

THEATER

Interview

Hedging bets

Gilbert Grape creator Peter Hedges dramatizes the pitfalls of parenting

Playwright Peter Hedges can never retrieve his phone messages because when he calls home, his eldest son, who is not yet three, picks up the phone and says wrenchingly, "Come home, don't work." What little Simon Hedges doesn't know is that work for his father—writing plays, novels and screenplays—involves asking tough questions about what it is to be a parent. "Some writers write what they know, but I write what I am about to learn," says the 34-year-old blond, Iowa-born playwright.

In *Baby Anger*, Hedges's current play at Playwrights Horizons, a couple unwittingly does irreparable harm to their son despite their belief that they are giving him the best possible care. The mother is an unsuccessful actress and the father was once a hot-shot real estate agent. Their lives change radically when the child appears in a television commercial and becomes an infant celebrity. In his caustic comedy, Hedges takes an unflinching look at what may lie behind the universal parental impulse of wanting a better life for one's children. "I wanted to investigate the notion of how the un-lived life of the parent bleeds onto the child."

Although he started writing plays in the early '80s, while he was an acting student at the North Carolina School of the Arts (Mary Louise Parker and Joe Mantello were his college mates), Hedges is more widely known for his novel *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, which he also adapted for the screen in 1993. His work as a novelist and screenwriter continues; a second novel, *An Ocean in Iowa*, will be published next year, and his screen adaptations—of Jane Hamilton's *A Map of the World* and Harry Kondoleon's *Diary of a Lost Boy*—are in development. But this year, he has raised his profile as a playwright. Earlier this season, another of his

plays, *Good As New*, in which a teenage daughter faces the breakup of her parents' marriage, enjoyed a successful run Off Broadway at Manhattan Class Company.

Despite its serious themes, Hedges's writing is distinguished by whimsical humor. In conversation, the playwright offsets intense observations on life with an easygoing charm. He also makes frequent references to writers whose work has stimulated his own—such as Carl Jung, who articulated the notion of how parents project their un-lived lives onto their children. In his *Baby Anger* script, Hedges also acknowledges the writing of Alice Miller. Taking a cue from her attacks on *Death of a Salesman* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* for letting the parents off the hook in the end, Hedges says he wanted to "see what happened if I wrote a play where the parents aren't forgiven."

To appreciate how adeptly he connects real-life experience with intellectual concepts, Hedges recounts a story explaining the quote, "Your children are not your own," from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, which prefaces his play. Soon after his first child was born, he had to go to a pharmacy for medicine for the boy. Once the prescription was filled, he was stunned to hear them call out the name Simon Hedges. "Then I realized, 'Of course, it was medicine for him; he is his own person.' It was the first obvious sign that 'my guy' wasn't mine; I'm a caretaker." As the quote from Gibran implies, parents are responsible for their children and must give them all they can, but ultimately the children belong to the world. "It seems to me," Hedges explains, "that's something the parents in *Baby Anger* have forgotten."

All of Hedges's current work has children and parenting as a common theme: In the new novel, a little boy announces that 'seven' is going to be his year, but when he reaches that age, his mother leaves the family, and it's nothing like what he'd imagined. And in his screen adaptation of *A Map of the World*, a child accidentally drowns, and the tragedy has a tremendous impact on two couples. "I have to move into a new phase," he says now with a sudden grin. "I think I'm going to write a really inappropriate, nasty adult novel full of trashy sex."

—Gerard Raymond
Baby Anger is currently in previews at Playwrights Horizons. See Off Broadway.



Ozmosis: Glinda sends Dorothy flying.

The Wizard of Oz

By L. Frank Baum. Music and lyrics by Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg. Directed and adapted by Robert Johanson. The Theater at Madison Square Garden (see Broadway).

