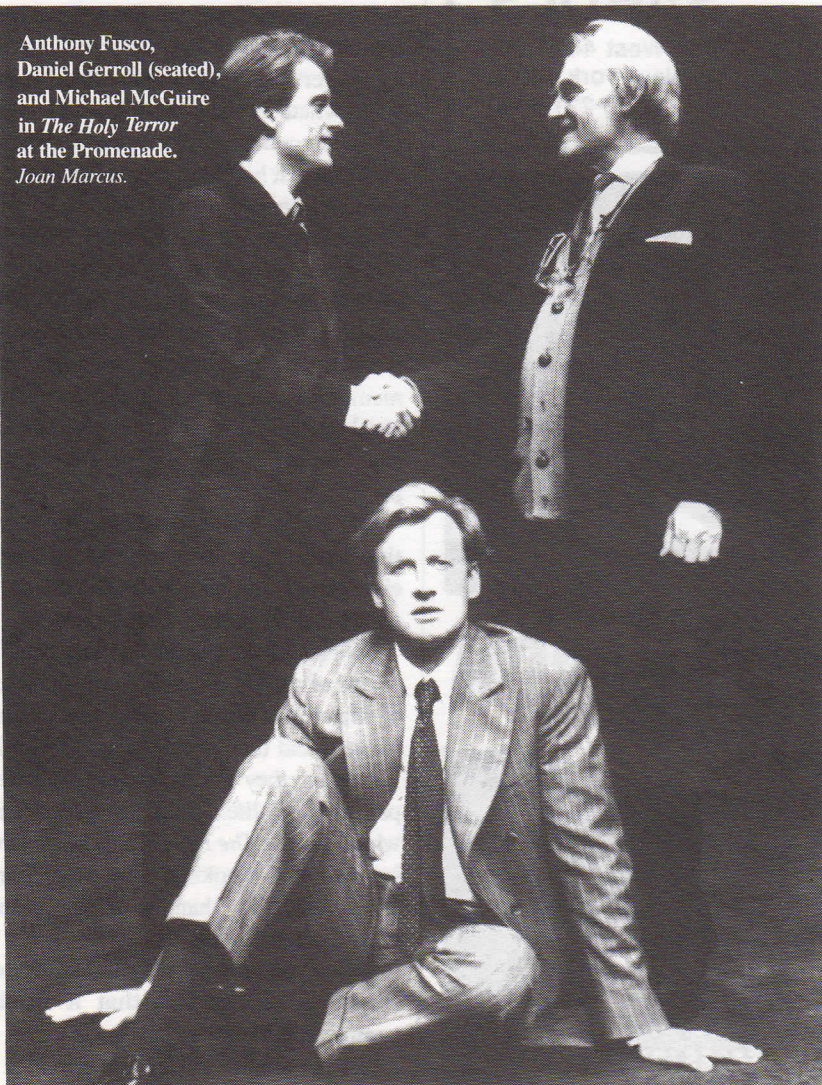


Q & A with
**SIMON
 GRAY**

By Gerard Raymond

Anthony Fusco,
 Daniel Gerroll (seated),
 and Michael McGuire
 in *The Holy Terror*
 at the Promenade.
 Joan Marcus.



Simon Gray confesses that he is a bit “knackered” after a long day’s rehearsal. Nevertheless, he orders a drink, lights up a cigarette, and is ready to talk about his new play, *The Holy Terror*, which he is also directing at the Promenade Theater. We are sitting in Melon’s, the usual neighborhood bar and restaurant hangout for those who work at the Promenade.

In the restaurant, pictures of everything relating to melons adorn the walls. The 56-year-old British playwright/director sits, appropriately enough, under a framed cover and playwright’s bio from the playbill of his 1987 West End play titled *Melon*. Gray is actually better known for *Butley*, *Otherwise Engaged*, *Quartermaine’s Terms*, and his last New York hit, *The Common Pursuit* (which will air on PBS *Great Performances* later this fall). But *Melon* is very relevant to his new play. In fact, *The Holy Terror* is *Melon* radically revised.

