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New York City on Stage: (De)Constructing Urban Space in John Guare's *Plays: 1*

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Abstract
John Guare distinguishes himself as a playwright who has represented New York City's various neighborhoods and has fought realist conventions throughout his work. By relying on considerations advanced by Robert Bennett in his study of the literature, art, jazz and architecture of New York City after World War II, the current analysis shows that Guare approaches the discourse of the global capital of the world deconstructively, just like the post-war avant-garde he is probably familiar with. Moreover, Guare's own search for experimental strategies reflects that of his predecessors and of the shape-shifting city itself. Included in a volume which is part of the *Contemporary Dramatists* series published by Methuen Drama, the four plays under discussion are: "The House of Blue Leaves" (1971), "Landscape of the Body" (1977), "Bosoms and Neglect" (1979, 1986) and "Six Degrees of Separation" (1990). Exploring the main characters' experiences in New York City and their encounters with recognizable (or easily legible) sites of this quintessentially American metropolis, such as Greenwich Village and Central Park, the essay examines how Guare deconstructs urban space, advancing a most original and coherent reading of the city.

Keywords: urban space, urban legibility, New York City, Twentieth-Century American Drama, John Guare, theater and the city, deconstruction, celebrity status, neglect, Central Park

The ways in which the connections between theater and the city can be approached are countless.[1] Narrowing the discussion to New York City helps to some extent, but the options are still numerous, hence careful evaluation of precedents is essential. In "Urban Landscapes, Theatrical Encounters: Staging the City," the fifth chapter in *Land/Scape/Theater* (2002),[2] Stanton B. Garner Jr. traces the long-standing relationship between theater and the city, paying attention to the ways in which landmark plays of postwar American theater have staged urban spaces (98-100). By relying on Kevin Lynch's influential *The Image of the City* (1960), the critic is interested in urban legibility in one of his essay's sections. If in the initial study, legibility meant how easily the city's "parts can be recognized and be organized into a coherent pattern" (Lynch 2-3), in Garner's analysis, the same term has been extended "to include the structures of historical, spatial, socioeconomic, and cultural meanings that constitute the modern urban landscape" (97), following developments in the field of urban studies that occurred in the second half of the twentieth-century. A few years later, J. Chris Westgate writes from a partly similar theoretical perspective and discusses late twentieth-century works[3] in his book *Urban Drama: The Metropolis in Contemporary North American Plays* (2011), but ignores John Guare (born in 1938), just as Garner does.

While claiming a place for Guare among the playwrights who have staged the American city in significantly innovative ways and capitalizing on the playwright's "war against the kitchen sink"[4] or, in other words, on his constant subversion of realist conventions, the current study resorts to considerations advanced by Robert Bennett in his survey of the literature, art, jazz and architecture of New York City after World War II. It is Bennett's demonstration that in the context of the metropolis's restructuring to reflect capitalist power, "the avant-garde's critical urban

discourse … functioned as a deconstructive reading of urban space" (14). The argument of this current analysis is that Guare inherits and illustrates the avant-garde's propensity for deconstructing the global capital of the world. Moreover, Guare's own search for original, non-realistic theatrical strategies reflects that of his predecessors and hence the following pronouncement applies to him as well: "the post-WWII New York avant-garde also considered its exploration of alternative urban spaces as a perfect metaphor for the new experimental aesthetic practices that it wanted to create" (15).

The current analysis focuses on four plays that establish Guare's reputation as American playwright in the twentieth century: "The House of Blue Leaves" (1971), "Landscape of the Body" (1977), "Bosoms and Neglect" (1979, 1986) and "Six Degrees of Separation" (1990). These plays constitute the first volume dedicated to him in the *Contemporary Dramatists* series published by Methuen Drama and advertised as a celebration of great playwriting. Exploring the main characters' experiences in New York City and their encounters with recognizable (or easily legible) sites of this quintessentially American metropolis, such as Greenwich Village and Central Park, the essay examines how Guare deconstructs urban space, advancing a personal reading of the city and forging experimental strategies for his theater.

