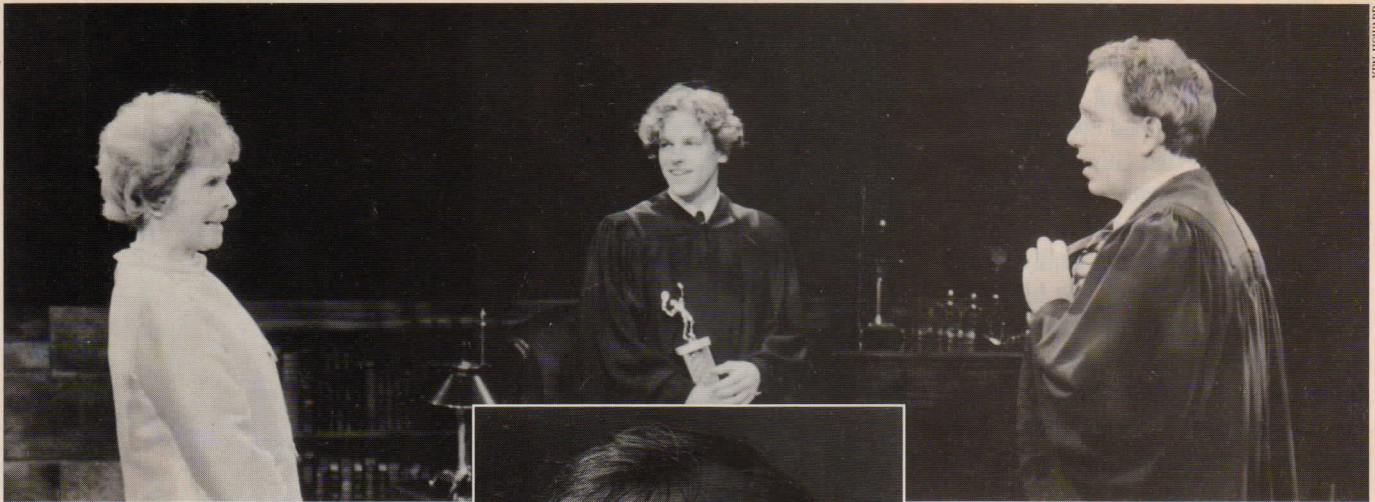


Born to Cause Trouble

A.R. Gurney, the paradox

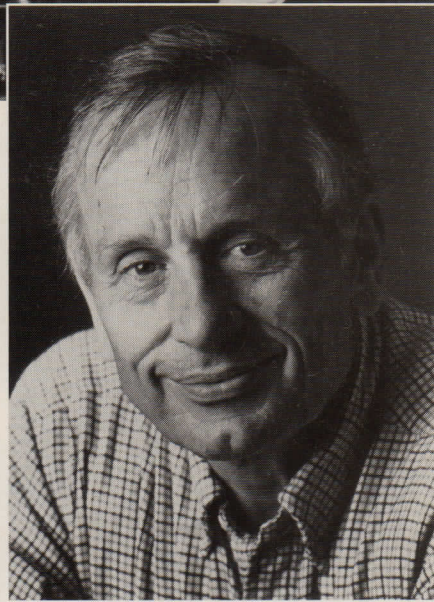


KEN HOWARD

“I do like to stir up trouble,” A.R. Gurney tells me as we sit chatting in his Upper West Side apartment. I find it a little difficult to see this genial, well-mannered playwright as a *provocateur*. But then Gurney is a paradox. Over the past two decades he has emerged as the leading chronicler of upper middle-class, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture — and one of its chief critics as well. A member of that same privileged class himself, he attacks a heritage to which he is bound by form and good manners in a genteel, formal, and well, very WASPy way.

Elegantly dressed people sipping martinis; an academic giving a lecture; a society hostess at the dinner table; a well-bred young man writing a perfect letter with a fountain pen; a commencement ceremony at a private school — this

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is A.R. Gurney's world. He writes wry drawing room comedies which are often ingeniously structured. *The Cocktail Hour*, a quintessential Gurney comedy first produced in 1988, contains a play within a play and takes place in “real time” during that WASP ritual, the cocktail hour before dinner. The hero, usually a surrogate for the author in Gurney's plays, is writing a play, which is also enti-

tled *The Cocktail Hour*, about his family.

