

MURRAY SCHISGAL, PLAYWRIGHT

By

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ABSTRACT

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One of the first American playwrights discussed in the context of the "theatre of the absurd," Murray Schisgal has written forty plays in the avant-garde drama of the United States. This study attempts to provide the basis for understanding Schisgal's process of crafting these plays.

Schisgal's recognition and success began in 1960 with the first American production of his one-act plays, The Typists and The Tiger. During the past thirty years this still active playwright continues to embrace elements of bold theatricalism as he experiments with dramatic form and structure. By extensive personal conversations and discussions, as well as a detailed analysis of his theories of comedy and three of his major works(The Typists, Luv, and Jimmy Shine), it is possible to understand Schisgal's methods and ultimately his purpose as an artist. Schisgal concerns himself with the question, "How does one live

given the circumstances of the hands we are dealt?" In his search for answers, he abandons conventional drama's cause and effect logic and experiments with a variety of dramatic situations that reflect the irrationality of modern life. His comments brought into focus the resources or creative "seeds" that Schisgal draws upon to accomplish this including cliché, an array of theatrical devices (music and song, monologues, rhythmic and percussive sounds, dance, vaudeville) as well as inspirations derived from both the conscious and subconscious states of mind. The resulting plays epitomize Schisgal's personal style of American "absurdism" that seems to benefit from a combination of realistic domestic comedy and elements of "theatre of the absurd."

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To

My Beloved Mother and Father
For Their Lifelong Support and Inspiration

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INTRODUCTION

American playwright Murray Schisgal concerns himself with the question, "How does one live given the circumstances of the hands we are dealt?"(Schisgal Interview 2)¹ In his search for answers, he abandons conventional drama's cause and effect logic and experiments with a variety of dramatic situations that focus on the irrationality of modern life. The purpose of this study is to provide the basis for understanding Schisgal's process of crafting these plays, which may be construed as "absurdist"² in many ways. By means of extensive interviews and a study of his plays, it becomes apparent that his approach derives from a wide array of stimuli or "seeds" of

¹ The term "Schisgal Interviews" refers to the original conversations between the author and Mr. Schisgal on December 12, 13 and 15, 1989. Four telephone interviews were subsequently held and will be referred to as "Followup Interview I" on October 15, 1990, "Followup Interview II" on November 7, 1990, "Followup Interview III" on November 30, 1990 and "Followup Interview IV" on December 15, 1990. The subsequent number in the notations refers to the page numbers of the verbatim transcripts of all the interviews included in the Appendices.

² The term "theatre of the absurd" has been credited to critic Martin Esslin and was used as the title of his book to describe the work of several playwrights who seemed to share a common philosophical point of view.

creativity which will be identified and discussed in Chapter IIA. Chapter I will provide an overview of Schisgal's life and career. This material enhances an appreciation for his struggle to find success as a writer, a factor which I believe strongly influenced all of his work. In Chapter IIB, the comedic devices and techniques that Schisgal utilizes to transform these creative stimuli into dramatic action are examined. The case will be made that Schisgal employs comedy to investigate and satirize very specific social issues and concerns facing latter-twentieth century America in much the same way that Aristophanes satirized Greek society in Fifth Century B.C. Athens. Schisgal's theories of comedy also point toward his brand of American "absurdism," an approach he utilizes to ask probing questions about man's existence, but which he skillfully combines with elements of domestic, situation-comedy. The purpose of Chapter III is to reveal Schisgal's role in getting his work produced on the stage. This discussion conveys this savvy businessman's sense of accomplishment with his successes, his anger and frustration with the present dearth of theatrical opportunities in New York, and his ability to maneuver adroitly, his work into the hands of the "right" people. In other words, those collaborators who can maximize the possibilities of bringing productions to fruition must be recruited. Chapter IV will illustrate the positive results

achieved in the original productions of The Typists, Luv and Jimmy Shine, when creative process and business acumen come together successfully.

Scattered throughout this study are references to Schisgal's affinity with the European dramatists of the "theatre of the absurd," a conclusion which Schisgal rejects for a variety of reasons (Schisgal Interview 150, 170, 171, 201, 202, 203). During the interviews, this particular line of questioning, which was raised several times, strongly provoked his ire, primarily because Schisgal eschews any and all attempts to categorize and classify his work. Nevertheless, Schisgal's credentials as an experimental playwright derive from the "absurdist" characteristics that exist throughout his entire body of work. During the past thirty years, Schisgal has continued to write distinctively "off-beat" or "perverse" plays (Schisgal Interviews 177, 167) in which elements of realism often alternate with moments of heightened theatricality. A very active playwright now in 1991, he continues to experiment with dramatic form and structure in his typically unpredictable manner.

The primary evidence for this study was provided by Mr. Schisgal through a series of extensive interviews with the author. During these discussions he disclosed the sources of his creativity, his comedic theories and techniques and his business-like approach to getting his

plays produced. It seems pertinent to provide the background which led to the opportunity to interview him.

My initial awareness of Murray Schisgal derived from my mother's friendship with his aunt, Anne Cohen, a next door neighbor in south Florida, and then later with Schisgal's mother, Irene, around 1979. A few years later, I also met Mrs. Schisgal at a social function and can still vaguely recall her great sense of pride when she spoke of her son, the playwright. Although this occurred many years before I began my theatre studies, the incident came back to me when I started to explore possible areas of doctoral research. I was surprised to learn that in spite of his prolific career as a New York playwright(thirty-three published plays), no serious or extended studies of Schisgal's work had been undertaken. Commentaries on his writing consisted of critiques and reviews of his theatrical productions, brief newspaper, magazine or theatre book articles and cursory introductions written by the playwright to accompany publications of individual plays or collections of his plays. Considering his impressive output and his longevity as a working and regularly produced playwright, I concluded that an examination of Murray Schisgal certainly warranted further investigation.

I wrote to Mr. Schisgal on May 10,1989, indicating my interest in his work and requested the opportunity to

榕湖飯店



May 15, 1987

Dear Kenneth:

I'm flattered that you're interested in doing your dissertation on my writings. I don't think it's a wise choice.

Why not write on the plays familiar to whoever it is who reads your dissertation?

If there's one thing I've learned is that if you want an even break don't ask anybody to do anything for you.

And another thing: you're young yet and I don't want to see you get hurt.

Besides, I don't have the time to go through all this.

I'm doing a new play at the Gem Theatre in Garden Grove, Calif.: July 5 to August 5. Come out and see it.

Or, if you're busy, read a good book.

Be well. Good luck. And goodbye.

discuss my proposal with him. I received the above prompt response five days later.

Although disappointed, I decided to present my "case" to Mr. Schisgal one more time to see if perhaps I could persuade him to change his mind. In this correspondence I provided him with more detailed information on my own background and pointed out the following:

Your body of work is worthy of a scholarly, critical analysis on the Ph D level, it's that simple. What a shame it would be, however, to study your plays in depth and write a detailed critique and analysis of them without ever getting any input from the playwright.

I must have struck the right chord because four days later I received the positive response that I was hoping to get(next page).



THE RITZ-CARLTON
LAGUNA NIGUEL

May 21, 1989

Ken:

Okay. You passed the age and perseverance tests. The following may be of some value to you.

I'll be in Garden Grove, Calif (it's about 45 minutes south of L.A.; at the Gem Theatre), rehearsing a new play from June 19th on. The play, "The Songs of War," opens July 7. I may do a new play, "Oatmeal and Kisses," at the American Jewish Theatre in December, a reading possible at The Manhattan Theatre Club in June. I may do an old play, "Fopkins" in Paris during Jan. or Feb., of '90.

I have 16 books published (acting versions, not books) by the Dramatists Play Service and two acting versions of plays published by Samuel French. I published one novel, "Days and Nights of a French Horn Player." And there's other stuff I can make available to you.

I'm sure we can arrange a mutually satisfactory time to meet. Afternoons only, please.

I prefer a phone call to a letter. My home number is 212 - . Call only at five o'clock in the afternoon, New York time. I do not accept calls in the morning.

What else?

Let me know.

But keep it reasonable.

Don't ask me to write anything.

Don't ask me to read anything.

Good luck.

The reader may find it interesting to note the unusual stationary headings on the reprinted letters. Furthermore, the notes were enclosed in unmatching envelopes originating from equally exotic locales. It seems Mr. Schisgal corresponds on an assortment of stationary collected from hotels all over the world.

Following our exchange of letters, I spoke with Mr. Schisgal on the telephone several times over a period of six months and this led to our first meeting in New York. he sent me a copy of his novel Days and Nights of a French Horn Player as well as a copy of his professional resume in the interim.

On Sunday, December 10, 1989, I met Murray Schisgal for the first time. He had invited me to his home in New York City for a reading of one of his more recent plays, "Oatmeal and Kisses." It was a day I will probably never forget. As I entered the lobby of his apartment house building, I was ushered into the elevator by the elevator operator with three other people: Dustin Hoffman, Schisgal's close personal friend; actress/model Twiggy; and British actor Lee Lawson, who was playing Antonio opposite Hoffman's Shylock in Peter Hall's production of The Merchant of Venice. As the elevator started to go up, I called out Schisgal's apartment number for the elevator operator. Mr. Hoffman immediately turned to me and said,

"Hi, I'm Dustin Hoffman," to which I replied, "Nice to meet you. I'm Ken Blatt," and we shook hands. By the time we stepped out of the elevator, the four of us were all introduced and I was ready to meet Mr. Schisgal. He greeted us at the door with a warm, beaming smile. When he saw me he said, "You are young," an apparent reference to his first letter, and we both laughed. Murray Schisgal is quite a disarming individual when you meet him. His warm, avuncular smile, his thin, almost frail-looking build, and the disheveled wisps of gray hair on his mostly balding head belie a razor sharp intellect and wit.

After the introductions of all the guests, including many other cast members from Merchant, everyone settled down in the living room for the start of the play reading. It was interesting to observe Schisgal's reactions as actress Twiggy, and actors Richard Libertini and Victor Slezak began to read their parts. Schisgal followed along closely with the text, his lips silently mouthing the words and his right hand pointing periodically to emphasize key phrases. At times, a smile came to his face as he obviously enjoyed the sound of dialogue that he had created.

The next day, December 11, 1989, I asked him what he hoped to achieve by having this reading. Primarily, he wanted to hear it for himself, to see if it was ready to be published. He considered "Oatmeal and Kisses" a "lightweight," good for off-Broadway or off-off-Broadway.

He was reluctant to actually get involved in a New York production because he did not want to be thrown into the hands of the New York critics with this kind of material. He felt that this play was good for "the regions" or "summer stock," but not for New York. As a rule, Schisgal believes that it is best to try to get a play published if it doesn't get produced within five years. Although he would much prefer to have it staged, since that helps with the rewrites, having it published also increases its exposure and opens up possibilities for productions around the country. Oatmeal and Kisses has since been published by dramatists Play Service.

I continued to meet with Mr. Schisgal on December 12, 13 and 15 for a series of lengthy conversations. When our talks began, I realized that Schisgal was reluctant to speak about certain aspects of his life and work. Initially he did not make personal revelations gratuitously. I think this is partly the result of his long and frustrating struggle as a young writer. That period of rejection and insecurity seems to have made him understandably defensive. Years later, although his career has been highlighted by moments of theatrical triumph, Schisgal's plays have sometimes received scathing dramatic criticism. This experience has made him leery of any attempt to analyze his work. It may also have contributed toward his cynical view of academic and educational theatre which characterizes

some of the remarks scattered throughout the interviews. In spite of his personal reservations about discussing his work, Schisgal's revelations provided an interesting and detailed understanding of how he has functioned as a productive playwright for the past thirty years.



CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF LIFE AND CAREER

Murray Schisgal has stated that he writes plays out of a need to re-examine his own life; personal feelings, relationships, situations and events are all subject to this process of dramatization(Schisgal Interview 145,146). The leading characters and protagonists in Schisgal's plays often seem like extensions of himself. To appreciate the dynamics at work, an examination of his background and the factors that have shaped his life is in order.

Murray Schisgal was born on November 25,1926 in Brooklyn, New York. His parents were working class, Lithuanian, Jewish immigrants and his father earned a living as a steam presser for a Union Square(Manhattan) clothing factory(Litte 25). He has characterized his childhood as an unhappy period of his life and indicated that his recent play, The Songs of War(first produced July 7,1989 at Gem Theatre in Garden Grove, California), comes "pretty close to the nitty-gritty . . ."(Schisgal Interview 165). The protagonist, Calvin Saks, states at the beginning of the play that "there is only one question that interests me. And that is, which one of my parents is responsible for my miserable childhood? And that's what the play is about"(Schisgal Interview 166-167). The play depicts the

life of a young boy caught in the crossfire of his mismatched and incompatible parents. Whatever liberties or poetic license Schisgal may have taken for the sake of dramatization, there can be no doubt after reading this play that his home life must have been a most unhappy one.

Perhaps out of a need to escape, Schisgal developed a vivid imagination as a child:

I couldn't fall asleep without telling myself a story. I needed another reality. From the bits and pieces of the day's events, I scrounged about for the thread of a story: once I had one, my imagination took over and wove a facsimile of myself into an elaborate melodramatic narrative at the conclusion of which I inevitably triumphed and was loudly applauded by my relatives and neighbors . . . But always the pattern was the same: I intruded myself into the story and carried it off in a direction that would permit me the hero's role. (Luv and Other Plays 1)

Schisgal grew up in Brooklyn and attended Thomas Jefferson High School. At the age of sixteen, he quit school and volunteered for the U.S. Navy. He joined in December, 1944, and was stationed at sea until his honorable discharge in June, 1946. He worked onboard as a radioman in the Atlantic Ocean until the end of World War II, and then served in the Pacific Ocean on a ship that was making a

goodwill tour of the Far East(Followup Interview III 225).

The vivid imagination he possessed as a child stayed with him as he matured and was even a strong factor in his decision to enlist.

Well, I was always influenced by visualizing myself in certain situations or professions. In other words, truly the reason I chose to join the Navy is because of the Navy uniform and the lifestyle of the sailors, the freedom they seemed to enjoy, the debauchery that they seemed to have available to them. (Schisgal Interview 188-189)

Apparently, Schisgal used this time well. "I spent a couple of years at sea reading everything I could lay my hands on, writing words and their meanings and committing them to memory." The purpose was "to build a vocabulary so that I could write and express myself more clearly and better Every ship had a library; I read a lot of Russian novels, English novels, American novels, I read everything. In the main, fiction. I was never interested much in nonfiction"(Schisgal Interview 189).

Following his stint in the Navy, Schisgal worked briefly as a musician. That experience and the influence of music seem to have profoundly effected his writing, as will be discussed later. Schisgal played the saxophone and clarinet for a few small bands that performed at weddings and cabarets, but then decided that he would never succeed

as a musician.

I was bad, embarrassingly so, so it took me awhile to just get rid of it and recognize that If I could have been a good musician I probably would have stuck with it. I was, I tried to be a musician. I've always had the desire to write. I always had the desire to listen to stories, to tell stories and to read stories, but when I was a teenager it seemed, because I was such a bad student and I was such an emotional mess, I guess, I concentrated on trying to be a musician. So I went through that period. I was not very good (Schisgal Interview 188)

He sold his saxophone and clarinet, and went to Florida where he worked for awhile " . . . as a dishwasher in a cafeteria. In a few weeks" he "was promoted to bus boy." Later on he traveled around the South and managed to hitch hike to New Orleans and then Houston, where he was "thrown into jail for vagrancy." He had to wire "home for money" (Luv and Other Plays 1,2).

When I came back from that trip, I must have been twenty-one, twenty-two, I--even though I went to college then and I went to law school, the idea of being a writer grew bigger and bigger in my mind When I thought of being a writer, the first thing I thought about was being a

journalist, like Clark Gable in It Happened One Night, with a cigarette dangling from my mouth, with a nice suit, tie and shirt, with the tough talking manner about me, with whiskey at the bar where you meet the other journalists and shoot the breeze. These romantic images have influenced me a great deal. Certainly that of the musician. I saw myself as a black musician living out of my case, working till four to five in the morning, hanging out with guys and boozing, doing things of that sort. Yes, those images were important to me, those 'windmill' images. (Schisgal Interview 188,189)

Romantic notions notwithstanding, Schisgal did take his writing seriously although he admits that he was untrained and ill-prepared.

The thing is that when I started writing, . . . I didn't have a background that warranted my even trying to write. In other words, once again, I just sat down and wrote. I wrote, if memory serves, three novels and sixty-five short stories, none of which were published. I just wrote, I mean, without truly being equipped to write. In other words, I never took courses on it. At the time when I started writing, I hadn't even gone to college yet. When I came back from the

Navy, I went back to high school and then I went to college and in night school, it all was pretty much self-education. I didn't have a solid background, education, I didn't. I just did what I wanted to do and got by on everything else.

(Schisgal Interview 189-190)

Schisgal attended Long Island University at night for two years and then decided that he would need a way to support himself while trying to succeed as a writer. He enrolled in Brooklyn Law School and received his degree, an LLB, in 1953 (Anderson 400).

At about this time, Schisgal shared a very special relationship with a friend and mentor, George Bailin.

He was a 'neighborhood kid . . . but I was never close to him until I got out of the service. He was a couple of years younger, not many, maybe two years younger I knew him, but I became close to him after my discharge from the Navy and during the years I went to law school, so that was a period from when I was about twenty to twenty-five, say. For those five years I was very close to him He was a good friend . . . and he was very influential during the period of time when I was trying to write He only lived a few blocks. What was unique was that we saw each other every day, but

nonetheless, we wrote to each other frequently as a way of writing. We enjoyed writing letters and exchanging ideas and putting it on paper. It kind of enriched the relationship. (Followup Interview II 218)

In lengthy letters they detailed their plans, ambitions , opinions and observations. Ultimately, they got into a literary argument about religion, and correspondence ceased(Luv and Other Plays 2). Afterwards, Bailin's interest in religion intensified.

He was going through a phase of great religious yearning. Eventually, he joined an ashram of sorts and I believe he's at one right now up in upstate New York. He's devoted to a Buddhist or Hindu sect, I'm not sure . . . I have not seen him in a score of years. (Followup Interview III 226)

Apparently Bailin's influence on Schisgal endured.

Yes, he helped me very much become a writer because he was a brilliant young man. In fact, at a very early age, he started teaching high school. Uh--he just was very influential in making me aware of language, of books and poetry, of a whole world that was not easily accessible to me and he kind of opened up a lot of doors for me . . . intellectually . . . (Schisgal

Interview 195)

Schisgal spent two years practicing as an attorney in a law office in Manhattan (Anderson 400). Despite well made plans, he didn't succeed.

I opened a law office on Delancey Street. My partner used it to get laid. I used it to write. Whenever anyone came in and asked us to take on a legal problem we were both in a total panic.

I decided I couldn't write and practice law at the same time, so I quit law. (Luv and Other Plays 2).

Upon reflection, he does not feel that his legal training enhanced his skills as a writer.

And if one wants to write, I think it is a bad way to get into it I think it [the law] treats language shabbily and I think it forces you to become very stylistic in the use of language and written language in a way that's detrimental to truly being able to express yourself (Schisgal Interview 211)

After giving up the law, Schisgal took on a series of different jobs. He "worked as an order clerk, as a biographical researcher, as a typist, as a teacher of English in a Chassidic Yeshiva (Luv and Other Plays 2). Most importantly, he continued to write. Out of work at one point, Schisgal met Reese Shapiro, an elementary school

teacher who lived in the Bronx. They were later married in 1958 and had two children; a daughter, Jane, and a son, Zachary. Reese Schisgal eventually entered show business as a reader of screenplays, first for actor Dustin Hoffman's production company, Punch Productions, then later as the east coast story editor for Warner Brothers. She returned to Punch Productions to become Hoffman's executive vice-president for development. Since then, Mrs. Schisgal has worked as an independent film producer. Among her credits is the 1985 Sidney Lumet film, Power, starring Richard Gere, Gene Hackman and Julie Christie. She is also currently a director on "Women In Film," an independent organization devoted to enhancing women's opportunities in the motion picture industry(Followup Interview II 217).

Looking back at this period of his life, it was only with dogged determination that Schisgal continued to write in spite of the fact that none of his work, which consisted almost entirely of novels and short stories, found any sympathy from a publisher. He also returned to college again, where he enrolled at the New School for Social Research in New York City and received a Bachelor of Arts in English(Luv and Other Plays 2) in 1959. Then he taught English at James Fenimore Cooper Junior High School in East Harlem(Anderson 400).

Oddly enough, I named some of the characters in The Typists from my students at James Fenimore

Cooper 'cause I was writing also at the time. I must say, I tried very hard to do what my job was, but in truth that was half my day. The other half was spent writing and I just walked the line It was always a means to an end. I never had it in mind to be a career teacher or anything like that. I don't like teaching. I don't like the position of a teacher in a classroom. And although I did it afterwards at the New School of Social Research and at City College for semesters, I really loathe the notion of teaching people anything. (Followup Interview III 225-226)

That Schisgal eventually turned to writing plays was mostly a quirk of fate. He had seen plays as a youngster:

. . . but not so that I would call myself knowledgeable about it. I never studied theatre and I never saw plays beyond going to the theatre once every couple of months. I went to the movies a lot, I always went to the movies, but not to plays. Plays I'd go to rather infrequently I saw Iceman Cometh when it was first done at the Circle in the Square. I remember I went there a couple of times. I saw Summer and Smoke with Geraldine Page. I saw stuff off-Broadway. I don't recall going to Broadway very much. When I was

much younger, I used to go to the theatre with relatives in Brooklyn. It was a Jewish theatre and I would see plays there, the Hopkinson Theatre They had companies going into Brooklyn from Broadway and doing theatre. I may very well have seen a few of those. But I was never interested in writing plays or seeing plays or the theatre per say I wrote it because I couldn't get my other stuff done. I couldn't get any response, any positive response. And then I had an idea to try a play. I don't know where it came from (Schisgal Interview 196)

He was still employed as a junior high school teacher when he tried his hand at writing one-act plays. "Out of frustration, without training and without any particular interest in the theatre, I wrote five one-act plays, each taking about a month to write"(Luv and Other Plays 2). Included in this group were The Typists and The Tiger.

For the first time, Schisgal began to get positive responses to his work. "People who read my plays said nice things about them. I had never gotten a similar response for my short stories and novels. I started to write more plays"(Luv and Other Plays 2).