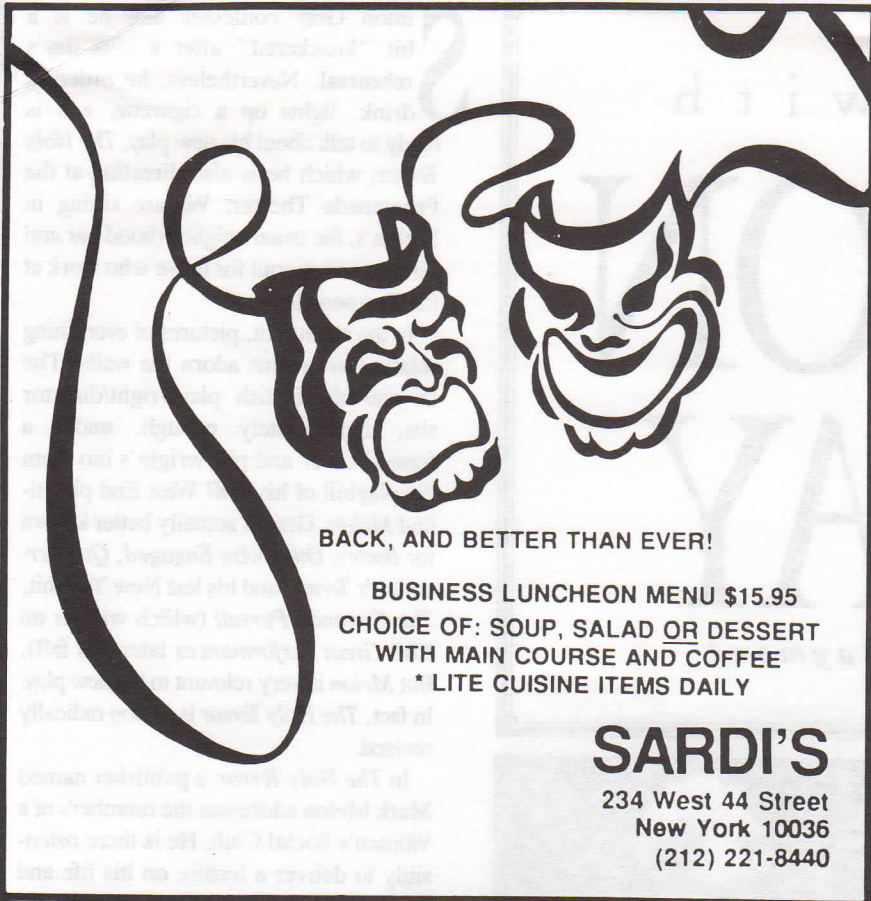
In *The Holy Terror*, a publisher named Mark Melon addresses the members of a Women’s Social Club. He is there ostensibly to deliver a lecture on his life and times in the book industry. Instead, he takes them on a blackly comic roller-coaster ride through his nervous breakdown, sexual infidelities, insane suspicions about his wife’s fidelity, and possibly has a second breakdown as well during the course of the lecture.

TheaterWeek: *The Holy Terror* was sparked by Professor Stuart Sutherland’s book, *Breakdown*, which described his mental breakdown and the collapse of his marriage. What were you drawn to in that account?

Simon Gray: It is the idea that you can wake up one day and the ground is no longer under your feet. What you take to be the certainties cease to be so. In this case, the wife whom he loves, becomes, suddenly, for reasons he himself doesn’t understand, the cause of dreadful despair. It is in a sense the psychic equivalent of being run over by a bus, but because it is the psyche, it gets more interesting.

When you first wrote the play, it was called *Melon* and produced in the West End in 1988 with Alan Bates in the lead. How did it evolve into *The Holy Terror*?

