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With two plays running in New York and *Three Days of Rain* a hit across the country, Richard Greenberg has plenty to celebrate.

By Gerard Raymond

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 Broadway debut a decade ago with *Eastern Standard* to his latest, *Hurrah at Last*, which is being presented by the Roundabout Theatre Company at the Gramercy Theater — will acknowledge him as one of the wittiest and most articulate among contemporary American playwrights. "I'm interested in the distance between what's said and what's meant and what's understood," he says. "I like writing people who talk better than I do."

Those who might have complained that Greenberg's early work was too clever by half are discovering a new depth and complexity under the elegant surface. "A more complicated sense of life has crept into Richard's work over the last several plays," says Jerry Patch, dramaturg at South Coast Repertory Theater, the company that commissioned *Hurrah at Last* and several earlier Greenberg plays.

In conversation, Greenberg is chatty and amiable, but he has a ten-

dency to be somewhat offhand about serious issues. It's a habit that has annoyed some critics in the past. For instance, in *Eastern Standard*, the play that put him on the map, the protagonists confront issues such as AIDS and homelessness with insouciant wit and seeming flippancy. Greenberg casually mentions that *Hurrah at Last* relates in part to a potentially fatal event, which he blithely refers to as an "interruption" in his life: "I got sick for a minute." What he's referring to is about he had with Hodgkin's disease, a cancer of the lymphatic system, in 1993. In Greenberg's case, the story has a happy ending, and he feels in retrospect that the disease struck him at an opportune moment.

"The whirligig 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." Unable to resist a quip, he adds that cancer "is not the best way to get a vacation — I was too exhausted to be scared, so it wasn't frightening, but it was hard."

Greenberg's illness started with him feeling "really rotten," but his doctor could find nothing wrong. "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 I thought I couldn't be in the same 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 with 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 disease 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 chemotherapy. Recovering at his parents' home in Long Island, he returned to work on *Night and Her Stars*, a play under commission from Costa Mesa's South Coast Rep, which he had begun just prior to getting sick.

"I was too far into it when Robert Redford announced his plans," Greenberg says wryly about the play which, like Redford's 1994 movie *Quiz Show*, is based on the TV game show scandals of the 1950s. Greenberg's original version of *Night and Her Stars*, an epic and wildly theatrical take on the subject far removed from *Quiz Show*, opened in California before the film was released; but by the time the play arrived in New York, it was not only eclipsed by the movie,

it had been scaled down for the production at Manhattan Theatre Club. Disappointed by the experience, Greenberg decided to lay off writing plays for a while and try his hand at a movie spec script.

But he never did write his screenplay. Instead, in a burst of creativity, he wrote two plays back to back. His renewed enthusiasm for the theater came about because of — what else? — a conversation. One day, while walking home after one of the first meetings of the now well-established off-Broadway company Drama Dept., Greenberg began discussing theater 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 after 90 minutes of intense conversation, they had become firm friends. (Every now and again, Greenberg remarks, one needs to become friends with a writer.)

"We were talking about the great conversations that can happen in the theater," Hedges relates, "the idea of theater teaching us to speak to each other again — the great conversation where a lot is at stake." Greenberg's talk with Hedges spurred him to write *Three Days of Rain*, which was presented by the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1997, and *Safe as Houses*, which received its world premiere at Princeton's McCarter Theater last year. Coincidentally, Hedges was also inspired to write two new plays — *Good as New* and *Baby Anger* — both of which were staged in New York in 1997. It's fitting, then, that the two writers are linked together by Drama Dept. in a program of two one-acts currently playing at the Greenwich House Theater (through May 29): Greenberg is represented by *The Author's Voice*, a short play he wrote prior to *Eastern Standard*, and Hedges by



Above: Peter Frechette reprises his starring role in *Hurrah at Last*. (The South Coast Rep production also featured Ileen Getz and Gareth Williams.) Below: Christopher Orr and Paige Turco in the Drama Dept.'s *The Author's Voice*.



Imagining Brad.

"I think Richard's new plays are informed by his brush with mortality," observes 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 of the characters' assumptions 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. "I thought it was going to be small and personal, and I wrote the first draft very quickly," says Greenberg. Rather than setting out to make an important statement, he adds, "You can sometimes trick yourself into doing something that is freer and better."

Three Days of Rain has enjoyed innumerable productions across the country in the past 18 months (including one at San Diego's Old Globe Theater that begins performances on May 26), proving to be one of Greenberg's biggest hits. A recent production by the Donmar Warehouse — the London audience's first proper introduction to Greenberg's work — was so successful that there is talk of it returning to the West End. "I find it very gratifying that people have responded to this play in such a surprisingly forceful way," says the author, sidestepping any discussion about the mixed critical reaction to the work in New York.