Encouraged by these developments, he quit his teaching job at the end of the school year in 1960, and headed to Europe with his wife. They planned to stay in Spain where

they could live cheaply and Schisgal could concentrate fully on his writing. They stopped first in London, where Schisgal submitted his five one-act plays to the British Drama League, a theatrical producing organization. Three of the plays were immediately optioned and produced: The Tiger, The Typists and A Simple Kind of Love Story.

From London, the Schisgals returned to New York "without ever having reached Spain"(The Typists and The Tiger 5). More work and several trips to England followed: a television production of The Typists, productions of The Typists in Israel and the Edinburgh Festival, and one year later, in 1961, a production of his full length play Ducks and Lovers at the Arts Theatre in London(The Typists and The Tiger 5).

Having attained some degree of recognition and success in Europe, Schisgal submitted six scripts to the Phoenix Theatre in 1961. " He was fortunate in having them land on the desk of Claire Nichtern, his present, admiring producer, then the Phoenix production coordinator"(Litte 25). The plays were personally optioned by Mrs. Nichtern, who was able to get the Wallachs (actor Eli and his wife, actress Anne Jackson) interested in the projects.

The Schisgal's went to Spain in 1962. They spent about two months in Ibiza, "rented a house for twenty-five dollars a month and drank cognac at four cents a glass" (Kaye 14) while Schisgal "wrote Luv from an idea that had

been lying a long time in his mind"(Litte 25).

On February 4,1963, the off-Broadway production of The Typists and The Tiger opened at the Orpheum Theatre. Later, producer Nichtern again brought the Wallachs, plus director Mike Nichols and actor Alan Arkin together for the Broadway production of Luv at the Booth Theatre(Litte 25).

What may have seemed like an overnight success to theatre-goers on November 12,1964, when Luv opened to rave reviews and a long, profitable run at the Booth Theatre was in actuality the culmination of a long and tortuous journey fraught with frustration and disappointment. Since 1964 however, Schisgal has written plays with remarkable regularity and has managed to get many of them produced on the stage. One of the keys to his longevity comes from his repeatedly successful collaborations with other theatre artists. For example, after working with director Arthur Storch on The Tiger and The Typists, he teamed with him again for the Broadway productions of The Chinese and Dr. Fish in 1970, and once more for the very successful Twice Around the Park, which opened at the Cort Theatre on November 4,1982.

After their success in The Tiger and The Typists in 1963, Anne Jackson and Eli Wallach performed in the 1964 Broadway hit Luv and then in the two one-act plays that comprised Twice Around the Park, A Need for Brussels Sprouts and A Need for Less Expertise. The latter were commissioned

and written expressly for the Wallachs(Schisgal Interview 158). Schisgal also worked with the Wallachs on the 1967 Columbia Pictures production of The Tiger Makes Out, based on his previously written play, The Tiger.

Schisgal has also worked more than once with actor Alan Arkin. They collaborated on the Broadway production of Luv, and The Love Song of Barney Kempinski, an original television play presented as an ABC Special in 1966, and nominated for Outstanding Dramatic Program by the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences(Emmy Awards).

Probably Schisgal's most famous collaborator over the years, as well as his close personal friend, is actor Dustin Hoffman. They first met when Hoffman performed in Schisgal's one character play, The Old Jew, which opened on August 16,1966 at the Berkshire Theatre Festival in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Hoffman performed the title role in Schisgal's 1968 Broadway production of Jimmy Shine at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre and then later directed All Over Town, a 1974 farce-comedy produced at the Booth Theatre. Hoffman and Schisgal again worked very closely together on the 1982 screen hit, Tootsie, which was inspired by the actor's personal struggle to launch his own career. They were both nominated for Academy Awards in their respective categories. Schisgal continues to work with Hoffman by meeting with directors, actors and writers to put together packages and properties for future motion

picture projects. This position has provided him with financial security and the freedom to write plays regardless of their commercial viability.

Aside from his plays and screenplays, Schisgal has written a hilarious autobiographical novel entitled, Days and Nights of A French Horn Player that was published 1989, and which he has adapted into a screenplay.

A few of Schisgal's later plays have employed comedic treatment of issues which then became extremely sensitive, such as "herpes" in Old Wine In A New Bottle, and homosexuality in Closet Madness and Popkins. In view of today's public concern over the AID's epidemic and sexually transmitted diseases, these plays have been rendered obsolete because the basis for their humor no longer exists. Some other plays possess such bizarre plotlines that they are seldom, if ever, produced. Examples of these include The Flatulist, which depicts a comedian who has perfected the art of breaking wind; How We Reached An Impasse on Nuclear Energy, which deals with a bearded lady; and Summer Romance, which satirizes a romance between a man and his paramour, a lady gorilla.

Most recently, Schisgal has been extremely productive as he continues to experiment with a variety of new thematic ideas. His particularly ambitious two-act work, The Songs of War, attempts to deal with his troubled childhood and reaches certain conclusions about it so that

he may have, as he says, "exhausted looking at my own childhood and my relationship with my parents. At a certain age, I think we come to terms with it one way or another But I have no desire to go--to do more in that direction"(Schisgal Interview 166). This piece borrows from vaudeville and includes monologues, jokes, dance and songs of World War I and I vintage. The use of monologues, a favorite theatrical device of Schisgal, had also been incorporated into two full length plays: "Theatrical Release," a new and as yet unpublished play, and Roadshow, produced off-Broadway at the Circle Repertory Theatre in 1987. This uncharacteristically serious drama takes a cynical look at marital fidelity and individual greed in the nineteen-eighties.

The purpose for providing this overview of Schisgal's life and career was not only to describe his struggle to succeed as a writer, but also to examine the rich variety of experiences and situations that he has to draw upon as a playwright. Together with his vivid imagination, these experiences have served him well as a source of characters and scenarios for his plays. As his life has become more comfortable and secure, it will be interesting to see what effect, if any, this situation has on the future direction of his writing.

CHAPTER II

Theatrical Theories of Murray Schisgal

A--Schisgal Interview: The Creative Process of Writing

In the discussions with Murray Schisgal, the many seeds of his creativity were identified and explored as his method began to emerge. One might say that his method is "no method." Rather, it is a stumbling and struggling attempt to discover one's inner thoughts and feelings which are then shaped into the form of a play. The revelations which Schisgal expressed during our talks provide an insightful basis on which to evaluate his entire body of work.

Repeatedly, he refused to categorize or summarize the nature of his work, or allow any generalized conclusions to be made based on his plays. He believes that each piece clearly speaks for itself and searching within them for answers to any of life's great questions was purely a pointless academic exercise, and one in which he did not care to participate.

Another area of discussion related to the question of

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categorizing was an attempt to link Schisgal to the "absurdist" theatre or avant-garde movement of the late nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties. He repeatedly rejected any association with this movement, which he views as an archaic theatrical genre. Interestingly, he embraced the philosophy of existentialism³(Schisgal Interview 170,174,203,206). Notwithstanding these considerations, our conversations eventually brought into focus resources Schisgal draws upon as a playwright including music, rhythm, vaudeville, cliché, and both the conscious and subconscious states of mind.

His experience as a musician has enhanced his understanding of meter and rhythm. As a result, Schisgal has infused his plays with music, rhythmic dialogue and stage movement punctuated by percussive sounds. He also finds himself attracted to vaudeville as a vital form of stage entertainment. The basic elements of vaudeville, consisting of a series of unrelated specialty acts including songs, dance numbers, pantomimes, comic skits and burlesque routines, have been incorporated by Schisgal into

³ Existentialism--" . . . the responsibility of each man for his own acts and for the consequences of those acts(Oxford Companion to the Theatre 732).

many of his plays.

The pervasive use of cliches in society provides Schisgal with yet another resource of creativity. Words such as love, friendship, happiness and success are so overused in modern American society that they no longer convey meaning. He has been particularly skillful in ridiculing cliché in his plays.

Schisgal also utilizes his understanding of modern psychology in all aspects of his writing. His creativity draws upon elements of the subconscious, including dreams and nightmares, as well as conscious desires, compulsions and obsessions to motivate the characters in his plays.

A clue to Schisgal's creative capabilities and prolific output of plays may lie in his simple and disciplined working routine. Each morning he spends four hours in an office of his high-rise Manhattan apartment working on his plays. When he was younger, he worked in the mornings and afternoons. He may work on one or more scripts at a time, or he may just pace. "But I'm in the room, but I'm in the room," he indicated with emphasis. Sometimes he listens to the radio while he works. Surprisingly, he does all his writing on an old Royal portable typewriter. When asked why he doesn't avail himself of a computer or word processor, his reply illuminated a factor of his creativity.

I don't have the patience to mess around with it.

And also, there's something I find satisfying about the sound of a typewriter. In fact, it's not electric It's like having a wrist watch that you wind yourself every morning and it becomes part of your rhythm or whatever If you write a page a day that your satisfied with you're doing terrifically. There isn't that much typing involved in playwriting, you know. You retype it . . . you change things and you hear it differently maybe so that the mechanical act of doing and redoing and erasing and inserting, there's an advantage to it. (Schisgal Interview 211- 212)

Examining the plays for recurring ideas and thematic elements may provide a useful approach to a study of his work, yet Schisgal believes that each play speaks entirely for itself. Attempts to classify or categorize his work meet with great resistance from this playwright.

Well, why do I have to describe them? I don't understand? What do you mean, 'describe them.' You mean give them a label? I don't understand why you even want that. I mean, it may be nice to have a phrase to use, but who cares? You want to do it, do it. Find a common thread or whatever and do it. I don't care

(Schisgal Interview 203)

I think that part of my problem as a writer always has been the disinclination to summarize anything or to generalize to the extent whereby one can say that life is this or reality is that So I don't answer those questions answers aren't, in my opinion, capable of being defined into cute little aphorisms, one or two lines that would sum up what the experience is. So I avoid them like the plague . . . (Schisgal Interview 146)

Thus, while he refused to analyze his plays, Schisgal was willing to discuss and analyze his personal reasons for writing. This helped to define his purpose as an artist and the sources of inspiration for his writing.

I believe that I write from a need to explore certain issues that I feel warrant exploration, and I don't choose my way in any methodical fashion. I just always go into what I am taken with at the time. I'm not interested in necessarily following any particular train of thought. If I had to say what I am about, it would be, first of all, writing for me is a form of self-analysis, a form of discovery, self-discovery. It's a way of examining one's own life, one's own emotions, etc., etc. That may very well be primary because I do, more often

than not, write from a very personal point of view about things that concern me as I am. So I am very subjective in the main, although there are exceptions because I write for money also. And those things may take me into areas that have nothing to do with my own personality. But given the choice and given the time and given the opportunity, I will always go back to examining my own life. That's the bottom line of it, I guess.

Two is, I am interested in one question and that question is, 'How does one live given the circumstances of the hands we are dealt?' So I would go to those two as being primary.

(Schisgal Interview 145)

. . . The attitudes we have about our relative positions to each other sexually is a very important one I'm also interested in change, personality change, how much can you change, is the change lasting? Are we doomed to be the same? Is it impossible to change? And the word 'change' is one that concerns me greatly also. (Schisgal Interview 123)

When asked if his plays were meant to examine different facets or different viewpoints of love relationships between people, Schisgal noted that:

In so far as examining love or any of that, those are merely offshots, they are not primary. They are merely going along with an examination of social habits, etc., in order to find out what's real and what isn't real, what's true and what isn't true (Schisgal Interview 146)

For Schisgal, finding ideas for his plays is a continuous struggle as part of his life as a writer. Nevertheless, it is clearly the starting point and everything else derives from it.