Guare, best known to audiences worldwide for his "Six Degrees of Separation" (1990), has set not just the four plays discussed here, but many others in New York City. Often discussed as a playwright who "breaks the fourth wall, dismantles verisimilitude" (Urban 58), he has programmatically tried to "take naturalistic theatre and break it open" (Guare qtd. in Urban 58). Not concerned with mimetic representation, he projects New York as a significant presence in his plays, his references to the city always being meaningful and contributing to the thematic coherence of each work, as well as to the formation of a recognizably Guare-specific universe.

From "The House of Blue Leaves" (1971) to "Six Degrees of Separation" (1990), via "Landscape of the Body" (1977) and

"Bosoms and Neglect" (1979, 1986), the urbanscape featured in each play is indicative, in a way, of the playwright's own movement from the margin to the center of the theater world. Set in Queens, a borough considered to be marginal to the metropolis, "The House of Blue Leaves" is one of his first plays which drew the attention of the audience, but resulted in limited recognition for young Guare, himself coming from Queens, where he grew up. With "Landscape of the Body," he takes theatergoers to lower Manhattan, a gritty area of dubious transactions and freak accidents, an urban section where several deaths are located, and invites new readings of it. First staged in Chicago in 1977, and only afterwards in New York City, the play initially received mixed reactions. Revived in 2006, it attracted critical reconsideration, which might also be due to the shift in the audience's perception of the area in which it was set. Initially criticized for its loose structure, "Bosoms and Neglect" was presented in 1979 and then restructured and expanded for a new staging in 1986. With this play, he already reached Manhattan's Upper East Side and more visibility. But Guare's success is "Six Degrees of Separation" (1990), which received multiple awards and best captured the audience's imagination. It is set in the same part of Manhattan, the residential area overlooking Central Park and the home of the elite families in New York City. One could venture to speculate that it is no accident that this play brought the playwright recognition and an established position in American drama, given the theatergoers' interest in having a glimpse at this group's representation on stage or in seeing reflections of themselves on stage.

In "The House of Blue Leaves," the characters live in an apartment in Sunnyside, Queens: "the living room of a shabby apartment," "filled with many lamps and pictures of movie stars and jungle animals" (Guare 11). The date listed is October 4th, 1965, which coincides with the Pope's visit to New York City. In *Contemporary American Playwrights,* Christopher Bigsby explains:

> For Guare, the very decision to set the play in Queens was especially significant. It was never, he insisted, a borough with its

> own sense of identity. It was either a stepping stone to something greater or the place where hopes stalled and the whole web of ambition unwound. Its location, close to but never really a part of a hustling, lively and successful New York (read Manhattan), is reflected, in *The House of Blue Leaves*, in lives which are similarly marginal or spiralling down into apocalypse. (11)

The critic astutely notices that both in his foreword and in the play itself, Guare exploits this unsettled and unsettling relationship between Queens and Manhattan. The peripheral borough's frustration that their dreams cannot be achieved is so much greater because of their geographical proximity to the center, whose approachability remains a chimera.

From the very beginning of the play, Artie Shaughnessy, a middle-aged musician with great dreams but no visibility, is introduced as almost buried in Queens, having little chance of ever being able to escape his context. His hope of reconnecting with an old friend, a success in Hollywood, who could help him start a movie career, is fed by his mistress Bunny Flingus, but there remains the problem of his wife, Bananas, whose nervous breakdown places him in a particularly delicate position, when it comes to starting a new life.

Bunny's first appearance on stage is linked to her waking up Artie and urging him to join her for welcoming the Pope:

> People have been up for hours. Queens Boulevard – lined up for blocks already! Steam coming out of everybody's mouth! Cripples laid out in the streets in stretchers with ear muffs on over their bandages. Nuns – you never seen so many nuns in your life! Ordinary people like you and me in from New Jersey and Connecticut and there's a lady even drove in from Ohio – Ohio! – just for today! She drove four of the most crippled people in Toledo. They're stretched out in the gutter waiting for the sun to come out so they can start snapping pictures. I haven't seen so many people, Artie, so excited since the premiere of *Cleopatra*. It's that big. Breathe! There's miracles in the air! (Guare 12-13)

In this passage, even if usually an undesirable and transitory location, Queens finds itself in the exceptional position of being upgraded, in the nation's perception, to urban space, coveted by travellers from regions that are even further away from the center. Queens is all of a sudden seen as the place to be in a geography redrawn on the occasion of the Pope's visit. Pilgrims are compared to movie-goers, and the Pope's visit is equaled to a performance that the audience is eager to attend. Here Guare's deconstructive criticism of both Queens and the Catholic institution's self-fashioning emerges clearly. Queens Boulevard acquires not only characteristics pertaining to a sacred site, but also some pertaining to the stage. Thus, the play invites its audience to reflect on the interpretation of contemporary performance as a highly spiritual and ritualistic experience, offering a metatheatrical commentary.