In its bid to become another Radio City, the 5,600-seat Theater at Madison Square Garden (where the production of *A Christmas Carol* is becoming an annual event) is presenting a 90-minute staged version of *The Wizard of Oz*, starring Roseanne as the Wicked Witch of the West. Finding your way to your seats in this cavernous arena is as difficult as navigating the Wild Forest that Dorothy and her friends must go through on their way to Emerald City; human apple trees and midgets dressed as munchkins guide you along a yellow brick carpet toward a frenzy of hawkers selling Oz-themed merchandise. On opening night, the president and CEO of Madison Square Garden began the proceedings by making a pitch for the Knicks. He wasn't the only one whose thoughts were in an-

other arena; the Ranger fans sitting behind me screamed and hooted every time Roseanne took the stage, as though she'd just scored an overtime goal. They came to see Roseanne and, by God, they were going to enjoy her.

The problem, with all due respect to one of our most popular TV stars, is that Roseanne can't act her way out of a paper bag. Like Whoopi Goldberg's current performance in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Roseanne simply plays, well, Roseanne. Her Wicked Witch, while being a genius publicity coup, doesn't require much more than a little bike riding, lots of screeching and cackling and the ability to wear green makeup and a large pointy hat with aplomb. That much Roseanne can muster. She doesn't look all that comfortable on the flying bike, though, and she made more than a few dicey landings on the shaky rooftop sets. Jessica Grové, as Dorothy, has a fine voice, but little warmth; Ken Page does a funny turn as the Cowardly Lion; and both Lara Teeter and Michael Gruber, as the Scarecrow and the Tinman, respectively, are adequately endearing.

But what a wasted opportunity this is. The direction, by Robert Johanson, is uninspired; the musical arrangements of this lovely score sound thin; and the production is cheap-looking, with rickety Mylar walls and a ridiculously tiny toy house that spins above the audience to simulate the tornado. Everyone flies in the *Wizard of Oz*—the Munchkins, the Wicked Witch, Glinda, Dorothy—but not even the children were seeing magic in this production. One kid cried out, "Look, Mommy, I can see the wires!" You sure can—and the seams, too.—Sydney Weinberg

Collected Stories

By Donald Margulies. Dir. Lisa Peterson. With Debra Messing and Maria Tucci. Manhattan Theatre Club (see Off Broadway).

Of the many wonderful lines in Donald Margulies's thoroughly engaging new play, none is as inadvertently ironic as Ruth Steiner's dismissal of a particular magazine. "Life's too short for *The New Yorker*," snaps Steiner, an aging literary lion played to feisty perfection by Maria Tucci. In reality, Tucci is married to former *New Yorker* editor, Robert Gottlieb. That this connection doesn't strike you immediately is as much a testament to Tucci's performance as it is to Margulies's play. Both are so convincing that, for the moment, nothing else matters.

Inspired by the famous controversy between novelist David Leavitt and the poet Stephen Spender—in which Spender felt Leavitt's *When England Sleeps* was lifted from his memoir, *World Within Worlds*—*Collected Stories* probes the development and ultimate disintegration of a student-teacher relationship between 1990 and 1996.

On the day of their first tutorial, the perky, young Lisa Morrison (Debra Messing) chirps to her future mentor, "Your voice has been inside of me for so long." In her usually sharp-tongued manner, Steiner dismisses her new pupil's fawning and insists they get to work on Lisa's short story, a piece on bulimia entitled *Eating Between Meals*. Eight months later, Lisa has become Steiner's personal assistant, a job she finds "both wonderful and excruciating" due to the older woman's constant criticism. Over time



Teacher's pet: Tucci and Messing

however, the two form an intimate bond that's tested as Lisa begins to have some success. When Lisa eventually writes a critically acclaimed novel based on a story Steiner told her in confidence, emotions explode into a show-stopping argument on artistic appropriation, creating a provocative conclusion to a sharply drawn play.

Nimbly directed by Lisa Peterson, both Messing and Tucci deliver insightful, multilayered portrayals of two very different women voraciously moving through life, wrestling with their ambitions and regrets. Thomas Lynch's set, Jess Goldstein's costumes and Kenneth Posner's lighting are all fabulous. And so is *Collected Stories*, a witty, painful work—the reason you go to the theater.—Sam Whitehead



Baby love: Playwright and screenwriter Peter Hedges kicks back with his offspring.