One always lives with the apprehension that one won't have an idea to work on and there are periods where you don't have ideas, so it's a mixed bag. You never lose that apprehension that you may not have--I envy people that say 'I have ten projects waiting to be done.' I've never had ten projects waiting to be done. If I have one to do, I'm quite pleased because the act of writing is a rewarding one and gives one pleasure and torment and anxiety and a host of other things, but it's an act that one wants to, yearns to, tries to always be involved with, whether it's a love of language, whether it's a love of structure, form, whether it's going into a fantasy life Usually I will out of desperation take the best idea that occurs to me

and work on it. If it works out, fine. If it doesn't, throw it away. Sometimes I have the ending in mind when I begin, sometimes I don't. I like to have a little outline, ideally. It's wonderful to do something that you've outlined and the outline holds up. But then again, if you don't have anything to work on and you just, say a little skit comes to mind, you'll be working on the skit. So . . . I am loathe to develop some kind of methodology that holds true at every instance, or that one can learn and say, 'Oh, this is how you go about writing!' You scramble and you scrounge is pretty much my way of doing it. Mostly scrounging for ideas, things that would interest me to sustain spending a period of time on a single project. (Schisgal Interview 147-148)

His search for ideas often begins with a personal experience or something very close to him, although not exclusively.

If I don't have it, I'll start out with something that's close to someone next door to me It depends on what my mind has brought to the fore and what I've been able to dig out. Ideally, yes, I'd like very much to be able to write about a friend, try to use his life in some fashion and

connect my own life to his so that it will have a genuine engine, or I can project into it. So to answer your question, yes, I look always to be very subjective and write . . . very personally The Typists was very subjective and personal. It was an experience I had; The Tiger wasn't. That was a character I used in that I identified very strongly with that character and felt a real thing happening to me. Nonetheless, that character was not me as I envisioned it. Clearly part of it was, but I had a friend in mind. I didn't when I wrote The Typists, where I really envisioned myself caught in that trap. I had never been a postman, as in The Tiger, but I had been a typist and I have had that experience of feeling--working at the typewriter, feeling trapped and at five o'clock I walk out of here an old man and that's my life (Schisgal Interview 148)

Beyond his ability to dramatize events and ideas from his own life, Schisgal often depicts the dramatic action of his plays through characters whose lives seem detached from the real world and devoid of any direction or purpose. This suggests an affinity for the avant-garde or absurdist writers of the late nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties. However, Schisgal completely divorces himself from that

literary movement.

Like they talk about the 'theatre of the absurd,' and I have never yet met a playwright who was a member of the 'theatre of the absurd' who says he's an absurdist Beckett denies it, Pinter denies it. No doubt Genet and Ionesco deny it. I'm sure Ionesco denies it. I don't know what it all means. It's academic bullshit The word 'absurd' means literally nothing when thinking subjectively. No one looks at the world or reality 'absurdly.' One looks at it hopelessly, painfully, full of awe, full of apprehension. You could go on and on with--with adjectives, with descriptions of what it is, but 'absurdly?' How do you look at the world 'absurdly?' The word itself is so academic, so dry, so divorced from human thought and feelings (Schisgal Interview 201) The word is dead. The school of the 'absurd' is dead. You can't have a movement that started in the fifties and sixties and has not been fed or has not flourished, has not been nurtured. It's all archaic bones in the dust. It doesn't mean anything If you're talking historically, who gives a shit! Who gives a shit about the 'theatre of the absurd.' It's not feeling theatre, it's not exciting to audiences.

It's history. Yes, there were a group of writers that critics, for whatever reason, put together under the title and they were-- they wrote plays that expressed a certain attitude or whatever. That's no longer true. Who cares! . . . And I would call to your attention that there were no Americans included in the 'theatre of the absurd' with any respect or lasting or permanent place. There were none(Schisgal Interview 202)

If, as Schisgal states, the European absurdists had no influence on his writing, then we must look elsewhere for the origins of his dramatic point of view. He contends simply, that his creative ideas derive from within himself. This issue remains a difficult one to reconcile.

You see, that's why they say, 'Who influenced me?' I am more influenced by the vision I have and the sounds I hear when I am working than I am by any particular playwright. I don't think of Pirandello or Ghelderode or Ionesco or any of those group when I am writing or when I'm even thinking about writing. And I'm not truly interested in that, or what they wrote. I'm not. What I'm interested in is seeing before my mind's eye the people come to life that I'm writing about and hearing their voices. Not only their voices, but with The Typists, hearing those

typewriters. And it's structured musically so that the sound of those typewriters were as vivid to me as any sounds that I or any of the characters ever uttered. And the punctuation of the typewriters were crucial to giving that thing a structure. So that's what I look for. I look for the vision and the sound and to structure it so that it has an energy But . . . I have never felt I had a mentor, a sense that I identified strongly with other writers I've never been cerebral about writing. I have always been visceral and I pay a price for this. I've written a lot of crap. I made a lot of mistakes in writing, But that's alright. I feel at this stage of the game that maybe some of it has seeped through and I've learned a few tricks here and there. But that's been my method. In other words, to jump in and flail about and try to grab hold of the rein. (Schisgal Interview 149)

✓ Eluding all labels, Schisgal merely identifies himself with the modern theatre:

. . . a theatre that does not concern itself with psychological characters . . . [and] doesn't concern itself with sociological character. It concerns itself with existential character, and

as such, you do not need, in order to fully probe your character, narration on the chronological events of a man's life I am interested in character that lives in a state of constant apprehension, and I do it in different ways at different times without the consistency or the obviousness of most existential theatre, but the truth is my interests are quite similar

(Schisgal Interview 170)

Schisgal creates conflict or "states of constant apprehension" by imposing strong, immediate, emotional pressures on his characters which drive them into some very unusual directions. In his play Popkins, meant as a sequel, of sorts, to Ibsen's classic A Doll's House, the emotional pressure is an unquenchable desire for change.

He [Ibsen] has Nora say that before I come back to live with you [her husband, Torvald], the most wonderful thing would have to happen and that is that we would have to change, we would be different people, but they're quite messed up So change, in and of itself, is not necessarily a desirable goal. There is a naivety to that notion that if we change we're better and . . . that's the crux to the play Because change is what America's about. We all want change. We want to be smarter, we want to be

thinner, we want to be healthier, we want to be fit, we want cosmetic surgery, we want toupees, we want this, that and the other thing, as if it's going to make our life necessarily better. Well it may very well not, so that's what that play is about (Schisgal Interview 192)

Change is a powerful notion: personality change, behavior change, people changing fascinates me because like everyone else, I guess a part of me always seeks to change and I just question whether that, in and of itself, is a goal, a desirable goal. (Schisgal Interview 193)

Another strong emotional pressure that Schisgal works with is "wanting." As opposed to the obvious human needs such as air, food, water and shelter, the real fuel for plays according to Schisgal are "wants" and it proves a powerful spur to his creativity.

. . . I think the word 'want,' 'wanting,' to me is a very meaningful, significant word. 'To want' to me, is incredibly important. Because wanting is in large measure the lives we lead, what we want and to want the wrong things is always a possibility. (Schisgal Interview 206) . . . Once again, it has to do with wanting. The real challenge of most marriages is that you don't really want it anymore. It doesn't give you

pleasure anymore. You really want something else, you really want out (Schisgal Interview 207)

Schisgal uses this concept of "wanting" when analyzing the relationship between a man and woman in his play Old Wine In A New Bottle.

. . . so anyway, the guy in that play, it wouldn't make any difference what his wife did. In truth, he's in love with that younger woman. I mean he just, he wants her. Wanting is so important. It's, I mean it's so weighty, so filling. (Schisgal Interview 207)

In terms of his own life, Schisgal considers his marriage in terms of "wants."

. . . . I think I have a good marriage. In other words, I want no other and I don't look for any but don't, don't once again categorize marriage as a happy or unhappy marriage. I mean, see that's in stasis, that's in concrete. I don't think the term's applicable, I don't think you can use the term 'happy marriage.' Just like I don't think you can say someone had a 'happy life.' That means nothing (Schisgal Interview 206) Yes, I mean it's so volatile. Who's so arrogant to think he has a 'happy life?' My God, that phone can ring right now and the

world can come to an end for me or for you or for all of us. Who lives happily? We've had happy days, happy weeks, happy moments. To have a happy day is pretty good, to have twenty-four hours without something hitting you in the head or some fear taking hold of you by the throat and saying "Good God, I better do something quickly or I'm going to be living in the gutter.'" So I, you know, I define my marriage only today in the sense that I am fully committed to my wife, heart and soul, and have been for a long while, but not necessarily during our thirty-one years of marriage. I'm sure that there were occasions when we've experienced all the ups and downs that all marriages must, of necessity. I would not describe my marriage as a 'happy marriage.' I would describe it today, today, today in retrospect, etc., as one we both want with all our heart and soul, we want it and we fight for it and we don't want it to change Well, oddly enough, the things we want I do feel there is a safety catch on it in some way . . . I think they're expressions of our personality. I don't think they're necessarily that unreasonable or that far-fetched (Schisgal Interview 206-208)

To explicate the relationship between "wants" and "needs" and how they can be utilized by the playwright, Schisgal related a story about a friend of his, fellow playwright Howard Sackler, who wrote The Great White Hope.

. . . I'll never forget it. He said--we were in London together and he said to me, 'You know they have this large shaving brush . . . an enormous shaving brush with a lot of hairs, bristles on it.' They were beautiful. They were enormous, with an ivory handle or whatever. He said, 'I saw this shaving brush in a window of a shop and God, I don't know whether to buy it or not.' And I said to him, 'Well, do you need it?' And he said to me, 'If I want it, I need it.' And that always stuck in my mind. And that's the kind of guy he was. 'If I want it, I need it.' And I--emotionally it took me a long time to understand what he was talking about But anyway, yes, wanting is . . . that is for me one of the real motors of plays. Wanting, I want something, 'I want to be king!' says Macbeth, you know. To want something badly so that it forces the action and doesn't let the action sit still You can push that right through for your whole story, because that 'want' is so ferocious. And to want things, . . . and it can

be spiritual things, I'm not talking about material
 [things]--is the motor that keeps most of us
 pushing through life. It's to get something, to
 get some recognition(Schisgal Interview
 208)

. . . . You can't come in small, you shouldn't
 anyway. You should be terribly, terribly hungry
 for something if you're forced into a play.
 That's why, I just reread Pirandello's Six
Characters (In Search of an Author). It's such a
 wonderful play. Why? Because these people want so
 much to live their lives on stage, have it
 written out. They want it, they need it, they're
 lost. What a wonderful idea Their
 appetite is so desperate, so enormous, and they
 don't have to shout about it. It's persistent.
 It's persistent. Ah, it's wonderful! . . . What
 you need is obsession to be a character in a play
 I tend to exaggerate it and play it and
 go to extremes for me it has to be that
 strong. (Schisgal Interview 209)

According to Schisgal, one of the major characteristics
 of his writing is a lack of consistency in the way he
 handles the dramatic action of each play. Each time he
 writes, he approaches his material differently because each
 time he writes he feels differently about the material.

To Schisgal, this is a natural progression since everything in life exists in a state of flux. To do otherwise invites stagnation and boredom.