Paradoxically, the Pope, who had come to support peace in the world, becomes the target of violence, as Artie's son devises an assassination in his search for aligning himself to a celebrity. The bomb goes off in his parents' building in a farce-like turn of events. Artie's address in Queens, which is "the house of blue leaves" in the title of the play, gets marked as a site of news-worthy material, and this is the closest any of them gets to fame. More importantly, the lesson that the Californian friend, Billy Einhorn, and through him Guare himself, teaches his audience is that a quiet life in Queens is desirable, even after having touched the stars and lived in Hollywood: "Artie believed that Queens was unreal and that Hollywood was the ultimate reality. Billy demythologizes the dream by insisting that Queens is real and that the identity of the rich and famous depends on middle-class Americans who pay to see the stars" (Plunka 360). Implicitly Guare invites his audience to reconsider Manhattan itself as the center that holds power over and fascinates inhabitants of other boroughs. And in this endeavor the playwright is not afraid to resort to farce as the strategy that shapes his discourse on urban space, thus subverting realist drama.

With "Landscape of the Body" (1977), Guare develops the memory play that he admired Tennessee Williams for. The opening that captures two characters on a ferry boat to Nantucket makes

room for flashbacks that reassemble the decisive elements of a murder case. Gradually, it is revealed that Betty Yearn, a mother who had lost her son and was accused of killing him herself, is approached by Captain Marvin Holahan, the police officer who interrogated her some time before, but who is no longer part of the force. Distance in time and space seems to be essential in having a clearer view of New York City itself and the intricacies of the case.

Also, defying realist conventions, Guare resorts to giving information from an unlikely source, Rosalie Yearn, a character addressing the audience directly, even though she is dead at the time the play opens: "This scene you are about to see contains information completely unknown to the boy's mother, my sister. Information unknown to Captain Marvin Holahan of the Sixth Precinct Homicide. Those two people in the course of their lives never learned the information you are about to receive right now" (87). Revealing what happened to the audience, but keeping the victim's mother and the police officer in the dark, is the play's commentary on the unknowability of somebody else's life, even when this individual is close to us, or he becomes the object of an investigation. Moreover, it is a technique capable of securing the audience's interest, despite the play's entering a gritty territory of Manhattan in the 1970s. As it is shown, the boy gets killed at home, by a friend, because of a misunderstanding. This is the very same friend with whom he had got involved in a criminal money-making activity (i.e. one of them promised sex to gay men, bringing them to the apartment, while the other attacked them with a monkey wrench; after getting the victims' valuables, the boys would throw the bodies into the hallway and have the cops collect them as junkies).

The Greenwich Village featured is the site of numerous illegal and immoral activities, or as Bigsby puts it, "The New York in which these characters live and die is a hell in which the only still point is their desire to serve the self" (17). Even if the self-serving schemes end up in destruction, Guare does not condemn the city itself for it, since the characters make their own choices. The enticement New York exerts for people who grew up in quieter

parts, such as rural Maine, is explained by Rosalie herself, who was hungry for adventure before arriving. This very hunger justifies, at least to herself, her sliding into the world of x-rated movies: "there's no surprises like that in Maine" (Guare 92). This is how she narrates her being excited to get close to a star of pornographic films in unexpected circumstances. The intervention in which she discloses her first encounter with the industry can be interpreted with the help of Gene Plunka's focus on the characters' fascination with celebrity status in Guare's drama. Indeed, there is no better example than Rosalie's of how his characters "become prisoners of their own warped fantasies" (Plunka 352). Living in Greenwich Village seems to be worth sacrificing anything, and she is ready for it: "I'm proud of my life and I'd like to show it off to you" (Guare 21). In order to obtain finances to pay rent, she also works in a travel agency that is clearly based on fraud, but that does not cause her any interior conflict, or, at least, there is no mention of it in the self-presentation that she stages for her sister and the audience.