Gurney's full name is Albert Ramsdell Gurney, Jr., but everybody knows him as “Pete,” a nickname his parents gave him. “It's a kind of WASP tradition,” Gurney explains. “They give the son a nickname to distinguish the child from the father, but also, I think, subconsciously, to give the child a chance to crawl out from under the sense of traditional obligation that goes with its inheritance. The diminutive and the serious plays not just in our names but in our lives: a sense of playfulness and childishness along with a serious sense of responsibility.”

Indeed Gurney's troublemaking in the theater is a curious mix of this playfulness and responsibility. In *The Old Boy*, Gurney's most recent play, the hero learns to take responsibility for the devastating effects the assumptions of his privileged class have on the lives of others. Paradoxically, when Pete Gurney who has crawled out from under his traditions, rebels against what Albert Ramsdell Gur-

Above: Rosemary Murphy, Christopher Collet, and John Getz in Gurney's most recent play *The Old Boy*, which received its West Coast premiere at the Old Globe Theatre. Inset: Old Globe Associate Artist A.R. Gurney.

by Gerard Raymond

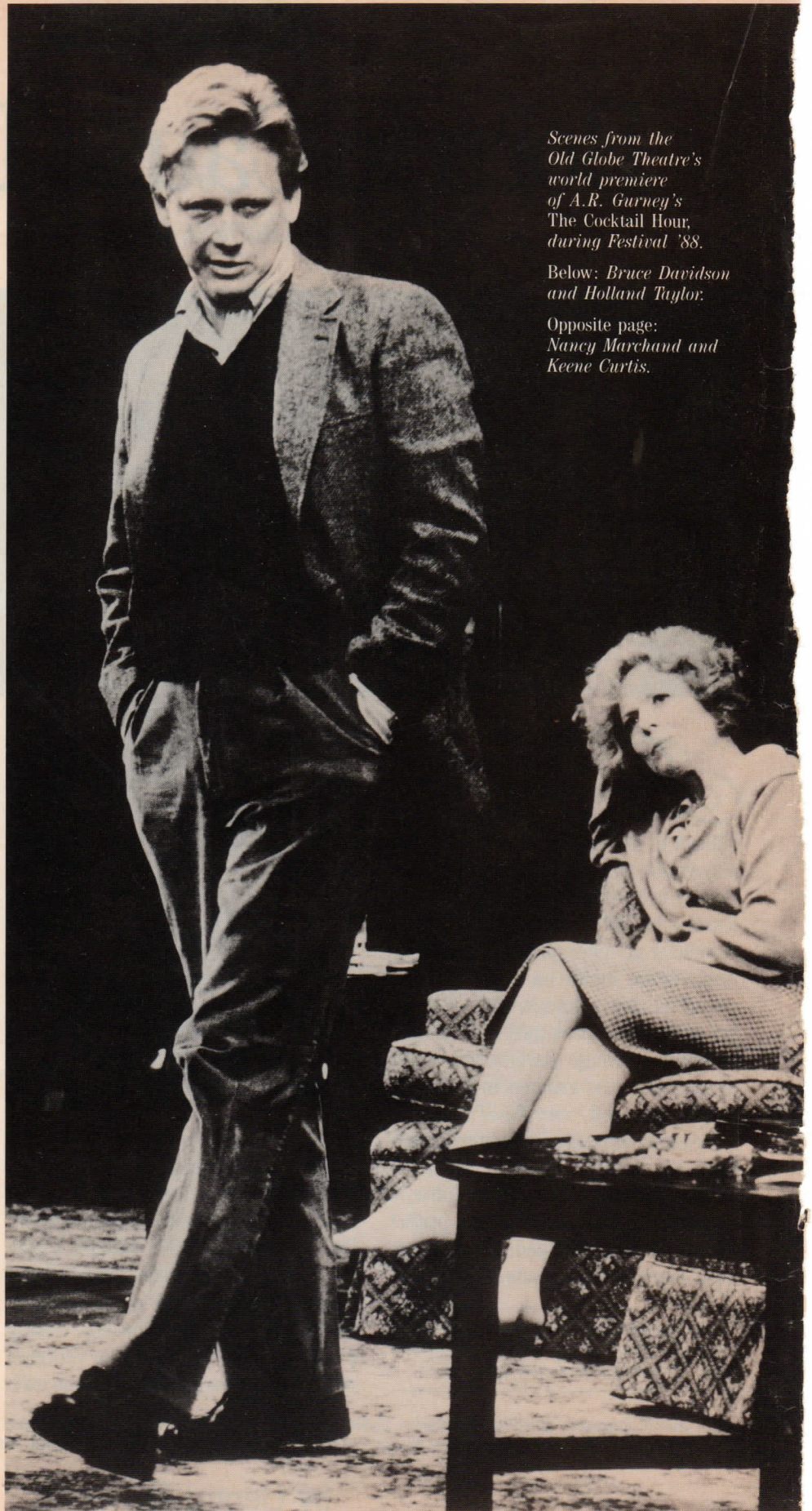
ney, Jr. stands for, he calls for a greater sense of responsibility.