See, that's why you can't freeze it, you can't put it in the refrigerator like ice cubes that are all in the cube tray. I could never write Luv today. I probably couldn't write it a year after I wrote it, or write like it Not only I feel differently, I'm not interested in it anymore. I'm not interested in maintaining a stylistic integrity, so that my works are all cut out of the same piece of ice. . . . Clearly, one looks at Beckett's plays and they all bear a strong resemblance to one another and they are cut out pretty much in a very similar style. His early plays, his late plays, they are all 'Beckettish.' I've never sought that. He has a coherent philosophy no doubt, feelings about reality, I don't. I don't have any, I define nothing and therefore it's pretty hard to hold to any style or perspective for any period of time.

(Schisgal Interview 150)

His continuously dynamic approach to writing accounts for the wide variety of structural and thematic elements that are found in Schisgal's plays. Once the script has been completed and the original production opens, Schisgal

has no need to go back and re-examine it.

I'm really not interested in going back to them in any way. I don't reread them. If there's a production, I won't see it unless there's a special reason. As a rule, I usually see the play once it opens rarely. We work on it before it opens, but once it opens, I don't like seeing it, my own plays again. I don't enjoy it and I'm preoccupied with what I'm doing now. I'm not really interested in what I've written before. So that I never reread them and I rarely see them when they're produced. (Schisgal Interview 151)

The effort that Schisgal puts into rewriting his plays will enhance an appreciation for this point of view. He stated, "I would say every play I do is at least ten rewrites and sometimes it gets sick. I do it so many times and I do it from the top . . ."(Followup Interview IV 238) Once the play goes into production, Schisgal continues to work closely with his director and the rewrites continue, sometimes until the play opens(Followup Interview IV 232) At this point, he is " . . . sick of it . . . and . . . can't stand it anymore I don't want any part of it. It's history!(Followup Interview IV 239). Nevertheless, the active process of writing a play still brings Schisgal the greatest satisfaction:

. . . Working on a play everyday is precisely

what I want to do. It's not painful. It's frustrating and it can become painful if it turns out not to be as good as one's expectations. It does hurt to do bad work. Yes I primarily am concerned with putting on paper the play I want to see. I may never see that play, but it has to be on paper, so that when I read it, I get a sense of it visually. And the process of writing must, in view of the difficulty of theatre today, of getting plays on etc., must give me a sense of gratification. I think it was possible, and still is possible no doubt, for a playwright to derive his primary joyful experience from watching a play in production. Today, that is such a helter-skelter kind of effort that I have put upon myself the burden of realizing the play on paper. Hopefully of course, I'd love to have it produced and I'd love to have it look well and go well. But if it doesn't, that doesn't deter me in any way. (Schisgal Interview 151, 152)

Most of Schisgal's plays can be considered avant-garde, strange or as he sometimes characterizes them, "perverse and "off-beat"(Schisgal Interview 168, 177). The ideas or creative inspirations are not always derived out of circumstances in his own life or anyone else's life for

that matter. Often the source of the play is from a child-like motivation to toy with his ideas and throw them at the audience.

So writing for me is a form of 'play' as well as the other things I said: self-examination, trying to explore certain questions. The idea of play, why do I choose to write this thing which is so fucking off-the-wall, and where did it come from? It's a form of play for me and I love to play. It took me a long time to admit it. I love to play with my imagination and with characters and with language and with play. That's where it comes from(Schisgal Interview 168)

Other sources of creativity come from his subconscious in the form of dreams and nightmares.

Nightmares. I'm conscious of that. You see, I go through periods. I went through a period where I would try to put a cat in plays. I wrote or I'd put a knife in plays, all images that come out of my nightmares: the cat, the knife or whatever. I will consciously look for the opportunity to insert. Even if I do a humorous thing . . . I said, uh--'meowing like a cat in a garbage can.' I will put that in because it is out of nightmares, because those images are so vivid, convey such magic that I'd go after them (Schisgal Interview 172)

This love of 'play' perhaps pushes Schisgal's work in the direction of emphasizing situations and plot lines at the expense of detailed character development.

Yeah. I fight boredom all the time. In other words, no doubt I pay a price for it because I don't have those fully drawn, probing, profound characters who answers in the course of a play all the big questions about his or her life. And so you're absolutely right. In other words, I avoid at all costs the familiar because I fight always naturalism, I fight always exposition, I fight always the familiar. And so I do a little dance to get around it. I really think that the play of 'character' as it is historically known will, let me say, it's of little interest to me I know, when you read reviews of plays and they talk about the richness of character, well that's pretty hard to do without being tedious. (Schisgal Interview 169)

As Schisgal begins to shape and craft a play, he has a very real and specific setting in his mind as he visualizes the movement of his characters around a particular setting. In spite of the detail provided by his imagination, his strong dislike for "words in the theatre"(Followup Interview IV 237)usually yields succinctly written plays (I usually don't overwrite, I underwrite.") and a minimum

of stage directions(Followup Interview IV 237).

Well, I see it, oddly enough. And I don't always see it on stage. Very frequently I'm not on the stage when I'm visualizing what I'm writing about, hearing it Sometimes I'm on the stage and I can actually see the stage boards and I can see the sides, my mind puts me on that stage. Sometimes the stage disappears and I'm in reality, in a different way. So it shifts on me. I prefer being on stage because then I can count the steps it takes to get from here to there. Accurate or not, but that's very important for me. See, I'm overwhelmed by the spatial aspect of theatre. Bodies on the stage fascinate me. The dimensionality of the characters on the stage is of greater interest to me frequently than any other aspect of theatre, including language. The body on stage, how it sits, how it stands, where those arms are; I can never put down all those directions that I see because I hate stage directions The theatre that I can't stand besides naturalistic theatre, is verbal theatre. I cannot stand going to the theatre and seeing people sitting in the living room talking. Whether they're wisecracking or not, or joking, I'm not interested immediately. And I can't help

it because the stage is a magical place and placing the body on stage becomes a magical being and therefore it is not ordinary. It is not natural And to watch that body on stage to me is one of the main reasons to go to the theatre (Schisgal Interview 172-173)

This importance which Schisgal attributes to bodily movement on the stage is evident in much of his work and it is one of the techniques he utilizes to enhance dramatic tension. He has taken physical movement on the stage to an extreme degree in two plays that are farces: An American Millionaire which opened at the Circle-in-the-Square Theatre on April 20,1974, and All Over Town, which opened on December 29,1974 at the Booth Theatre. Interestingly, farce appeals to him for philosophical reasons as well.

The truth is that farces are interesting to me because of movement and they're choreographed. But too, equally important is that farces are at heart existential. They don't deal with character, they deal with the frenzy of social relationships and I think that Feydeau was a very important existential writer. One can enjoy his work on more than one level. (Schisgal Interview 174)

In addition to the element of movement, Schisgal uses other dramatic devices to enhance theatricalism and

maintain the "magic" of the stage. One device that he particularly likes to utilize is the soliloquy. It seems to provide him with a very effective means of attacking realism in the theatre.

I did it in my first play, one of my first plays, The Typists. The two typists come forward downstage and talk to the audience. Light hits them and they tell their personal experiences because they don't want the other person to hear their inner monologues Well, it's a way to break through the wall, the fourth wall, which I think is essential to do when you can do it, when it works. As I told you, I loathe naturalism (Schisgal Interview 185)

When asked if his use of these presentational devices was in any way influenced or inspired by the plays of Brecht, Schisgal responded vehemently.

I don't give a shit what he wanted. Most of the Brecht I've seen has bored the shit out of me. I've seen a couple of good things. I truly respect him as a playwright and as a poet and think Three Penny Opera, to say the obvious, is by far the best modern musical ever written. It's wonderful and I love it. And I love many parts of many of his plays. But frankly, I have no real identification with him; his temperament, his

milieu, his interests. (Schisgal Interview 185)

Schisgal uses the soliloquy when he wants to provide a character with the most dramatic means of expression at his disposal. It is a device that harkens back to the time of the old variety form of vaudeville.

Yes, I am very enamored of vaudeville. I think vaudeville is a great theatrical way of presenting an event. I really feel a closeness to vaudeville and would love to find ways-- that's why frequently I'll use song and dance and break it up with jokes, like skits or whatever. I think there's something to the vaudeville rhythms in a theatre, the authenticity of it is what attracts me, the up-frontness of it. That is, the performer downstage talking to the audience. And who can forget the way Olivier did The Entertainer, in both theatre and film. How wonderful that is. (Schisgal Interview 186)

Music can also augment the theatrical qualities of a play. Schisgal's training as a musician has influenced his use of music and musical rhythm in his plays. Sometimes musical selections are indicated in the stage directions " . . . so I use music that usually, that I have some feeling for or that evokes certain emotions in me personally and I try to communicate that through the piece to the audience"(Schisgal Interview 187).

Rhythms of pure sound may replace the use of music and have led to some very interesting results.

Well, I do something else. I always try for rhythms. In other words, I consciously try to write to a beat and that includes dialogue as well as introducing the chattering of typewriters, the slamming of doors, the ringing of bells. I will deliberately look for a rhythmic pattern to what I do. If I can find it, it pleases me. The Typists, the whole thing was written, almost was orchestrated, as was say All Over Town. And it's not only introducing music. It's the rhythm of dialogue and the rhythm of the choreography. And I try to get all those elements together. And my failures mostly come about, in my mind, is when I can't sustain those ideas so that the whole is imbued with a rhythmic base (Schisgal Interview 187)

This examination of Schisgal's method of creating a play so far indicates his use of a wide array of stimuli and ideas to ignite his imagination. In effect, his approach is spontaneous and haphazard. He emphasized this point and compared his techniques with those espoused by Harvard's pioneer dramatic writing instructor, George Pierce Baker. He pointed out that that kind of an approach would be totally anathema to him:

Phillip Barry, Sidney Howard, S.N.Behrman--they were all in Baker's class and he had a book that he wrote that encompassed his idea about dramatic writing And it says things like, 'A cluttered play is always a bad play. Selection with one's purpose clearly in mind is the remedy for such clutter. How may we know whether our motivation is good or not? First comes structure, ordering for clearness and correct emphasis in the storytelling.' My God! I couldn't read more than a page of this, I find it so boring and tedious and such academic bullshit if I had to sit down and write a play and answer questions as to its motivation and clarity and to define it in terms Mr. Baker evidently thinks is necessary before sitting down to write the play, I could never write. I'd rather write the play, as I do, using what experiences I've acquired, certainly trying to learn from what mistakes I've made, but doing it with as much spontaneity and as much visceral feelings as I can muster, as much life and energy as I can muster. (Schisgal Interview 183)

By describing his process of creativity in terms of strong physical and emotional analogues, such as "giving birth" and "Catharsis," Schisgal seems to minimize writing

as an intellectual exercise. In effect, his is attacking another cliched idea:

I've always been the same. And it fills me, you see, it fills me emotionally, this impetuosity, this heedlessness, this stupidity. I wrote a book called Days and Nights of a French Horn Player. I took about, maybe a dozen lessons on the French horn, from a French horn teacher from Juillard, read a few books, listened to records, a great many records of French horn concerti and that was it. I mean, while writing. I mean, I know about as much about the French horn as the 'man in the moon' I couldn't wait to write what I wanted to write. And it truly wasn't that important to me. I wasn't interested in the mechanics of the French horn, but yet truly, the work must suffer because if you're going to do something decent, you should know--have a good knowledge of what the hell you're writing about. But my main concern in writing is not that. My main concern is always, for want of a better expression, 'giving birth.' I am truly filled with it. I must get it out. And the compulsion is to get-it-out, because it is forcing itself on me and so all other things are thrown to the side.