After Rosalie's death, her sister, Betty, who had come to take Rosalie back home to Maine, stepped into this network of urban peril almost unwillingly. Betty was forced to take over Rosalie's jobs in order to pay off a debt, but, as a single mother, she did not find comfort in her new city life and was looking for a way out. In a particularly revealing fantasy of hers about what New York City should or could have been about, she tells her son, Bert:

> If we'd had a family, we'd go to the movies and eat at McDonald's and take summer trips to Maine to see your grandmother and see free Shakespeare in the park and take long rides on the subway to the Bronx Zoo and the Brooklyn Botanicals. If we had a family, things'd be a lot different around here. (Guare 103)

The city and the entertainment sites it has to offer to regular middle-class families seem unattainable for her in the absence of her son's father, or so she thinks. By the end of the play, this yearning for conformity leads her nowhere. Thus, Guare deconstructs the American dream equated here with ordinary

pastimes and unimaginative practices. As her son points out, it is in their power to go to all these places, thus transgressing the social functions of these family venues and putting new meanings into them. The mother-son debate proves once more that the reading of urban spaces can be a highly subjective enterprise, as one city-dweller's personal action could build a new layer to the already existing history of an urban space. In its deconstructionist effort, the play instigates its audience to intervene and shift preconceived ideas of certain places or at least be more tolerant when other individuals or groups do so.

Since the play opens with Betty leaving New York City, the following critical conclusion is justified: "She eventually is unable to establish meaningful relationships in what becomes a vast urban metropolis that is synonymous with the onerous, crippling, devastating, and violent effects of modern life that vanquish idealistic dreams" (Plunka 355). Indeed, by the end of her stay in the city, this woman is confronted with the most brutal tragedy a mother can face in her lifetime: her child's murder. The very wording of the police report is meant to make the city be insidiously present as part of the heinous crime: "Bert's body was found yesterday afternoon floating off an abandoned pier at the bottom of Charles Street in a particularly seedy part of Greenwich Village. The boy's head was found floating close by" (Guare 82). However, once again, having revealed the actual location and circumstances in which the murder occurred, Guare almost exonerates the city and redeems Greenwich Village as an alternative space worth (re)considering.

In "Bosoms and Neglect" (1986), Guare deconstructs Upper East Side in Manhattan as urban space that epitomizes order, connectedness and sanity. By contradicting these projected values, the city is shown to be the source of chaos, disconnectedness, anxiety and depression. The play's opening is set in an "apartment in the East Sixties" (147), where the female protagonist, Deirdre, lives. Here she talks to the male protagonist, Scooper. Soon the audience finds out that the two are patients of the same psychiatrist, and they had seen each other in his waiting room for a long time

before their first actual interaction in a bookstore near the doctor's office, which led them to her apartment and the current moment. Scooper's remark concerning the location of Deirdre's apartment is revealing: "My God, across the street from Doctor James. I didn't think real people lived on this street. All the Mercedes lined up to haul our pains away. I thought you had to be a shrink to live here" (155). His words seem to imply that the buildings all around exude wealth, as well as the sense of control and satisfaction that come with it. Moreover, his experience of the area is associated with the psychiatric treatment he has subjected himself to for years, and hence, he imagines the one office he knows standing in synecdochic relationship with the rest of the neighborhood.[5] But, as it is now revealed to Scooper, this apartment in the same area as the doctor's office hides a broken person who struggles psychologically, just like himself. Reflecting on their presence at the same address on East Sixty-Eighth Street regularly, Deirdre confesses:

> We shared the same waiting room for so many months in silence. I spend so many sessions asking Doctor James, Why isn't that man looking at me? I even got it into my head that Doctor James had hired you to drive me mad, to ignore me, to come for your session even before my session. (174)

Deirdre talks openly about her need to be noticed and about her frustration with Scooper's incapacity to acknowledge her. Without being aware of it, he becomes the epitome of masculine indifference, or in Deirdre's words, "Everyman who's ever gone out of his way to ignore me" (175). Standing for a city dweller's self-absorption and unavailability to communicate, Scooper's response is a reflection on the condition of contemporary man in general: "I was deep in my own problems" (175). Even if this statement fails to completely justify the ever-perpetuating neglect that defines not only the male protagonist, but all the New Yorkian characters of the play, it proves the fact that Guare examines the origins of this all-pervasive condition. As he does that, he advances

criticism of the metropolis that isolates and deepens individual anxiety rather than provide chances for exchange.