Once he resumed writing for the theater, Greenberg put movies on the back burner. He embarked on a new commission from South Coast Rep (which became *Hurrah at Last*) and started working on the libretto for *The Royal Family*, a new musical based on the perennial favorite about a Barrymore-like theater family by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber. The musical — with a score by William Finn (*Falsettos*) and directed by Jerry Zaks — could arrive on

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Peter Frechette, Kevin Conroy, Dylan Baker, and Patricia Clarkson starred in the 1988 Broadway production of *Eastern Standard*.

Broadway next season. And there's more Greenberg to come: In June, another new play, *Everett Beekin* — in which the action moves from the Lower East Side in the 1940s to Orange County, California of the present day — premieres at South Coast Repertory's Pacific Playwrights Festival. Later in the season, Drama Dept. will produce Greenberg's *The Dazzle*, about a pair of eccentric brothers who lived in a mansion in Harlem.

The playwright's experience of being sick is filtered through *Hurrah at Last*, but with a distinctly Greenbergian spin. “When I was in the hospital, I tried to turn the experience into a play, but it seemed too hackneyed and tedious,” he says. “So I wanted to use it in a kind of farce.” Another factor in the play is the issue of money; Greenberg says he had begun to notice that money had become a compelling issue in his own life as well as that of his friends. The resulting play, he says, is a “verbal farce” into which “the extremity of illness and the extremity of money” have been woven.

The protagonist of *Hurrah at Last*, like that of *The Author's Voice*, is a writer. (“Everything I have written about being a writer is being pro-

duced in the same week,” laughs Greenberg.) Played by Peter Frechette, an original cast member of *Eastern Standard*, the character is physically tired and obsessed with the fact that everyone else seems to be financially better off than him. “He is striving for some clarity, having reached a point of exhaustion with the writer's life,” says Greenberg. “I don't know how much I want to say about the play, because I'd like to think it has some surprises.” In the second act, the writer succumbs to an undiagnosable illness, and the play takes on a hallucinatory tone. “I was hallucinating for about a week in the hospital,” Greenberg relates. “For months after, I was trying to disentangle what actually happened from what I had imagined.”

In *Hurrah at Last*, Greenberg also plays with the notion that most people will reveal almost anything about themselves except how much money they make. He has a keen, Chekhovian eye for the complexities and inconsistencies of human behavior; much of the comedy in the play is derived from each of the characters seeking something — be it love, money, or power — that someone else has but doesn't value.

And then there is Greenberg's



Bradley Whitford and Clarkson in the MTC staging of *Three Days of Rain*.

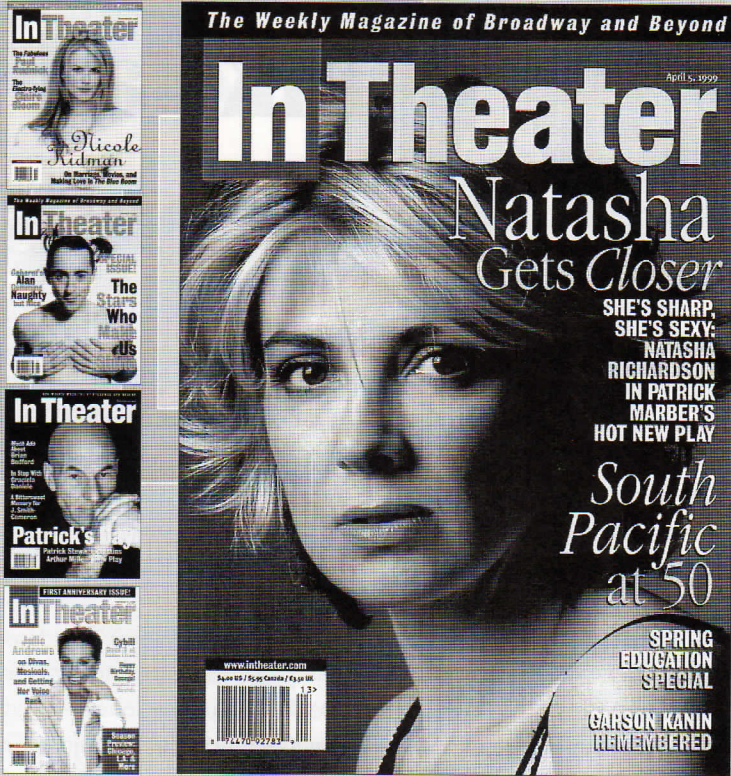
post-illness insight: "The play is about the value of being interrupted in the middle of your life," he explains. "It's a very useful thing if you survive it." The playwright's embrace of the caprices of life is captured in the very title of the play, taken from a poem by Delmore Schwartz, whose writing spanned three decades from the late '30s to the early '60s. Schwartz is part of a rich New York Jewish literary tradition to which Greenberg could also claim heritage. Although the poet 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" resonates with a Shakespearean understanding, proclaiming a jubilant 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.* ■

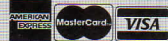
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