(Schisgal Interview 190-191)

It is clear from the preceding interview statements that Schisgal's creativity derives from his own need to explore the conscious and subconscious elements of his characters as they attempt to cope with the circumstances of their lives. Although his plays do not attempt to provide any solutions, the exploration of the problems results in intriguing dramatic situations. Rejecting conventional realism, he has consistently embraced those elements of presentation which promote bold theatricalism, that is, an appreciation for the stage as a special, perhaps even a magical place. This adventuresome approach seems to be his primary function as a playwright and underlies the impact that all his plays have on an audience.

CHAPTER II

Theatrical Theories of Murray Schisgal

B--Discussion and Evaluation of Schisgal's Theories of Comedy

Comedy is the dominant dramatic form or characteristic found in Schisgal's plays. He has a penchant for creating "off-beat" comedies with strange plot lines and troubled or disaffected characters. Unlike the domestic situation comedies that appeal to mainstream American tastes. Schisgal consistently aims for something different. The following discussion attempts to explain the reasons for his reliance on comedy, describes the nature of the comedy he writes, and also provides a detailed analysis of the comedic techniques utilized in several of his plays.

Surprisingly, in an interview with The American Theatre, Schisgal stated, "Well, I really don't think of myself as primarily a comedic writer. I frankly write what at the moment strikes me as being worthwhile and I just don't categorize myself for what I am doing"(130).

Anyone familiar with his plays will find this statement confusing and perhaps attribute it to another

example of his resentment of classifications. This conclusion becomes more evident after examining a followup statement made later during that same interview:

Yes, it won't do to adhere to classic distinctions between comedy and tragedy. I don't know if they were ever valid, but certainly they have little use in our vocabulary today. I think a play primarily should not shy away from any attitude which it needs to fulfill itself, and if one would deal with contemporary society, I think that of necessity one has to laugh as much as cry (130-131)

As a general observation on life, the above statement may hold true, but it becomes contradictory when you consider the majority of Schisgal's work. In fact, in a 1982 interview with New York Times reporter Helen Dudar, he discussed with her the basis for his proclivity toward comedy.

'Let's go out' is Mr. Schisgal's favorite expression and an invitation he extends profligately. In the days of his East New York childhood, he was a skinny kid who used comedy to cope with a hostile environment represented by bigger, tougher boys--'Everybody wanted to kill you,' he recalled. Persuaded though he is that humor is born of cowardice, he now finds he can

be funny even in the absence of terror, a discovery that has unleashed chronic friendliness in most public places. (Dudar 5)

If Schisgal's flair for comedy evolved from a need to survive during his childhood, it is also important to reconsider statements he made regarding his approach to writing. "I look always to be very subjective and write . . . very personally." Later he added, "When you asked me what's my view of reality, I go back to what I said originally in that insofar as my view of reality is one that asks the question, 'How do we live?' That's my view of reality - How do we live? How do we experience joy?" (Schisgal Interview 151). That Schisgal developed an understanding of comedy as a child and now utilizes it to explore the madness of modern life, provides a starting point for a discussion of the way in which he develops comedy in his plays.

Schisgal satirizes man's existence by selecting specific vices, follies and controversial issues, and then examines them in some form of dramatic action. His characters are thoroughly unremarkable people, certainly different from traditional dramatic heroes. They are plagued with insecurities, doubts and fears, and often resort to ridiculous behavior in order to make it through another difficult moment in their lives. Schisgal's comedy blends cutting satire with a dose of compassion for man's

innumerable foibles.

An interesting analogy can be drawn between Schisgal's use of comedy to dramatize the way modern man "lives" and "experiences joy," and the purpose of comedy in Aristophanic Old Comedy. Writing during the latter part of the Fifth Century B.C., Aristophanes presented his comic premise during the prologue in the form of a "happy idea" that was "fantastic in concept and comic in its absurd lack of traditional logic"(Pickering 37). In terms of his use of comedic devices, Aristophanes displayed in most of his forty plays "an unparalleled comic imagination, managing to combine exquisite lyric poetry with obscenity and farce, and high seriousness with low comedy. His primary concern was always the welfare of Athens and thus, in a sense, the welfare of all mankind"(Pickering 40).

In a similar structural approach, the comic premise or "happy idea" can usually be identified in the introductory scenes of Schisgal's plays and they then form the comic basis for everything that follows. Although Schisgal rarely uses poetry, he has a keen awareness of rhythm and music, and frequently incorporates these elements into his plays as well. As with Aristophanes, the concept is often fantastic and the logic usually absurd and ridiculous, lacking a rational or scientific explanation.

Schisgal possesses a unique inventiveness in which he freely combines a variety of comic effects or devices. In

[illegible]

his book, Anatomy of Drama, Alan Reynolds Thompson provided a method for analyzing comic effects based upon a hierarchy of their intellectual appeal. His scale ranges from indecent and obscene effects which would appeal to "the simplest minds," (196) to physical action and mishaps, effects that arise from the development of plot, verbal wit, inconsistencies of character and finally the intellectual "comedy of ideas" and "satire" (205).

Schisgal skillfully combines the "comedy of ideas" with inventive verbal wit. He does not hesitate however, to also incorporate crude sight gags and farcical slapstick into the same scene. To some, the result is hilarious comedy, while for others it approaches comedic overkill. In his book The Jumping Off Place, Gerald Weales commented that "Schisgal is among the cleverest of the playwrights of the 1960's, but even his best work hints that his cleverness may be a burden as well as a blessing" (106). Weales may have been referring to this overabundance of comedic devices.

Analyzing comedic techniques used in specific plays may elucidate Schisgal's approach. In The Flatulist and How We Reached An Impasse On Nuclear Energy, two of his later, less commercially successful plays, the "happy idea" or comic premise that Schisgal has crafted has been taken to a particularly ridiculous extreme.

The Flatulist, first produced in February, 1980 at

Rip Torn's Sanctuary Theatre in New York, combines serious emotional content with crude, physical comic effects resulting in a kind of obscene fantasy. The dramatic action begins in the office of Jack Kohane, a talent booking agent, who receives a visit from his former client, Gregory Horowitz. Unlike many of Schisgal's other plays, here the events of the past impinge strongly on the present circumstances. Gregory is a former comedian with a history of being temperamental and troubled. As past problems are discussed, Jack tries to instill guilt in Gregory for the way he behaved. More importantly, Jack raises the point that Gregory's deceased father, Buzz, a trained violinist-turned-comic, always felt that his son was ashamed of what he did to earn a living. Gregory pleads with Jack to allow him to demonstrate part of his new act. He won't tell him what it is, but mentions that it was once performed in France. Accompanied by an introductory tape recording from an earlier performance, Gregory warms up his body "with almost fanatical concentration" by doing a series of knee-bends, squats, jogs-in-place, and other exercises. Then he bends forward at the knees, opens a flap at the rear of his pants and begins to flatulate to the tune of "Home on the Range." Jack looks on in "absolute amazement," which turns to anger. He goes to raise the venetian blinds in order to open the window as Gregory yells out to him:

'No, leave it! I'll do it!' He bends over, breaks

wind: the venetian blinds zoom to the top of the window; he breaks wind again, and the window flies open; he now changes his position, aims at the blade fan on the ceiling, breaks wind: the blade fan whirls about soundlessly, speedily. He rises, feeling very pleased with himself. (The Flatulist 36)

There can be no doubt that in performance, this moment from the play would shock and disgust some audience members, while others would probably find it crudely comical. When asked about this, Schisgal recalled a humorous story from the February, 1980 performances.

I tell the story of a man who walked out, a middle-aged man and I was pacing him back and I followed him out and I said, 'Sir, I can understand your being offended by this play and I'd like to give you your money back. He said, 'No, no, I don't want money back, I don't want it.' I said, 'No really, I wrote the play, I'm the playwright and I can understand that you're sensitive and you took offense and please let me give you the money.' He said, 'No, I don't want the money.' He said, 'I'll tell you something, Mister.' He said, 'I loved that play. I think that play was terrific. And then that guy started farting on the stage and I couldn't take it

anymore. (Followup Interview II 219)

Apparently, this audience member missed the point of the play and mistook the actor's flatulence for the real thing!

Schisgal also utilizes comic inconsistencies between Gregory's statements and his actions, to compound the comic effect. For example, Jack threatens to walk out on Gregory unless he agrees to go back to doing the old comic routines that his father did. Gregory responds, "He was a vulgar and obscene little man. His act was an abomination, an insult to the intelligence. He groveled and whined to please his audience. That, I submit respectfully, is not the . . . attitude of an artist" (The Flatulist 37). One can only marvel at the irony of such a statement coming from a flatulist. Then, as if to underscore the absurdity of his preceding statement, Schisgal takes the dramatic action to the most ridiculous extreme. Gregory loses control, again unbuttons the pants "flap, assumes the posture and breaks wind, several times, knocks the books off the mantelshelf, tosses Jack's homburg into the air, starts a roaring blaze in the fireplace as a painting whirls around on the wall" (The Flatulist 37-38). In spite of this cascade of sight gags, the serious tone of the scene continues. Jack maintains his refusal to send Gregory out on any performance bookings. Gregory blames Jack for ruining his father's career by destroying his confidence as a serious musician and turning him into a "hack" comic. He

characterizes Jack's "influence over the lives of others" as a dangerous weapon. The melodramatic quality of these recriminations between the two men is broken by the absurdity of the final moments of dramatic action. As Jack begins to exit from the room, Gregory blasts him directly with four or five "huge, thundering wind blasts that shake the office furniture and reverberate against the walls. Jack is shot again and again, stumbles across the room, gasps . . . , clutches his throat, flails his arms" and finally collapses dead on the desk as the room fills with "noxious, toxic gasses" (The Flatulist 40). The scene ends as Gregory picks up Jack's homburg, places it on his head and walks out of the office singing the refrains of "Home on the Range."

In spite of its unusual construction containing disjointed moments of crude comedy interspersed with excessive melodrama, The Flatulist apparently succeeded as a comedy in performance. Although it played for only a few days as a showcase production and, according to Schisgal, left the audience "open-mouthed and aghast by what they were witnessing" the comedic moments worked, providing him with "some of the biggest laughs I've ever gotten in the theatre" (Followup Interview II 219).

With a scenario even more outlandish than that of The Flatulist, Schisgal's politically motivated How We Reached An Impasse On Nuclear Energy seems overburdened with comic

business and devices that obscure its attempt to seriously address the issues that it raises. First presented in 1988 in a public reading at the Apple Corps Theatre in New York City, this comedy-drama juxtaposes two of the most controversial issues of the nineteen-eighties: male chauvinism versus women's rights, and the dangers of nuclear energy.

As the dramatic action begins, Dennis Wilson, the Nuclear Power Commissioner, has just returned home from a month long fact-finding trip overseas to assess the safety standards of nuclear power plants. Unbeknownst to him, his wife has grown a beard and when he first sees her, is quite understandably taken aback!

Dennis. Rosalind . . . what . . . what is that
. . . (Forces a laugh) It's funny. It is funny.

Where in the world did you get it?

Rosalind. Get what, Sweetheart?

Dennis. The . . .beard.

