized for two months.

"I know it's a shocking lack of curiosity on my part — other people are so proactive," Greenberg says apologetically, "but I woke up in the hospital and there was my father saying, 'You've got Hodgkin's and they can cure it,' and then I fell asleep. That was the extent of my research. All I know is that it was the best one to get in a family of diseases — this is the one that goes away." As it happened, Greenberg was also fortunate in having no adverse reaction to the chemotherapy that he had to undergo subsequently. Recovering at his parents' home in Long Island, New York, he returned to work on *Night and Her Stars*, a play under commission from South Coast Rep which he had begun just prior to getting sick.

"I was too far into it when Robert Red-

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*Night and Her Stars* (1994) with John Ellington, Dylan Baker, and Peter Frechette.

ford announced his plans,” says Greenberg wryly about the play which he had based on the 1950s TV game show scandals — the same inspiration for Redford’s 1994 movie *Quiz Show*. Greenberg’s original version of *Night and Her Stars*, an epic and wildly theatrical take on a subject far removed from the movie treatment, opened in Costa Mesa before the film was released, but by the time it arrived in New York, it had become scaled down for a smaller production. The final version is a “solid play,” Greenberg allows, but it’s not what he started out to write. The less than satisfying experience resulted in the playwright deciding to lay off writing plays for awhile and to consider writing a spec script for the movies instead.

But he never did write that movie script. Instead he had a burst of creativity and wrote two plays back to back. All this writing activity came about because of, what else, a conversation. One day while walking back after a meeting with a fledgling theater group in Manhattan, Greenberg started a discussion with fellow playwright Peter Hedges, author of the novel and screenplay of *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape*. The two writers had never met before, but an hour and a half of intense conversation later, they had become firm friends. “We were talking about the great conversations that can happen in the theater,” relates Hedges. “The idea of theater teaching us to speak to each other again: the great conversation where a lot is at stake.” Every now and again one needs to become friends with a writer, remarks Greenberg. After that conversation, he sat down and wrote two plays. And Hedges did the same. One of Greenberg’s new plays, *Three Days of*

*Rain* premiered at South Coast last season, and one of Hedges’ plays *Good as New* opened the current season at the same theater last fall.

“I think the new plays are informed by Richard’s brush with mortality,” observes Jerry Patch. “There is a richness and deeper understanding of life’s contradictions; *Three Days of Rain* is a kind of textbook work on irony.” In that play, almost all the assumptions of the characters in the first act turn out to be wrong when we go back 35 years to look at the lives of their parents in the second act. Greenberg’s second play, *Safe as Houses*, a big-family play along the order of Albee’s *A Delicate Balance*, recently premiered at Princeton’s McCarter Theater and may make its way into the forthcoming South Coast season.

On a roll again, Greenberg put writing for the movies on the back burner to work on two further theater projects: his latest commission from South Coast Rep which would become *Hurrah at Last*, and the libretto for *The Royal Family*, a new musical based on the perennial favorite about a Barrymore-like theater family by George S. Kauffman and Edna Ferber. The musical, with a score and lyrics by William Finn (*Falsettos*) and directed by Jerry Zaks, is expected to arrive on Broadway next season.

*Hurrah at Last* reflects some of Greenberg’s own personal experiences of being sick, only given a typical Greenbergian spin. “When I was in the hospital I tried to turn the experience into a play but it seemed too hackneyed and tedious, so I wanted to use it in a kind of farce,” says the playwright. He describes the new play as a “verbal farce,” into which he has woven “the extremity of illness and the

extremity of money." At the time he started writing it, he explains, he had also begun to notice that the issue of money had become a compelling thing in his own life as well as that of his friends.

The protagonist of *Hurrah at Last*, who we first meet at a Christmas Eve party, is a physically exhausted writer who is obsessed with the fact that everyone else seems to be financially better off than him. "One of the interesting ideas which Richard toys with in this play is how we will reveal anything about ourselves but our status with money," comments Patch. In the second act, the writer falls sick with an undiagnosable illness, and the play takes on an hallucinatory tone. Here Greenberg actually draws on his own hospital experience. "I was hallucinating for about a week," he relates, "and for months after, I was trying to disentangle what actually happened from what I had imagined." He adds that even now he has no clue as to whether "significant things" he remembers are real or not.

Much of the comedy in *Hurrah at Last* is derived from the characters each seeking something that another character has but doesn't value — be it love, money, or power. "That's the method of Chekhov's humor, which is what Richard uses as well," notes Patch. As sharply observant of human behavior as the famed Russian playwright, Greenberg too is able to come to terms with and even celebrate the inevitable frustrations of life in *Hurrah at Last*. The title of the play is from a poem by Delmore Schwartz, whose writing spanned three decades from the late 1930s to the early 1960s. Schwartz is part of a rich New York Jewish literary tradition, to which Greenberg can also claim heritage. Although Schwartz became mentally troubled and ended his days in 1966 alone in a Times Square hotel, his poem "I Did Not Know the Spoils of Joy" has a Shakespearean understanding and joyful acceptance of the rhythms of life.

*Although this knowledge comes and goes,  
Although the wind and the rain persist:  
How I am glad that I exist!  
With a hey ho, the stupid past,  
And a ho ho, a ha ha and a hurrah at last.*

Gerard Raymond is a New York-based writer on theater.

*Hurrah at Last* will be at the South Coast Repertory from May 22 – June 28.



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