

May 11, 2024

A Poet of the Profane: Preparation for Chat with Stephen Adly Guirgis

Between Riverside and Crazy

Summary:

This work is widely considered a New York play written by a New York playwright, as it captures the spirit of upper Manhattan as underrepresented groups continually face gentrification and discrimination. Walter Washington (aka Pops) is a widowed, retired New York City cop whose son, Junior, has recently been released from jail. They live in a rent-controlled apartment on Riverside Drive (hence the name of the play). Junior's girlfriend, Lulu, and Oswald, an addict in recovery, also spend a good deal of time in the apartment. In addition to Pops contending with being booted from his long-time-apartment, he is suing the Police Department because he was accidentally shot by a fellow police officer.

Autobiographical Connection:

Stephen Adly Guirgis, a native of New York City, grew up on the Upper West Side, a neighborhood in Manhattan coveted for its position next to Central Park and may evoke fanciness. However, Guirgis comes from a working-class family, unlike many of his neighbors, and his characters often reflect the social milieu he knows best, despite the polished impressions of his childhood street address of Riverside Drive.. An untrained playwright and actor, Guirgis took eight years to finish his undergraduate degree from the State University of New York-Albany.

Guirgis acknowledges that much of the content in *Between Riverside and Crazy* is autobiographical. The apartment in the play shares some characteristics with his old childhood home on Riverside Drive, and Guirgis himself has had confrontations with new management who want to get rid of old tenants in order to raise the rent. As well, his own emotional experience with his father after the death of his mother explains some of the dialogue between Pops, the lead character, and his son, Junior. In terms of historical background, the 1994 shooting of a black undercover transit officer by a white cop inspired the background story of Pops's injury and his consequent lawsuit against the city; in real life, Desmond Robinson was critically injured after being shot four times in his torso, but he did recover physically from his injuries. Both he and the white policeman left their jobs as a result of the incident.

Style & Tone:

Much has been made critically of Guirgis's style and tone and his liberal use of profanity where he has been called the US's "new reigning poet of the obscene." Guirgis's language has been defended as a kind of realism uplifts the voices of historically marginalized groups. His use of language is in line with the 1960s/1970s Black Arts Movement playwrights such as Richard Wesley and Ed Bullins.

Themes:

- Forgiveness
- Police, Race, and Identity

Begin thinking about your questions during our Q&A. Some topics to get you started:

- The writer's process and new play development
- Writing to target different audiences
- His path in the industry, from "starving artist" to success
- Being a Pulitzer Prize winner (i.e. what's it like?!) and the pressures of success
- On spectatorship:
 - Similarities or differences between British and American spectators
 - What does he enjoy as a spectator?
 - What has he seen in London?