Rosalind. Oh, how stupid of me. I completely forgot. (Strokes beard) I grew it while you were away.

Dennis. (A short puzzled beat) You grew it?

Rosalind. Why are you surprised? You knew I shaved. I made no secret of it.

Dennis. Yes, but . . .

Rosalind. But what?

Dennis. I . . . I was under the impression that
you shaved only your legs and . . . your armpits.

(Impasse 24)

The typical situation-comedy dialogue between Rosalind
and Dennis continues in this mundane fashion, further
emphasizing the comedic understatement of the situation.

Rosalind I take it you don't like the
beard.

Dennis. Like It?

Rosalind. Dennis!

Dennis. I'm sorry dear. I've been flying for the
last fifteen hours and I haven't turned around
as yet. Is it . . . a genuine beard?

Rosalind. Darling, I told you . . . !

Dennis. Just asking. I'm just asking. Frankly, I
don't understand why you . . . want it. It does
nothing for your appearance.

Rosalind. (A short,sad beat) You're the first one
to say that.

Dennis. I am?

Rosalind. Everyone else has complimented me on
it.

Dennis. They have?

Rosalind. Perhaps you should think of going into
analysis. (Impasse 25)

Rosalind goes on to defend her right to grow a beard, if she

so desires, as a natural expression of her male secondary sex characteristics. To prove her point, she reminds Dennis of the times that he has expressed his female secondary sex characteristics.

Rosalind. You seemed to me to be so gentle, so sensitive; you weren't ashamed of your female qualities; you expressed them freely, and I loved you for it.

Dennis. Don't misconstrue my position, Rosalind. I'm not ashamed of my womanhood.

Rosalind. I know you're not. That's why all this is so absurd.

Dennis. It's one thing to express the opposite sex inside oneself, it's another to physicalize it.

Rosalind. But I've seen you physicalize the female in you.

Dennis. When have you ever seen me . . .

Rosalind. Many, many times. Don't you enjoy opening my perfume bottles and sniffing at them?

Dennis. Oh, that.

Rosalind. How about when you look through my jewelry box and casually put on a necklace or a bracelet?

Dennis. For fun. That's merely for fun!

Rosalind. Do you remember the night you came home

drunk from a party at the Belskys?

Dennis. (Thinking) Uhhh . . . (Abruptly) No.

Rosalind. You put on my bra and panties.

Dennis. (Thinking) Uhhh . . .

Rosalind. And you pranced around the room as if you were Queen of the May. I rarely saw you as happy as you were that night.

Dennis. Ah! I remember now. I was quite drunk and I had no idea what I was doing. (Impasse 29)

By means of these hilarious inconsistencies of character between the staid outward appearance of this "man of science" and his private dress-up fantasies, Schisgal creates comedy and advances his political agenda for the play. He also continues to assault the audience with alternating moments of serious drama and absurd comedy. Following this scene, Dennis allows Rosalind to make him up as a woman with lipstick, powder and wig and then admits that he likes the way he looks. To this Rosalind adds:

Rosalind. You don't feel physicalizing your female characteristics demeaning, do you?

Dennis. Surprisingly not.

Rosalind. There's a naturalness about your appearance now. (Impasse 30)

The burlesque effect from this making-up scene stands in marked contrast to the serious tone of the play which ensues. Rosalind confesses her new-found knowledge and

fears concerning nuclear power to Dennis and pleads with him to resign from the Nuclear Power Commission. Dennis, however, sees the issue as an attempt on the part of Rosalind to try to dominate him, setting up the impasse. Even as the discussion attempts seriously to address the issues of power, nuclear devastation, and equal rights, we must remember that the dramatic action of this scene calls for a woman with a beard, arguing with a man made up to look like a woman. Exactly what the final effect of all these conflicting images would have on an audience cannot be determined by a reading of the play. Perhaps with Impasse, Schisgal's attempt to explore serious issues by combining domestic, situation comedy-type dialogue with an absurd set of circumstances fails to achieve his previously stated objectives for writing a play. Those are: self-analysis/self discovery and examining the question, "How do we live? . . ." This time, the comedy seems too heavily dependent upon sight gags, while the scenario is simply too far-fetched to be believable on any level. Instead of the comedic and dramatic elements reinforcing one another, they work against each other, weakening the overall dramatic impact and leaving the reader confused.

It is interesting to note that in his more recent works, Schisgal has headed in many different directions. He wrote Oatmeal and Kisses about five years ago in an attempt to find a "commercial performance" play(Schisgal

Interview 160), in other words, something that would appeal to general audiences and make some money. Using similar characters to those in Old Wine In a New Bottle, but avoiding the herpes issue, this light, frothy comedy concerns itself with the fitness and nutrition craze. It is as close as Schisgal ever gets to pure situation comedy.

The Songs of War, produced in 1989, is an autobiographical play with music and songs. Its intent is serious and the style comes across as very theatrical by its use of songs, monologues, narration and vaudeville format, although its portrayal of characters and events suggests a realistic approach.

With "Yellow Cat," Schisgal has ventured into the realm of fantasy romance, but with a serious moral. The protagonist in this fetching and far-fetched tale of love and chivalry is Mike Orkin, a swashbuckling folk hero who combines the best attributes of "Spiderman" with those of a modern day "Robin Hood." Once a yuppie-type, he walked out on his wife Lucy, and eventually joined the ranks of the homeless on the streets of New York. He shows up at his former wife's literary agency office twenty years later in tatters, pushing his belongings in a shopping cart. It turns out that Yellow Cat, Mike's alterego, prowls the city at night helping to move homeless families into empty apartments of the wealthy who are away on vacation. Following the renewal of their romance and some other minor

plot complications regarding the literary agency business, Mike and Lucy decide to give marriage another try. Overall, it is frivolous fun which also focuses some much needed attention on the plight of this nation's homeless population.

"Theatrical Release," completed in 1989, is an unusual piece of theatre that blends abstract, nonrealistic sets and costumes with realistic dialogue, plot and characters. The story examines the relationship between Allen Birmingham, a Wall Street stock broker, and Tommy Lenville, a high rolling "wheeler-dealer". The stage directions indicate a stylized ballet motif in the design of the set, costumes and much of the movement. Specifically, the stage directions indicate set pieces that are obviously "stage-fake" with the characters dressed in full-bodied white leotards, white shoes and no socks" "Theatrical Release" 1-1-1). The dramatic action is frequently interrupted by songs and dance. To prove his loyalty and confirm their new friendship, Allen commits corporate crimes by providing Peter with "insider" information. Allen gets caught and both men eventually go to jail. There is a subplot that involves Allen's wife, Becky, who has recovered from a serious bout with cancer. The fear of a recurrence of the disease impinges heavily on their lives and casts a somber mood even on the lighter moments of the play.

The very latest Schisgal offering called "Snowball," returns to the idea of "talking gorillas" that began with the 1983 play, Summer Romance. In terms of the nature of the play, Schisgal noted, "My thrust is not to be offensive. My thrust is to turn myself on"(Followup Interview II 124). In other words, for him, the process of writing plays approaches the thrill of sexual excitement.

Schisgal's method of creating bizarre, comedic situations as a vehicle for his exploration of serious human concerns consistently characterizes his work. His ability to transform the previously discussed array of creative elements or impulses into theatrical comedy accounts for the diversity of his plays and tends to confirm his own admission of being unable to write domestic situation comedies for mass consumption. Nevertheless, his plays often struggle with this very dichotomy, that is, a willingness to risk offending an audience's sensibilities while at the same time trying to insure their enjoyment by punching each dramatic moment with a maximum amount of comedic business.

CHAPTER III

Schisgal Interview: The Playwright's Role in the Production Process

Like any artist of the theatre, the playwright's **grasp** of the business and financial aspects of his field **is** crucial to his success. Schisgal's thirty year career **spans** the vital period of commercial Broadway productions **during** the early nineteen-sixties, the development of **alternative** theatres off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway **during** the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, the **concurrent** growth of the regional and university theatre **movements**, and the present collapse of opportunities for **serious** new works on Broadway. His ability to somehow **maneuver** through all these changes and still get his work **produced** on the stage is a testament to his uncanny **survivability** as a working New York playwright.

One factor that should not be overlooked has been **Schisgal's** ability to attract distinguished actors, **directors** and producers to collaborate with him on **productions** of his plays. Some of these, a few of whom **have** already been mentioned, include Dustin Hoffman, Gene **Hackman**, Anne Jackson, Eli Wallach, Alan Arkin, Rip Torn,

Mike Nichols, Vincent Gardenia, Arthur Storch, William Devane, Marshall Mason, Paul Sorvino, Cleavon Little, Barnard Hughes, Adolph Green and Phyllis Newman. Yet with each new play that he writes, Schisgal must work just as hard to get it produced.

In the case of his recent play, The Songs of War, he sent the script out to regional theatres all over the country and received over a dozen rejections. He also sent it to his friend Jerry Gardeno, a director who had a relationship with the Gem Theatre in Garden Grove, California, and they produced it during the summer of 1989.

There's no hard and true rules. You scramble and you hustle and try the best you can to get people to read it. If I did Songs of War in July and I'm going to do Popkins in March, I guess if I can do one play a year, that's not too bad. I don't feel deprived or panicked or anything. That's not where I'm at. What I'm interested in now primarily is what I'm writing now. Hopefully, I can get something done. I would like the plays to be done, but if not, they're written and they're there and I just keep moving. (Schisgal Interview 177)

You have to understand that that many plays don't get done. A lot of these repertory theatres which now is where it's at, certainly

not on Broadway, off-Broadway, you can't do all kinds of plays. You can do small plays, you can do plays that have four, five characters, who sit and talk the whole evening So the real life of the theatre today is in repertory theatres and LORT theatres throughout the country. And they do not do that many new plays. They do a lot of classics, a lot of tried and true plays. They'll do four plays and one will be a new one and three will be remakes You can't compare the theatre today and go back twenty-five years to 1963-64. I mean, they're not the same theatres No, it was a different ball game. There was different action. I mean, Broadway in the early 1960's was doing a lot of new plays. A lot! That's not true today at all(Schisgal Interview 178) And it's all so institutionalized. Off-Broadway there used to be quite a number of off-Broadway producers as well as a lot of Broadway producers. Well, will you do me a favor and name me three off-Broadway producers or three Broadway producers who are not institutions, and who are producing plays on a regular basis? Will you name those names for me and tell me where our producers are? There are

none!(Schisgal Interview 178)

Since the option of doing new plays on Broadway, off-Broadway and in the regional theatres has become severely limited, our discussions turned to the possibility of utilizing alternative performance situations. As far as Schisgal is concerned, taking a new play over to London or having it produced by an experimental theatre group or a university theatre department does not represent a viable alternative. Regarding a production in London he said:

It's not a practical possibility because when I did it, I did it in very small theatres and under very limited--I don't choose to have it done there now unless it was done well. If the National Theatre wanted to do a play of mine, fine. If they wanted to do a play of mine in the West End, fine. I don't think I write that kind of play that they'd be interested in. That's my educated guess. (Schisgal Interview 179)

In terms of experimental theatre groups or off-off-Broadway, Schisgal held little enthusiasm for that idea because of previous negative experiences and the minimal public exposure that such performances attract:

Those experimental theatre groups that I know about or I have heard about do not do good

work. They do not have the money, they do not have the resources, they do not have the acting and directing talent, they are really 'fly-by-night' outfits that get by as best they can No, I don't know any experimental groups where work can be done and done well! Now, what do you mean by it being 'done well?' That means you need time, that means you need talent, those ingredients are wholly missing from most, all of off-off-Broadway or experimental groups that I know of. They have neither the time, money nor the consistent talent that's needed to do a good piece of work. What's the advantage of doing it there?