I thought there was something wrong with *Melon*—something structurally



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wrong, in the middle of the second act, actually. So when the question of doing it in the States came up, I wanted to have another look at the text. I began to adjust certain scenes which I had begun to hate and found myself actually beginning again right from the top and rewriting the whole play. There is scarcely a line in it now that belongs to the original.

In *Melon*, it seemed simply too pat that this guy's breakdown stems from his jealousy and suspicions of his wife's infidelity. I was convinced that the causes must lie, if not deeper, then somewhere else. I realized that I had never truly believed the central premise of Professor Sutherland's book which made me write the play in the first place: That jealousy can induce the kind of madness which requires institutionalization, drugs, and electro-convulsive therapy. Exactly the reverse seemed more likely to be true—that so serious an illness could well have jealousy as its first and major symptom. Subsequently, Professor Sutherland had another breakdown and discovered that he would certainly have had the first breakdown whatever the state of his marriage. So in the course of this story, *The Holy Terror*, it just happens, as you might get a sudden illness.

Also, the shape of *The Holy Terror* is different. One of the things that was wrong with *Melon* was that I didn't really know who the character was talking to. Now he is talking to a very specific audience [the members of a suburban English Women's club] which I think gives it much more focus. You are able to get involved in the process.

You wrote *Melon* while chewing nicotine gum to replace your usual sixty cigarettes a day. What was the effect of quitting cold turkey on the play?

I think *Melon* came out of a very bizarre period of my life. I was probably unaware of what kind of state I was in when I first wrote it and then rewrote it as *The Holy Terror*, but they were strangely disturbed patches in my life. I think that the patch in which I wrote *The Holy Terror* [after having resumed smoking] was more conducive to writing than the patch I was in when I wrote *Melon*.

When you rewrote the play, were you conscious of the fact that it would premiere in America?

No, not at all. I don't believe in that. I actually think Americans feel rightly in-

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sulted if they feel a play has been sort of adjusted for them. I mean, either they get it or they don't get it. They won't get it more if you do it in 'American.' I don't know what that is and I wouldn't know how to do it. You'll have to get an American to do it, and I am sure it will be absolutely preposterous. Besides, I think American audiences actually like the Englishness of these plays.

Playwright Christopher Hampton once described you as the "quintessential English playwright—one who articulates the intense emotions that simmer just below the surface of the British psyche." Is *The Holy Terror* the first time in your work that these violent passions actually erupt?

Yes, I think so. There is always a moment generally in the plays when something happens that is of a violent or semi-violent nature, but this is the first time that somebody is in a confessedly violent emotional state of mind.

You are very forthright talking about how your plays don't work and describing the arduous task of rewrites. In the diaries you kept about the English and the American productions of *The Common Pursuit*, *Unnatural Pursuits*, and *How's That for Telling 'Em Fat Lady?*, you reveal the long process by which you arrived at the New York version of that play. Does this self-criticism sometimes undermine the completed work? Does it bother you that audiences might wonder if the present version of the play is the right one?

Not in the slightest. If people think that because it is hard work to produce a play it somehow diminishes the play, then there is nothing I can do about that. That is simply stupidity. You really have to read the accounts of Tolstoy's struggle to write *Anna Karenina*, which went through four drafts completely. Writing is hard work. Even, *even* great writing is hard work!

I don't know what audiences on the whole think about the process of making a play and making it work. I think a lot of them are not terribly interested. But I think there is no point in being dishonest about it. There is nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed of. It is part of the continuing process of the theater.

I also like to think that it is a proper attitude of respect to the audiences that you want to get it absolutely right. When I did *Melton*, I didn't think I hadn't got it right until half way through the run, actually.

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Suddenly one night, something began to prickle in my arms. I got slightly embarrassed and I thought it needed more work. [He laughs.] Sometimes you make it worse. But if it is potentially any good, the work deserves the best you can do.

How important is structure to your plays?