The place where the first dialogue between Deirdre and Scooper occurs is a Fifth Avenue bookstore. Thus, the play includes an implicit eulogy to independent bookstores that facilitate not only the relationship between humans and books, but, as importantly, community-building: "Rizzoli's. Fifty-Seventh off Fifth. Wait for it to open. Cool. See what new books have come in since yesterday" (Guare 153). Moreover, choosing not just any independent bookstore, but one with a cosmopolitan dimension, speaks of New York City's long-standing tradition in this respect.

The protagonists' love for reading brings them together and keeps the conversation going, once they reach Deirdre's apartment, which is filled with books. Sharing their knowledge of various authors is intertwined with the game of connection and seduction that takes place between them. Even when reflecting on their lives, Scooper resorts to literary vocabulary that is intelligible to both of them: "We're the subsidiary characters in everybody's lives" (Guare 189). On the one hand, he laments the turn his life took when a certain episode made it compulsory for him to start seeing Doctor James; on the other hand, he feels that he should take control of his life and decide which direction to pursue, or else force his own centrality on the narrative which is his life. He struggles to overcome the feeling of being neglected, and, at the same time, the guilt of having neglected his mother.

When a phone conversation reveals that Scooper's plan to leave the city for an exotic holiday with his mistress fails, the prospect of spending more time with Deirdre in the city takes definite shape. She contemplates the advantages of the month of August, underlining the accessibility of so many places, once the crowds are gone: "What a month we can have! New York in August! You can get into any restaurant. Movies are empty and cool! Movies! We'll see every movie in town and get icicles on us from watching! ... Day trips to the beach! Museums!" (Guare 189). Even if the heat poses a problem, the very coolness of all the opportunities that open up solves it. New York City represents an

urban space with attractive restaurants, cinemas and museums, which offer multiple chances for socialization, but which are normally avoided by couples just getting formed and needing privacy because the very attractiveness of the most coveted places makes them overcrowded, and, thus, paradoxically, undesirable to those who dislike crowds.

The heat, as well as this constant fight to have access to the best facilities the city has to offer, justifies another character in the play to state that "New York's a jungle" (217). This character is Scooper's mother, Henny, who also suffers psychologically, just like the younger people in the play. But, in her case, physical suffering takes precedence: besides the blindness she has lived with for years, the breast cancer she has hidden from her son and even herself, as she has not sought medical advice, threatens her life. Eventually, she is taken to hospital, and, after surgery, her son wants some sort of revelation,[6] "a scene that will clear everything out between us" (207), but she is reluctant to fulfill his expectations, given the profound disconnection between them. Her monologue, which would have gratified her son, occurs after he has gone out of the room, without her realizing it, and thus it is another act that misses its target. In this narrative of her life, New York City looms large. She shares that in her youth she left Manhattan to go to Boston to start afresh, but there she was identified as a New Yorker and ostracized: "They laughed at my New York accent" (220). Her Bostonian love story ends in her being rejected by the man's family because she was just "a shanty Irish Catholic girl from Manhattan" (220-1). So, even if she left the city of her birth, the city did not seem to have left her; she continued to carry with her markers of class, ethnicity and religion that made her unacceptable to an old family in Boston, or at least that is the version of reality that she has adopted in order to make sense of her youth, obscuring other factors that might have contributed to her failure to stay in Boston. Either way, her life-long connection to New York City, where she returned, got married and gave birth to her son, defines who she is. Her life's purpose, confessed at the end of the speech meant for her son, is: "A better life for you" (221). In

a way, it encompasses the profoundly human attempt to ensure that one's offspring thrives. Despite her initial reluctance to plunge into the past, the very aim of her life prompts her to give in and grant her son the clarification he was yearning for, if this was going to help him. However, the fact that Scooper is not there, when the mother "reaches out for her son" (221), represents the playwright's scepticism concerning the possibility for real communication and connection (in an urban hospital). Another interpretation rightfully links this to the title of the play, explaining that "Not knowing how to provide a better life for Scooper has resulted in decades of guilt-ridden neglect on Henny's part, and now she is slipping back into a world of neglect herself" (Demastes 49).