Gurney's own life provides the source material for most of his work. You can find bits and pieces of his autobiography strewn throughout his first important play, *Scenes from American Life*, which was produced in 1970. Set in his home town of Buffalo, New York, the comedy comprises a series of vignettes observing life among the North Eastern WASPs spanning a period from the Depression to current times. It serves as a blueprint for his subsequent writing, a lode which he has repeatedly mined over the years.

The story goes that Gurney was eight when he made his first stand against the time-honored traditions of his upbringing. He announced at the family dining table that he wouldn't follow his father in his prosperous real estate and insurance profession. He wrote constantly during his prep schooldays and his undergraduate years at Williams College. After a stint in the navy he enrolled in the Yale School of Drama in 1955 where he continued to write for the theater. But Gurney didn't go into the theater full-time until 1985. After one year of teaching English and Latin at a boy's country day school in a suburb of Boston in 1959, he spent the next twenty-five years teaching American literature and the humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, working only part-time as a playwright.

Trying to account for his slightly skewed view of WASP culture, Gurney explains how he was startled to discover that his elitist upbringing had not prepared him for the diversity of the contemporary world. He often makes his characters acknowledge the existence of people outside their hermetic culture and examine their prejudices against these "others." In *Another Antigone* Gurney addresses anti-semitism and in *The Old Boy*, homophobia.

"I have always indicated my people because I think they haven't taken responsibility as much as they should." He chuckles having caught himself use the word "people." Gurney issues his most controversial challenge in *The Old Boy*. Indicting all heterosexuals for their homophobia, he accuses them of being



Scenes from the Old Globe Theatre's world premiere of A.R. Gurney's The Cocktail Hour, during Festival '88.

Below: Bruce Davidson and Holland Taylor.

Opposite page: Nancy Marchand and Keene Curtis.

responsible for the spread of AIDS.

In *The Old Boy*, Sam, a potential gubernatorial candidate who visits his old prep school to make a speech on commencement day, finds out that his best friend from school, Perry, has committed suicide after being diagnosed with AIDS. When they were young men, Sam had ignored the fact that Perry was gay and persuaded him to get married. "Sam puts the lid on this guy Perry and forces him into a very conventional mode," Gurney explains. "This causes him to explode, and he tries to make up for lost time by sleeping with a lot of guys."

Choosing his words carefully, Gurney elaborates on his thesis: "An ostracization of the gay people forced them in on themselves in a rather frantic way which then caused, to some degree, the spread of AIDS. The epidemic, not the disease itself, was a result of our refusal to look in a particular direction."

Gurney reports that many heterosexuals resented his accusation, but he argues that the play is about responsibility. "I need to reach out, embrace, accept and to allow for all sort of sexual ambiguity in the world. A number of friends I have known and liked have been sick, and died in some cases; or they are HIV positive. That made me start thinking: How much was I responsible for this?"

We know of Catholic guilt and Jewish guilt, can this be WASP guilt? For Gurney, like the Old Boy, has ignored sexual diversity in his plays. Apart from a reference to bisexuality in *The Middle Ages*, a confused lesbian in *The Dining Room*, and a whiff of homosexual scandal in *Scenes from American Life*, he too has avoided looking in that particular direction. He says he started thinking about homosexuality when he asked himself if it really made much difference with whom one went to bed, and if that was what responsibility, power and masculinity was all about.

