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The Guide

A theatergoer's resource edited by the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

Three Days of Rain

By Richard Greenberg

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Synopsis

Act 1 takes place in a derelict Manhattan loft in 1995. After the death of acclaimed American architect Ned Janeway, his son Walker disappears for a year, leading his sister Nan to believe that Walker has died. Upon Walker's return, the family lawyer gives Walker the keys to this loft, apparently the first studio/office his father used when he began his career. Together they leave to meet with the family lawyer and discuss their late father's will. Later, Pip Wexler, the son of Theo Wexler (the other half of the legendary architect firm of Wexler / Janeway), arrives at the loft in the toxic aftermath of the meeting, triggering a series of revelations about their fathers and themselves.

Act 2 takes place in the same loft in 1960, as Ned Janeway and Theo Wexler are designing their first house together—which will become the iconic, acclaimed Janeway House. Ned Janeway is a shy, laconic introvert, and a disciplined craftsman of an architect. Theo Wexler, by contrast, is the charismatic, exuberant public face of their firm. Both are young, ambitious architects at the start of their careers. Lina is Theo's manic, enigmatic girlfriend, often at the loft and inspiring them both.

Characters

WALKER – son of the late Ned Janeway. Unstable, introverted, prone to disappearing for long stretches of time to avoid his dysfunctional family.

NAN – eldest child of the late Ned Janeway. Practical, mother of two small children in Boston. Long accustomed to being the caretaker of the family, particularly for her younger brother Walker, and for their mother Lina.

PIP – the son of the late Theo Wexler, and a close friend of both Walker and Nan. All three grew up together. Pip is now a successful TV actor, famous and comfortable. Upbeat and carefree.

NED – (played by the same actor playing Walker) one of the most brilliant and accomplished architects in America, at the start of his career, he's shy, stuttering, ambitious but uncertain. A disciplined craftsman, he is the junior partner in the new firm of Wexler / Janeway (whose current operations are financed solely by a commission from his parents to build a new family house).

THEO – (played by the same actor playing Pip) the charismatic, inspiring figure in the legendary partnership of Wexler / Janeway, at the start of his career Theo Wexler is ambitious and driven, eager for fame and recognition.

LINA – (played by the same actress playing Nan) a sophisticated, manic Southern belle, with a romantic, artistic soul. Impulsive, hungry for life and adventure. Future mother of Walker and Nan.

Playwright Richard Greenberg

Richard Greenberg was born on Feb 22, 1958 in East Meadow, NY. He is perhaps best known for his Tony-winning play, *Take Me Out* (2003, Best Play). In addition to *Three Days of Rain*, Greenberg is the author of *Eastern Standard*, *The Violet Hour*, *The American Plan*, the book for the musical *Far From Heaven*, *A Naked Girl on the Appian Way* and *The Assembled Parties*. He has also adapted existing works, including August Strindberg's *Dance of Death* and a stage version of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

Richard Greenberg is widely regarded as one of the most prolific and accomplished playwrights at work in the modern American theater. His plays are known for their intelligence, wit and precision, drawing comparisons with Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter. He studied at Princeton and Harvard, intending to pursue a graduate degree in English and American Literature, but dropped out after gaining entry into the Yale School of Drama in 1985.

He first gained critical acclaim for his play, *Eastern Standard*, 1988, dealing with yuppies, AIDS, insider trading scandals and homelessness in New York City. NY Times theater critic Frank Rich wrote "...If Mr. Greenberg's only achievement were to re-create the joy of screwball comedies, from their elegant structure to their endlessly quotable dialogue, *Eastern Standard* would be merely dazzling good fun. But what gives this play its unexpected weight and subversive punch is its author's ability to fold the traumas of his own time into vintage comedy without sacrificing the integrity of either his troubling content or his effervescent theatrical form..."

Three Days of Rain received its NY premiere in 1997 at the Manhattan Theatre Club, featuring Patricia Clarkson, John Slattery and Bradley Whitford. It was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. In 2006, an eagerly anticipated Broadway revival with Julia Roberts (in her stage debut), Paul Rudd and Bradley Cooper, received poor reviews and closed as scheduled.

Richard Greenberg continues to write for the stage as well as screenplays and TV. His latest work, *The Assembled Parties*, 2013, received three Tony nominations.

The Inspiration for *Three Days of Rain*

Prior to writing this script, Greenberg had been focused solely on writing for film for an extended period. One day, while walking home in the rain, he ran into playwright, novelist and film director Peter Hedges (best known for the novel and screenplay, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, 1991). As Greenberg reported to *American Theater Magazine*, "We started talking, and we got excited about writing plays again—which neither one of us had been doing at that moment. It started this flurry of activity that has made me write like crazy." *Three Days of Rain* was one of the first plays he wrote in this burst of inspiration, completing the first draft in just three days.