Even if apparently all the characters in the play seek healing, and the city seems to provide it through its network of doctors and medical specialists, ultimately Guare deconstructs New York City's capacity to cure human ailment, since the city emerges as a space that creates and deepens disease in the first place.

"Six Degrees of Separation" (1990) tackles an intriguing real-life episode as it is based on a con artist who did manage to get access into several upper-class homes by claiming to be the son of Sidney Poitier, the African-American actor who received leading roles as early as the 1960s. When the con artist in the play, Paul, first bursts onto the stage, he says that he needs help after having been attacked and wounded in Central Park. In a thorough discussion of the play, entitled "The Geography of Imagination: Urban Mapping of Social Networks in John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*," Ana Fernández-Caparrós Turina defines Central Park very relevantly as "a public space synonymous with transgression but also with a space containing pockets of resistance to ruling conservatism that is, a site where ideological boundaries defining normativity are contested" (64). Indeed, Guare makes every effort to convince his audience of the multiplicity of meanings the park unveils, by allowing in his play several conflicting perspectives on this urban space.

In the opening of the play Paul also explains that he chose to come to this exact address, the apartment of the Kittredges,

because he is a classmate of his hosts' children at Harvard: "I was mugged. Out there. In Central Park. By the statue of that Alaskan husky. I was standing there trying to figure out why there is a statue of a dog who saved lives in the Yukon in Central Park and I was standing there trying to puzzle it out when" (Guare 231). Taking advantage of his interlocutors' need to feel good about themselves, he adds: "after the muggers left, I looked up and saw these Fifth Avenue apartments. Mrs. Onassis lives there, I know the Babcocks live over there. The Auchinclosses live there. But you lived here. I came here" (Guare 233). At least two details in his carefully constructed speech obtain his hosts' attention and sympathy. The reference to the Balto Statue in Central Park is most probably not random; the piece pays homage to the famed sled dog who battled tundra conditions in Alaska and helped save the state's children ("Balto"). Paul knows that, in case the Kittredges were unfamiliar with the statue's role, they would be the type of people who would look for the story behind the statue, the monument meant to trigger collective memory.

Also, he senses that they are a family who would be flattered to be preferred to other more prominent neighbors, given the fact that competitiveness is a major trait of the upper-class circles they strive to continue to be part of. At the same time, as it turns out, he might not have chosen these strategies himself. As he tricks other families into allowing him to spend the night, have free dinners and then disappear, and, as they are all connected through their children, the duped families realize that Paul is a fraud, but a credible one due to the fact that he learned all the details about them from a member of their class, Trent Conway, who taught him how to act and talk in order to pass as belonging to the upper class.

The constructed nature of class becomes then apparent. The upper-class status confirmed by residing on Fifth Avenue, next to Central Park, turns out to be an element outsiders want to discover as if they were exploring a new territory and mapping unknown lands. As the Kittredges and their friends find out, Paul is a hustler who convinced Trent Conway to reveal information about all the names in his address book in exchange for favors.

Ouisa Kittredge seems to be the one who tries to understand Paul's performance. She is the one who does not blame him for his infatuation with her class and does not consider his actions criminal: "Paul looked at those names and said I am Columbus. I am Magellan. I will sail into this new world" (Guare 270). She is the one who realizes that the network of relationships in her circle could be as incomprehensible to an outsider as a map in a foreign language, but that, with a help of a translation and a guide, her world could become not only readable, but prone to be conquered.