We next discuss the structure and form of his plays, something Gurney considers an important element in his work. If you come from a world where children are entered at birth in expensive private schools, taught ballroom dancing and learn Latin and Greek, it's no surprise

that you would choose the stylish genre of drawing room comedy, even if you intended to "stir up trouble." Don't forget this is a milieu where finger bowls were mandatory between courses at dinner! For Gurney, the theater is not unlike the "closed universe" of his childhood.

"One of the ways in which we were punished when I was a child," he recalls, "was by being sent to our rooms. And there I would be within those four walls, wondering how I could get out, how I could feel alive. How could I cause trouble, tease my brother and sister who "might be" next door in their rooms? How could I let myself be known? In a sense the theater is like that. Making people laugh is one way of stirring up trouble, making them think and be concerned is another."

Perhaps Gurney tries to replicate that childhood challenge of breaking out of the confines of his room, by placing restrictions on himself as a dramatist. "I'm sure there is something very psychologically perverse about it, but it seems in some strange way to liberate me," he claims. In his highly successful 1981 play *The Dining Room*, he stays within the limitations of a single archetypal dining room set but manages to present scenes from the lives of three generations of various WASP families skillfully moving through both time and location.

Gurney the playwright takes pleasure in the mechanics of his medium, Gurney the pedagogue cannot resist teaching his audience lessons in dramatic form. Though *Another Antigone* is an indictment of anti-semitism, like *The Cocktail Hour*, it also contains a play within a play. A student decides to write a modern adaptation of *Antigone* in lieu of a term paper on the classic play. In a typical Gurney twist, his play is also a modern version of the Sophoclean tragedy. The student clashes with the intractable authority of her classics professor who insists he will accept only a properly written paper. For good measure, the didactic Gurney also throws in a few lectures on Greek tragedy.

In *The Cocktail Hour*, Gurney gets even more self-reflexive. For example, when discussing the play he is writing about his family, the playwright son tells his mother that he still needs to write a cru-

cial scene. His conversation, informing her that the missing scene should be played out between the son and his mother in the play within the play, leads into exactly the sort of mother and son confrontation scene which Gurney believes is crucial to his own *The Cocktail Hour* at that point. "I think it is a way of bringing the audience into the play when you let them know what you are doing as you are doing it," Gurney explains. "We don't mask the lights anymore in the theater, so why do you have to mask the structure of the play?"

PETER CUNNINGHAM



Could this be Gurney's way of distancing himself from things which come too close to home? After all, he comes from a tradition where emotions are kept in tight rein and any excess of sentiment or passion is, as the mother in *The Cocktail Hour* puts it, so "unattractive." The son declares his love for his father at the end of *The Cocktail Hour*, but only after the two of them discuss how to end the play within the play with an appropriate "kicker" or "button," a final point which will pull everything together.

Gurney acknowledges that *The Cocktail Hour* is his most autobiographical

play. Ten years had to elapse after his father died before he was able to address the central issue of reconciliation in the play. Gurney had written previously about disappointed fathers, but he always made jokes about it. Gurney Sr.'s adverse reaction to the 1970 premiere of *Scenes from American Life* in Buffalo, probably has something to do with the playwright's attitudes towards the subject. In *The Middle Ages*, produced in 1977, a father claims that his son was born to cause trouble. "Why he was even born in the middle of a dinner party," he complains. "His poor mother had to leave before the dessert."

Like himself, Gurney's characters too, are often obsessed with form and they are, in fact, very adept at hiding behind structure. In *Love Letters*, a highly popular two-character performance piece which has been seen widely throughout the country, the hero avoids the messy confrontations of real life through letter writing. He is so obsessed with writing perfect letters that he ignores the feelings of the woman with whom he is corresponding. The play itself is a series of letters between the two characters and eventually the letter writing keeps them apart.