The title of the play is from the following poem:

FOR THE ANNIVERSARY OF MY DEATH

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And the shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And bowing not knowing to what

--W.S. Merwin



On How the Past Dreams the Present

Three Days of Rain hinges on a bifurcation of time: Act 1 takes place in 1995, with the children of larger-than-life parents assembling their lives in the wake of their parents' absences in their lives. Act 2 takes place in 1960, before these children are born, at the moment when the parents begin to sense the potential of their lives and their ambitions. The audience is invited to piece together more information than any of these characters are privy to, and we're driven to reflect on how our dreams for ourselves and for our loved ones echo through each other's lives, distorting memory and meaning, unraveling the fundamental assumptions we build our own lives on.

Richard Greenberg frequently manipulates time in his plays. He cites the PBS miniseries, "The Forsyte Saga" as a formative moment for his writing. He is fascinated with how time tells the story as much as the story distinguishes time. While still a student at Yale, watching the miniseries in fits and starts allowed him to experience the narrative in a unique, non-linear way, something he aspires to achieve in his writing. "I want to get an entire life onstage while conveying a sense of how time feels, how unstoppable it is, and how we don't really know what's going on because as we're trying to weave, it's weaving us."

Possible Historical Inspirations for the Janeway House

Greenberg's characters in *Three Days of Rain* describe the Janeway House as follows:

"...there's a different light in every room... This is the quality that the plans don't capture... When you look at (the plans), they're very fine, but they somehow don't imply the house itself... There's an intuition, held in reserve, a secret the architect keeps until the building is built. It may only be that the plans actually work... It's also said that of the great houses of the last forty years, this is the best one for living in."

VILLA SAVOYE, 1929-1931,
by Le Corbusier

FALLINGWATER, 1935,
by Frank Lloyd Wright

VON STERNBERG HOUSE, 1935,
by Richard Neutra

FARNSWORTH HOUSE, 1945-1951,
by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, 1951-1953,
by Louis Kahn



Fallingwater House by Frank Lloyd Wright

On the Emotional Monumentalism of Architecture

As quoted in the play, Goethe did famously opine that “Architecture is frozen music.” Starting in the early 20th century, international architectural movements have served to both illustrate and spearhead profound cultural and intellectual developments in modern life, everything from Cold War politics (Internationalist style, Brutalism), economic and industrial achievement (Hoover Dam) to emotional and philosophical discovery (Frank Lloyd Wright, Ayn Rand).

Truly exceptional architecture has a way of embodying the spirit of a particular time and place that somehow transcends its own moment. The Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, St. Peter’s Basilica, the Palace at Versailles, everything from Capitol buildings to humble private residences, each of these examples somehow succeeds in conveying a particular spirit, an intention—imposed by the architect—on a particular physical environment. The visitor then enters into this new space, becomes physically engulfed within, and learns to experience on the architect’s own terms.

Recognizable styles of architecture throughout history continue to define and illuminate the ideas, the emotions and the aspirations of their respective cultures for the times that follow. The Greeks saw architecture as the meeting point of technology and philosophy, wisdom made manifest. Baroque architecture sought to dramatize physical spaces, finding majesty in detail and pathos in the transience of time.

Further Activities

JOURNAL

Experiment with Ned Walker’s style of journaling. Remember the most powerful sequence of memories you currently possess. How can you describe those memories with the most efficient, laconic language, sufficient to convey the meaning you know those words possess? Write down five entries in a blank notebook in this manner.

Review. How does the experience of re-reading these memories, written with the fewest words possible, compare to your own memory of these events?

Turn-of-the-century theater spaces continue to function as exquisitely ‘tuned’ acoustic environments to this day. Prehistoric barrow graves in rural England were aligned with the midsummer sunset, to naturally illuminate a specific spot within the grave, using only sunlight and architecture, for reasons unknown. Recent trends in “Tiny House” buildings combine the necessities of modern zoning restrictions with an embrace of “bento” principles in modern life.

In these ways, architecture is an echo, an artifact of the moment of building, spiraling outwards through time like stars thrown out from the birth of a universe. Buildings fall down, are remodeled or demolished, but that original intention still echoes even in the archaeological footprints of soil layers, pole pits, fragments of shattered marble, walled-over doors and windows, vintage skyline photographs. The architecture of the physical world becomes the emotional topography of our own memories.

When we ourselves enter a familiar, intimate space—even if we’ve never been in this house, or that bedroom, or this abandoned studio loft—the numinous details in even the most bare space speak to our predecessor’s—or our architect’s—deepest intentions, both what they were conscious of, and what they never saw coming.

BUILD A STUDIO

Imagine for yourself your ideal creative studio. How much space would you need? What furniture would you absolutely need to accomplish your writing/drawing/music/etc.? Make a list of what you need. Describe the space as precisely as possible (using the journal you created above).

Would you invite your friends? Would you keep this studio a secret? Why?

WRITE TO THE FUTURE

Imagine yourself in your own creative studio, as imagined above. From this place, write a journal entry to your future self.

What is the information that you think will be absolutely crucial for you to remember about yourself? How can you write this so that your future self will absolutely understand, no matter what may have happened between now and then?

Sources

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"Traveling Through Time with *Three Days of Rain*" by
Claudie Jean Fisher, Artslandia at the Performance.

Photo Credit: Richard Greenberg by Jennifer S. Altman
for the LA Times

