The Flu Season
STUDY GUIDE
(compiled by Craig Fleming)

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About Will Eno

WILL ENO (Playwright) lives in Brooklyn, New York. He is a Helen Merrill Playwriting Fellow, a Guggenheim Fellow, an Edward F. Albee Foundation Fellow, and was awarded the first-ever Marian Seldes/Garson Kanin Fellowship by the Theater Hall of Fame, for which he was nominated by Edward Albee. His play The Flu Season recently won the Oppenheimer Award, which is presented by NY Newsday for the best debut production in New York by an American playwright in the previous year. His plays have been produced by the Gate Theatre, the SOHO Theatre, and BBC Radio in London; the Rude Mechanicals Theater Company and Naked Angels in New York; Teatro Companhia Sutil in Brazil; and Hair of the Dog in Sydney, Australia. His new play Thom Pain (based on nothing) premiered in August 2004 at the Pleasance Theatre in Edinburgh and then transferred to the Soho Theatre in London in September. The play, in Edinburgh, won the coveted Fringe First Award, the Herald Angel Award, was cited by the Guardian as he best play at the Fringe, received many five-star reviews and played to sold-out audiences. Will's plays are published by Oberon Books, and have appeared in Harper's, The Antioch Review, The Quarterly and Best Ten-Minute Plays for Two Actors.

Author’s Comments

Dramatis Personae:

PROLOGUE A Narrator. Male. He should differ-- if not physically, at least in terms of demeanor-- from EPILOGUE. In physical terms, perhaps PROLOGUE is large, and EPILOGUE is skinny. More importantly, where PROLOGUE should tend toward warmth and geniality in his demeanor, EPILOGUE should seem colder, more angular, should maybe even have a flair for a seductive kind of cruelty. That said, they are both narrators, after all, and are therefore generally restrained in their manner; so that whatever feelings they have about the play and its story (and they should have many strong feelings) should be seen more in their suppression than in their expression. We should see them managing (with a couple of exceptions, mainly in PROLOGUE’s case) to overcome the force of
their feelings, or, to deny those feelings, or avoid them altogether. Though none of this should be played too obviously or strenuously. The general effect, and this is true of most of the characters in THE FLU SEASON, should be similar to that of watching a pane of glass slowly break (to use a metaphor). These are very particular notes describing a very particular effect; don’t let them be confusing. There is nothing here that is not in Hamlet’s speech to the players (Act III, sc. 2). Play it simply and straightforwardly, with all the dignity, comedy, and tragedy that naturally occurs in the human animal. PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE believe what they are saying, they care about the audience (though in very different ways). The play has a close relation to each of their identities and histories, so the stakes are always high for each of them. Both narrators remain on stage, except where noted. Finally, though PROLOGUE is not aware of EPILOGUE, the latter is aware of the former.

EPILOGUE  A Narrator. Male. As described above.
MAN late twenties or so
WOMAN late twenties or so
DOCTOR male, fifties, doctoral, dignified though somewhat distracted
NURSE female, early fifties, maternal, also dignified though somewhat distracted

Setting:
The play takes place in a mental health institution of a not very specific type. (Though not specific, it is very certainly not meant to be any kind of shocking or cruel environment. THE FLU SEASON is not in any way a criticism of the mental health industry. It is a play about the difficulty of love, the difficulty of being human, of making art.) The play also takes place in a theatre, as each narrator makes clear.

THE FLU SEASON could be called an experimental play. It uses some complicated strategies. It should not be played or staged, though, in an overly complicated or radically experimental way. All elements should simply be used to tell the story, the whole story, as powerfully and clearly as possible. Proceeding this way should produce an effect which is brave and new and moving and meaningful, rather than just “experimental” for the sake of being experimental.

Acts and Scenes:
There are two acts. The first is made up of nine scenes. The second, twelve scenes.

General notes about people and acting
People are complicated and behave in ironic and self-contradicting ways that can be seen as tragic or comic, and, often, as both, simultaneously. We can contradict ourselves, often severely, almost effortlessly. And we live with near-constant anxiety, though almost all of it is buried beneath our normal behavior. The same is true for the characters in this play. This does not mean that the complication and irony or anxiety of the characters needs to be “played” in any
blatant way. On the contrary. The strongest performance, the most human and most forceful, will often be the simplest. Though the language in the play is not necessarily naturalistic, it is, on the other hand, how these characters naturally speak. This is how it comes out of them. Attention should be paid, in rehearsal, to finding a delivery or a way of performance that, on the one hand, serves the heightened nature of the language and the heightened nature of the characters’ circumstances; and, on the other hand, serves to create real and believable characters who speak real and believable lines. Running times will vary, but, in general, pauses should be avoided, except where called for.

Finally and importantly, it is the author’s very strong feeling and belief that: PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE are narrators, yes. But it might be that they (particularly EPILOGUE) have, in an earlier life, suffered the fate of WOMAN. Or suffered the fate of one or more of the other characters in the play. Thus, their relation to the play is real and immediate and based in feeling; MAN and WOMAN are not “crazy people,” but are simply people trying to live in the world in which they find themselves; DOCTOR and NURSE are not unkind, are not even necessarily ineffective, but instead are simply people who are trying to help, despite being somewhat distracted by their own private pains. If the play is played simply and seriously, the effect can be quite profound, quite funny and sad.