I know that a play is on its way to being finished when I sense the shape is beginning to emerge. It somehow does it itself, or it never does. I do believe in shape, form. One of the things that has most sickened me in the theater, in Britain in the last decade particularly, is a contempt for the well-made play. Nobody ever thinks contemptuously of a well-made car or a well-made anything, expect a well-made play. It seems to me to be a stupid attitude to despise something because it is well-made. Actually, what is the alternative? A badly-made play? An unmade-play or an ill-made play?

Some of your critics have pointed out that most of your characters come from the same milieu—the world of Oxbridge academics and intellectuals. . .

Well, that is the milieu I know. Why on earth would I try to write about a milieu I don't know? You write what you write.

You write from where you write. The idea that you should stick in [other characters] for either feminist or social reasons is truly preposterous and clearly comes from someone who hasn't got the slightest idea what the process of writing anything, including a letter, one would suspect, is like.

You waited one year to put *The Holy Terror* on in New York because you wanted it mounted at the Promenade theater. You had your biggest success, *The Common Pursuit* at this same theater six years ago. What is so special about the Promenade?

It's a wonderful theater, nicely located, and I have always liked what you might call the Promenade audience. I believe they come to listen and watch a play rather than for a large event. They are there because they want to be, not because they have to be. I think it is a theater that lends itself to that kind of concentration.

I take it that you prefer to see your plays produced off-Broadway?

Yes, I don't think there is really any point for either the producer or for myself in having a play by me on Broadway. I think whatever claims I make or don't make for them, I do know that if they are going to be in any way enjoyed, they have

got to be listened to. And I don't think that plays, on the whole, get listened to on Broadway anymore.

You now tend to direct your own plays. Why?

I began directing my plays officially long after I had been directing them unofficially. I started directing them officially in the States, because, honestly, why should I go on virtually doing all the work of direction and not be officially acknowledged? There are very good directors in the States, but there is also a breed that is quite frankly useless.

I don't really trust a director who hasn't been a writer or an actor, who has not the experience of the practicalities of one or the other. They bring nothing to the theater whatsoever but a lot of useless vocabulary and have absolutely no idea of how to talk to actors. So they try to impose a jargon that gives them a mystique. It's an act of self-preservation really, which is of absolutely no assistance to the production or the actors at all. What actors are really longing for is clarity and common sense. And for that you have to be unembarrassed about plain speech. You also have to know what you want to say.

Are there any problems because you are the writer as well as the director?

Sometimes it's a problem when I have to abdicate as director and just listen and think about the play as the writer. But most of the other times, I have to do the reverse and the advantage is I can tell the writer to fuck off when he is getting in the way of my production.

But isn't there a danger of the writer taking control and insisting that you can't change a word?

Oh, no, no. I always thought that was absolute rubbish in the theater. You know, anyone who says you can't change a word of his script shouldn't have his play produced. I feel that quite passionately. It is a collaborative process and it is a journey and all those clichés, but they are true. I think you have to be a very tough editor if you are directing your own play and be prepared to be very tough with the script and decide what works. One advantage I have is I do always know what the scene is meant to be about even if I have not actually achieved it. All the work in the theater is about getting it right, and it has to involve a willingness on the part of all parties.

Did you learn the craft watching people like Harold Pinter directing your

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early plays?

Directing is not a craft, it is the application of intelligence and common sense to a particular problem. I think the one thing that I learned is that there is nothing that somebody intelligent and with common sense as a director couldn't do.

But what about things like blocking?

What is it, really? It is generally thought to be a mystery and it is not at all: People stand in what seems to be the most natural place but which gives focus. Common sense tells you that you won't put the person that you want to be looking at standing behind somebody else. It really becomes as elementary as that. And actors can generally feel their way 'round a scene.

Somebody has to take responsibility finally, that's what it is. For saying to the actor, don't sit down, or come in that way rather than the other way and saying, "I really can't stand the color of that dress." It is like an army, you know. It is better to have a bad officer than no officer, if you see what I mean.

When you direct American actors in your plays, do you wince when they don't get the accents right?