The audience's impulse to exonerate Paul loses intensity when it is revealed that he also swindled a young couple, Elizabeth and Rick, who were left without money or the feelings of trust in each other, once he was gone. Having used another web of lies and having convinced Rick to lend him their savings, Paul spends it recklessly and seduces Rick, who initially raves about the adventurous night he had, but later, overwhelmed with guilt, commits suicide. Interacting with the two aspiring actors from Utah takes place in Central Park, and Paul's fraudulent behavior here contradicts the intentions and ideals of the park's founders. Examining several nineteenth-century writers' contribution to the project of building Central Park, Adam W. Sweeting insists on their environmentalist activism, explaining also that "writers who campaigned for a park believed open city space offered the opportunity for both moral and aesthetic uplift" (99). Thus, seen as a necessary improvement to the city,[7] the park was supposed to constitute a necessary improvement of "urban character" (Sweeting 99) from the very beginning. The fight for Central Park ignored opposing views coming from Europe and local quarters.[8] Despite the fact that at the end of the twentieth century some of the initial fears, among which one can mention the proliferation of crime, prove to have been justified, Guare does not encourage a totally negative interpretation of Central Park, as it was clarified by Fernández-Caparrós Turina quoted above.

By the end of the play, Flan muses about their awkward position having been exposed publicly (at their own request),[9] since

they hoped that coverage by the press was going to be helpful to detect Paul, now missing:

> The paper of note – the *Times* – ran a story on so-called smart, sophisticated, tough New Yorkers being boondoggled by a confidence man now wanted by the police. Who says New Yorkers don't have a heart? They promised it would either run in the Living section or the Home section. (277-8)

Flan's rhetorical question may be referring here both to the journalists who published the article and to himself, his family and his friends, New Yorkers who belied stereotypes concerning aristocratic aloofness and helped out of kind-heartedness. A refined self-irony redeems the protagonist from anger, sadness or taste for revenge.

All in all, "Six Degrees of Separation" emerges as the peak of Guare's career and a corollary of all his tenets, incorporating elements from previous works: the estrangement between parents and children mirrors the neglect that is central to an earlier play already discussed; an outsiders' thirst for adventure is included both here and in "Landscape of the Body"; the fascination with celebrities such as Sidney Poitier reiterates the thematic core of "The House of Blue Leaves." Also, at the level of experimenting with form, similar intersections can be noted; techniques such as direct address to the audience, flashbacks, farce-like elements, dreamlike moments inundate all four plays, building a sense of coherence and rewarding audience's inclination to be enchanted and entertained. In as far as Guare's deconstructive reading of urban space is concerned, the same constant mirroring and perpetual conversation between these four plays can be noticed, the overall cohesiveness of Guare's discourse having inscribed itself not only in the mind of this reader and theatergoer, but in the minds of million others as well.

Notes:

[1] In 2009, when writing for *Theatre &* series at Palgrave, Jen Harvie identifies cultural materialism and performative analysis as two major

critical strategies to be used for illuminating these connections (8). However, detailing these strategies here does not serve the purposes of the current essay.

[2] The volume's editors, Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri, have engaged with landscape aesthetics for a long time and explain their preference for the term *landscape* rather than *place* and *space* in their introduction (3).

[3] In the chapters dedicated to New York City, Westgate chooses to analyze Tony Kushner, José Rivera, Sally Clark, Richard Greenberg, Djanet Sears.

[4] John Guare's introduction to *Plays: 1* is subtitled "The War against the Kitchen Sink" (xi-xvii), the phrase encompassing his lifelong creed.

[5] Deirdre substantiates this impression when disclosing that the area has been called the Mental Block by others as well (155).

[6] In this scene the son also seems intent on his mother's suicide, in revenge for her "killing" of his father, an aspect especially relevant for a reading of Scooper as a contemporary Orestes. In an essay providing such a reading of the play, Robert J. Andreach clarifies that the killing is not literal but translates into the neglect of a family member's needs, and that Guare uses Aeschylus' *Oresteia* as a thematic base, without recreating the structure or the textual details of the Greek trilogy (173).

[7] According to Sweeting, Andrew Jackson Downing, William Cullen Bryant, and Frederick Law Olmsted embraced and defended the idea that "polite and open surroundings would expose the poor to the proper way to behave" (99).

[8] Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, depictions of Central Park, such as John Dos Passos's in *Manhattan Transfer*, confirmed the initial fears of its initial detractors, as Hristo Boev explains: "In the representation of Central Park, Dos Passos underscores another aspect of the park as an open urban space, namely, the park as place of real and potential crime" (257).

[9] Flan claims to have connections and ends getting the story published (Guare 277).

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