General notes about staging:
Sets should be simple. Sets should also allow for quick transitions between scenes (In fact, the play can move along almost seamlessly, with transitions being made while narrators narrate. Though, if done this way, it should be done sensitively and with meaning, and not just for the sake of speed.). THE FLU SEASON is very much a play, as each narrator often reminds us; so, directors and producers should not put too much money or energy into lavish sets in an effort to make believable what can most be made believable by the actors’ performances. Also, a certain humility about theatre is expressed by the play, and, this humility might be undone by particularly ornate or complicated scenery.

Review of British premiere

Donmar doings
By MATT CHEPLIC

Championship "Season"

Edward Albee has lent his prestigious imprimatur to Brooklyn-based writer Will Eno, describing the dramatist's work in print as "inventive, disciplined and, at the same time, wild and evocative."

On the strength of Eno's latest London offering, "The Flu Season," Eno both merits and repays the compliment. Premiered at west London's 65-seat Gate Theater, "Flu Season" -- its title notwithstanding -- isn't a torn-from-the-headlines theatrical response to SARS. Instead, it's a distinctively Albee-esque meditation on love and death at a time of pain, shot through with a sizable dose of Marivaux.
Think a group-therapy version of "The Play About the Baby" with similarly archetypally named characters: young lovers billed solely as Man (Matthew Delamere) and Woman (Raquel Cassidy), while the supervising medics are Nurse (Pamela Miles) and Doctor (Damien Thomas). The self-evidently named Prologue (Martin Parr) and Epilogue (Alan Cox, son of actor Brian) are on hand to fill in the blanks -- or provide a few of their own.

As is often true with Albee, content in "The Flu Season" jostles playfully against form, with Eno offering up an experiment in syntax alongside an elegy of sorts. "Their skin is young and they know nothing," we are told of the hapless young couple who, like Albee's junior pair in "Play About the Baby," must experience heartache and loss almost before they can put words to it.

Flippancy plays a part ("Don't get sick in Portugal," we are advised), as well as a turn of phrase that risks self-consciousness in the extreme: The line "You should have the last word" leads to a litany of words ending with the query, "Is Latin Latin?"

I wearied quickly of Eno's previous entry, the tautologically titled "TRAGEDY: a tragedy," which premiered at the Gate in 2001. But at twice the length of its hourlong predecessor, "Flu Season" is infinitely livelier and more affecting. And it is saved from the black hole of archness by Gate a.d. Erica Whyman's smart staging and an exemplary cast who find something genuinely touching in the writing's tendency toward obscurantism and/or camp.

In any case, it's hard to imagine not responding to any play whose casts boasts Cassidy, a fresh-faced young talent of almost preternatural appeal and grace. Consider a characteristic outburst from Cassidy's Woman: "Excuse me. I'm sorry. I'll be all right. Or I'm wrong. I'm sorry, and I won't be all right. And I'm not sorry." Nor should she be. Everything this actress does is right.

Review of American premiere

Playing Doctor

Will Eno's infectious new play provokes hot and cold flashes

by Alexis Soloski
February 11 - 17, 2004

This winter's flu season began early and has proved especially harsh. The annual vaccine did not include protection against this year's viral strain. More than 36,000 Americans are expected to die as a result. Playwright Will Eno's *The Flu Season* will most likely not kill anyone. Indeed, the only death within the plot dissolves in a rush of metatheatrics. But like the 2004 flu, Eno's playwriting is of a potent strain—tough to anticipate, difficult to resist. It teeters uncomfortably, if intentionally, between the ironic and the sentimental, the clinical and the lyrical. Fascinatingly, you often don't know what to feel, or if you ought to be feeling anything at all.

The play vaults between a bleak amour at a psychiatric hospital and the attempts of two characters, named Prologue and Epilogue, to narrate both the plot and the
circumstances of its composition. It's rather like a Beckettian version of *Adaptation*. Prologue (Matthew Lawler) beams complacently, inviting the audience to *The Snow Romance*, "a chronicle of love and no love, of interiors and exteriors, of weather, change, entry-level psychology, and time." Epilogue (David Fitzgerald), a more skeptical figure, corrects him. "Right. About the title, the play is now called *The Flu Season*. A lot of downtime has gone by since the first draft was written. . . . The new title stands for the fatigue, for all the sick-days wasted in coming up with a title at all.

*The Flu Season*. I don't know. Could use some work."

The play proper begins as a doctor and nurse perform intake interviews. Everyone seems fairly aware that they are onstage. When the nurse begins the scene, "I think that would be fine," suggesting they are reaching the end of the chat, the woman patient asks, "What would? No one said anything. You're just going to start talking to me, totally out of the blue?" Eno seems to want us to take an interest in these characters without ever forgetting that they are characters.

The production, directed by Hal Brooks, doesn't always maintain this balance. Though the scenes are nicely choreographed, Brooks has apparently charged Andrew Benator and Roxanna Hope, as the man and woman, to play their roles as though they were not only batty but vaguely subnormal as well. Elizabeth Sherman and Scott Bowman, as the nurse and doctor, strive for caricature. This results in plenty of laughs, but undermines our identification with the characters, which the script at times seems to request. The metatheatricality might jar more, the satire might cut deeper, were some emotional engagement allowed. At the end, Epilogue instructs us, "There was never any woman, never any nurse, nor doctor, nor certainly any man. Isn't that sad? . . . There was no toy airplane. It was a pile of words. Isn't that sad?" Yes, but it might have been much more so.