Oh, no, it doesn't make me anxious or desperate if they don't. I think the last thing you want for an actor to be worrying about is pronunciation. You want them to worry about what they mean and what they are expressing. There are menacing creatures called dialect coaches who straight-jacket actors into what become implacable rhythms. I think the rhythms of English are all it takes. If the actors pick those up, they are more than three-quarters of the way there. If they understand what the part is about, they probably have the accent in them.

Is it true that you decided to start writing for the theater after you saw Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*?

Yes, it made me laugh. I also found its individuality very attractive. The thought that the theater should be able to accommodate many different voices was very liberating. This was not the case in contemporary British theater before *The Homecoming*. Well, actually, before *The Caretaker*, but I didn't see that first, so I went expecting to hate every minute of *The Homecoming* and found myself laughing almost continuously. I also liked the way it managed to draw you through the actors into a world.

What is it like writing now for the English theater?

Writing for the mainstream?

Well, you are in the mainstream, aren't you?

I don't think I have any choice. I don't think a fringe theater will put me on. My name has become sort of associated with mainstream theater and the fringe theaters want to put on, quite rightly, the work of people who can't have their work produced elsewhere. What was I saying? Yes, it is harder, writing now, obviously, because the times are commercially very hard. The success of the large-scale musical—I don't know whether "damage" is a fair term—but it has made it very difficult for straight theater to survive. The theater has become the theater of the large event and less and less the theater one used to think of. But that may change again. I think people get tired of it after a certain point, and are actually eager to hear language on stage again. I hope so.

As one of the established writers, do you find you have a reputation to live up to? Do people have a certain expectation for the new Simon Gray play?

I always thought that I was very lucky, actually, in that respect, because I have never been famous and therefore have never been inhibited by reputation. I think a reputation in the theater that becomes colossal or even mythological can be so

easily damaging. But luckily my work has been noticed and that has pretty much been it. My private life hasn't in any way been invaded and I think that on the whole it is a new play by me rather than a Simon Gray play. At least I hope it's that way 'round.

What would you like your work to be? What do you want most for the audience?

For the audience? I'd really like them to enjoy it—to have had a glimpse into other lives, other souls, and to have had a good time.

And is it important that they find the work funny?

I don't think I want to write jokes, but I would like people, I suppose, to share with me the things I find funny. I mean one of the great hurdles that Harold [Pinter] has had to live with is that people, for years, have gone into the theater straight-faced with the piety of the occasion when actually there is nothing he likes more than to have people laughing. Every playwright wants to have a response, and the most concrete response really is laughter. I want people to laugh because what makes them laugh comes out of something they recognize, or understand as being a part of human life. Enjoyment. Yes, I think enjoyment is absolutely vital. TW

Forthcoming work from Simon Gray

—*The Common Pursuit* on Great Performances, Public Television November 9, 1993, with Andrew McCarthy. Directed by Christopher Morahan. Television adaptation of the play which played at the Promenade in 1986.

—Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* adapted by Simon Gray presented by the Cocoteau Rep at the Bowerie Lane Theater from November 30. Directed by Dave Fishelson.

—*With Two Lumps of Ice*, an A&E/BBC co-production scheduled for December 1992. Screenplay by Simon Gray; a fictionalized adaptation of his diaries recounting the London, Los Angeles, and Dallas productions of *The Common Pursuit*. Starring

Alan Bates, Bob Balaban, Nathan Lane, Deborah Rush, John Mahoney, Jack Gilpin and directed by Christopher Morahan.

—*Running Late* and *Femme Fatale*, two films for television.

—The Roundabout Theater revival of *Butley* with Nathan Lane, to be directed by Gray in August 1993.

—*Says I Says He*, a new play scheduled for the West End in the fall of 1993 based on English spy George Blake and his fellow Irish prisoner who helped him escape to Moscow.

—London revivals of *Otherwise Engaged* with Peter Bowles; *Dog Days* with Tom Conti and *Quartermaine's Terms* with Edward Fox. TW