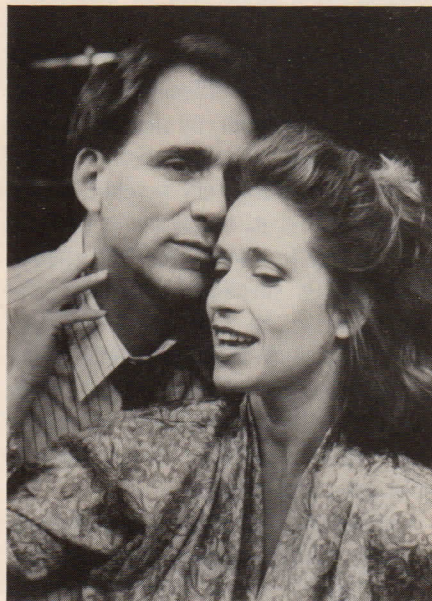
Gurney is currently working on a play in which one of the characters literally breaks out of the form. The new play, titled *The Fourth Wall*, promises to be as self-reflexive as *The Cocktail Hour* and as incendiary as *The Old Boy*. The title refers to the theatrical term for the imaginary wall which separates the actors from the audience in a traditional box set. In *The Fourth Wall* a Gurney heroine becomes obsessed with the world beyond the protective fourth wall on stage, and finally breaking through that barrier, she marches out militantly into the audience.

We are close to wrapping up our interview when Mary Gurney, the playwright's wife for the past thirty-five years walks in through the door. The perfect hostess, Molly, as she is known to everybody, asks if her husband has offered refreshments. Of course he had. We resume our conversation.

Before Gurney started writing about WASPs, the subject was unpopular in the theater, he theorizes, partly because during the 1960s and 1970s people blamed

the upper middle-class for the Vietnam War. By 1971, when he started chartering that territory, Gurney thinks that the WASPs started attending his plays to experience the pleasure of seeing themselves on stage and also because he explored their world by "putting it under the kind of odd light of contemporary cultural awareness."

I suggest that not all of his audiences are WASPs, and Gurney agrees that his plays are also anthropologically fascinating to many people. He compares the interest in the dying WASP culture to fascination for the obsolete Edsel or crockery of the 1930s. "In my writing I tried to frame it in such a way so that we see that this culture is disappearing."



John Getz and Harriet Hall in Gurney's *The Old Boy* at the Old Globe Theatre.

Gurney's characters too, seem aware of the decline of their culture. "It's all over. The life we led is completely gone," the father despairs in *The Cocktail Hour*. Gurney once described his WASPs as "people who are looking over their shoulders, who are not so much on the way up as on the way down." But he stresses that most of his plays are about "getting through, getting around, getting over, getting beyond and not falling into the trap of nostalgia. Nostalgia," he says, "is a debilitating disease."

After writing about these people for over twenty years I wonder if Gurney may have finally exhausted the subject of upper middle-class WASPs and their cul-

ture? A few years ago in various interviews to the press, he seemed to indicate that he had mined the field completely. But now he says he's not so sure. "I have to admit I mastered all the particular rhythms of that language, and the particular assumptions of that culture, but I am trying to stretch a bit, or at least, if I write about those people, asking them to stretch out a bit."

And Gurney is attempting to stretch. There is new edge and a raw passion in Sam's guilt-ridden plea for embracing the diversity of our society in *The Old Boy*. Gurney argues that the WASPs today are just another ethnic group in an increasingly multi-cultural America. "I can see why people would be uncomfortable with that, but certainly we are a tribe. We have certain cultural customs, certain signals that we give each other, and we have a serious sense of ourselves as a minority." But the words "ethnic" and "minority" carry implications of lack of power, and aren't the WASPs the privileged and ruling class of this country?

"Maybe on the surface the WASPs are perceived as being still in power, but I don't think that money lies that much there anymore," Gurney responds. "And I would suspect, and perhaps I would hope, that George Bush and Dan Quayle are the last gasp of that power. Certainly," he adds, "the way Bush has been behaving reminds me very much of someone whose success is beleaguered by everything. He is not a confident man. He has none of that wherewithal and patrician sense of *noblesse oblige* that Franklin D. Roosevelt had, for example."

Once more Gurney presents a paradox. Why stir up trouble in a culture that is fast disappearing? "I don't write my plays just to stir up WASPs's nests," he counters with a laugh. He wants to remind us of both the virtues and the flaws in his culture. The unexamined life is not worth living, he says, quoting Socrates. "Most WASPs sense in their deep heart's core that their day is over. But their day doesn't have to be over," he asserts. "We are an ethnic group and there are certain things we can give the country, and we should: our traditions of hard work and frugality, personal integrity and responsibility — the puritan ethic. □"