(Schisgal Interview 179)

Schisgal usually does not consider the educational theatre environment as an option when looking to get a new play produced. He is most confident when working with professionals and will only pursue university theatres with recognized reputations or when he can collaborate with a friend. One such example is Arthur Storch, Chairman of Syracuse University Department of Theatre and artistic director of Syracuse Stage.

Well, I'm not familiar with educational theatre. No one has ever written to me asking me for a play to do there. Experience has

taught me that unless you have a foot in the door, you're going to be short shrifted. Some reader's going to read your play, some student in graduate school or whatever, and turn it down or I don't know what, pass it on maybe. I don't know. I sent to Harvard, I sent to Yale I'm sending something now to Arthur Storch at Syracuse. I've worked there. I've done a play there. So yes, if I know someone there I will do it (Schisgal Interviews 182)

Despite the current situation which makes it extremely difficult to get any new work produced, Schisgal refuses to let it deter him:

. . . Obviously, to a degree, I'm affected by it and I don't pretend I'm not. I'm disappointed when I'm rejected, but that is something I've grown a bit thick-skinned about over the years. And I am affected by the fact that it is so hard to get a play uh--but I refuse to permit it to be important to me I'll send it out to Mark Taper or to the Old Globe Theatre or Harvard or Yale or something I've heard of or read about. If I saw Sweeney Todd recently at the Circle-in-the-Square and I liked the work of

the director named Susan Schulman, I send her a play. I say, 'I enjoyed your work. Here's something I've written. Are you interested?' I haven't heard from her yet, but as I say, I keep in there, I go to the theatre a lot and I send out my stuff. This week I sent something to Arthur Storch I mean, I would send out script a week (Schisgal Interview 182)

Successful collaboration means more than turning a completed script over to a talented director. Schisgal becomes a very active participant of the production team for one of his plays. He believes that this follow-through during the production process is critical to the success of the play:

. . . I involved myself in rehearsals. I would not give out a play as a rule that I did not have input in terms of casting it, in terms of possible rewrites, in terms of staging, in terms of everything. That's why ideally, I love to work with friends, with people who are on the same wavelength with me. That doesn't always happen. You end up firing directors, fighting with them. It's a mixed bag. What I seek is to work with friends, people I've worked with before, who share something in common and we have a place where we can discuss and argue and

fight and everything else, but do it towards the work and improve the work. . . I sent the play **【The Songs of War】** to my friend Jerry **【Gardeno】**. He knew a theatre that was interested in doing it. I went out there **【Gem Theatre, Garden Grove, CA】** and picked the actors with Jerry and the producer and then I was there. I left them alone for the first week of rehearsal, so that Jerry could work with his cast and not have my presence there which is intimidating frequently. The second week of rehearsal I was there; the third week of rehearsal I was there. Through the previews I was there and I listened and I suggest cuts, I suggest staging, I suggest everything--I mean, I talk to my friend about the production . I have input and he may disagree with me. We may argue, he may agree with me, but we work it out so it's something we want. I may lose one or two and he may lose one or two. I don't know, but this is collaborative and it's good to be collaborative with friends who will be objective about the work and not get into a whole personality thing with you which frequently happens when you work with people you haven't worked with before. You're suddenly

worried about his ego, your ego, hurting, not hurting each other, all the rest of that stuff Well, the director will usually spend a good deal of time on the phone or in person going over that with you. I have a list of questions to ask them and will have some thoughts about the style, about the sense of it. If he has any answers, actors have questions, we address them . Yes, it's a very time consuming effort to do, but you need the time. Unfortunately, you know, except for very rare circumstances, you just don't have the time and you don't have the money either. So it's always an uphill battle (Schisgal Interview 154-156)

When the collaborative efforts for a theatrical production do not come together, the effect on the first production of that play can be devastating and everyone involved suffers. Again, the key to avoiding this type of outcome, according to Schisgal, is to work with friends. People that have worked together harmoniously in the past greatly enhance the prospects for future success:

. . . two years ago, I did a show called Roadshow, very off-beat kind of thing Now, the mistake there was the production. Because of the theatre and the set-up and

because my director and I weren't on the same wavelength, I couldn't present the play, I couldn't have the play produced as I had envisioned it, so that when it came out, it fell short of the mark, to say the least I feel I've made a number of mistakes in getting my play on: by miscasting it, by having the wrong director, by being in the wrong theatre, by not having solved the third act The obligation of the playwright really is to see that the thing produced in some way resembles what he had in mind when he wrote the play. And you have to fight for that, you don't get it. Nobody gives it to you. You have to fight. I'm talking about the initial production, which is the one that really counts in terms of giving a life to the play (Schisgal Interview 183-184)

One of major problems facing contemporary playwrights is the demise of Broadway as a producing center for new plays. The expenses of mounting a new production in New York are now so prohibitive that producers are very reluctant to back anything but mainstream entertainment, plays that look like guaranteed hits at the box office. It is a trend that severely limits the options of working playwrights such as Schisgal.

Very few playwrights are connected with companies so that they can work on their plays with actors on stage. So it becomes a very private, cloistered kind of thing. And I think it's necessary to make that adjustment. I can have actors come up here to read my plays, I can read them in theatres, I can probably get a play done every year one way or the other; but it is not a daily theatrical life I'm living. I mean, the truth of the matter is the playwright has pretty much divorced himself, because of circumstances, from the theatre. So anyway, to get back to the point I'm trying to make, I try to put it on paper so vividly and so accurately that looking at it, reading it, visualizing it gives me a sense of accomplishment, even if I never see the damn thing produced. Otherwise, I couldn't keep writing. So that's the challenge. (Schisgal Interview 152)

Our discussion pursued this question of whether a play is a finished piece of literature or the framework for something that must be ultimately realized on the stage. Schisgal's response was surprisingly definitive:

No, no. The ultimate test of a play is its production. Nonetheless, it is literature. It

can be enjoyed on the page, not as much, not as satisfyingly, not as fully as a production, but nonetheless one can sit down and read Genet and get a charge out of him and enjoy him. So, you know, it's not one or the other, it's a mixed bag, but ultimately, the test is its playability. Clearly, that's what its function is, but that's not the whole story since we all read plays and derive great pleasure from that experience. (Schisgal Interview 154)

Schisgal writes probing plays that address the often strange and maddening nature of modern city life. He incorporates topical issues and social questions into the dramatic action. As a result, his plays are often considered too controversial or inappropriate for mainstream viewer tastes. While he is aware of these limitations, he feels that he cannot change the way his mind formulates plays.

. . . Yes, but my personality is perverse. The perversity of it is that my sense of what's commercial is far off the wall, I mean unfortunately. I thought I'm being commercial. Then everybody tells me it's off-the-wall and it's this, that and the other thing because the truth of the matter is that I can't change the way I see reality. Whether I'm commercial or

not commercial, whether I think I'm commercial or I think I'm not it doesn't matter. I see things the way I write them and so it's a game I play with myself because when I try to be commercial, when I deliberately try to write something to make money, it doesn't come out as a commercial vehicle for most producers. It's too off-beat one way or the other. It's 'herpes,' it's a 'bearded lady,' it's 'gorillas,' a whole menagerie. And so, everything has to be taken in context in so far as ultimately I pretty much see things the way I see them and I can't suddenly become a sit-com writer for television, which I've tried. I've tried to write sit-com for television and I've never been able to do it. I've tried to write film. The reason I was lucky with Tootsie was because I worked closely with my friend Dustin (Hoffman), but I've written half a dozen screen plays which have never got done. Two, I did Tiger Makes Out and I did Tootsie. But I've done a half dozen more and I've never been able to get them done because they're too--they're just not right. They're not 'Sally meets Irving or Harry.' I just don't know how to do that. I can't sustain it. Not only don't I know how to

do it, but it's that I don't know how to maintain an interest in it that's the real problem. I get bored writing dialogue coming out of these mundane, realistic situations that general audiences respond to.

(Schisgal Interview 161, 162)

The truth of the matter is however, that the present theatrical climate in New York is such that only a precious few plays are considered for a Broadway or even off-Broadway run. Schisgal's plays may be looked upon as too bizarre, too avant-garde or even too silly by producers, but he also points out:

. . . no one is getting producers So on the one hand I'm not getting produced for the stuff I've been writing lately which I'm sending out because it's half alive and half dead until it's done.' I don't know how it's actually going to work out . . . I can't truly hear those lines and watch those actors moving about spatially. On the other hand, I always comfort myself, I think of my peers. I mean, I don't find anybody on easy street who I admire or I respect. So I don't hit myself over the head too hard if I can't get my stuff done. That may all be a rationalization, but that doesn't stop me from going to the typewriter

every day, which I do. And that's the most important thing, that I don't permit the reality of how difficult it is to get a play done to prevent me from working. And that's what I'm truly interested in, working. And since I'm a writer, the bulk of my work is writing. (Schisgal Interview 168)

Many times during our discussions Schisgal brought up **the** importance of artistic freedom. The issue is not one **of** censorship or infringement of personal freedoms, but **rather** one of economic survival. It isn't until a **writer** achieves financial security that he can usually **afford** to devote all his energies to projects that are of **greatest** importance to him. For Schisgal, this security has **been** attained through his executive film development **position** with Mr. Hoffman's production company. He **believes** that his last four plays reflect a marked **difference** because he made "no effort to write stuff that I **think** is going to be commercial . . . "(Schisgal Interview 161). Was this not the same dilemma faced by the **absurdist**s in the fifties? Yet they chose to follow their **artistic** instincts, ignored economic considerations and **wrote** plays regardless of mainstream bourgeois tastes. **Schisgal** thinks that there is no comparable situation today.

I really think that there is more tolerance for

theatre, there's greater diversity of theatre in European countries. In London, you've got fifteen or twenty critics, you've got a good chance of knocking off four, five, six good reviews which can sustain you. I spoke to Peter Hall about this recently and he told me it's just death here. It's not the same, it's not. This is a 'tough cookie' country for theatre. It is tough! And for things that truly aim at something, that try for something, I'm telling you we do not have today, in my opinion . . . one single prominent playwright of the generation let's say of Sam Shepard, David Mamet, who can make a living at playwriting. Neither of them do, they are both into films every chance they get Say I came up in the early sixties with Albee, Arthur Kopit, Frank Gilroy, Jack Gelber, Jack Richardson, those guys coming up out of off-Broadway in the early sixties, late fifties-early sixties, etc. All those guys, including myself have been pretty much wiped out in terms of having a life in the theatre. They hang in there, they do something, as I do, but there's no real productivity, there's no real vitality, there's no real yearning for anybody. I guess of all us

guys, Albee had the biggest reputation and the most success. He won two Pulitzer Prizes. It doesn't mean baloney; he can't bring a play into this town if he stood on his head. The money isn't there. So my point is this: my point is, how important is theatre? I think a cynical reaction or response to that would be, 'not very,' and theatre is going the way of ballet and opera. It's going to be subsidized However, does that stop Don Quixote or prevent him from going after his Dulcinea? No, it doesn't, because there will always be a theatre and it could always turn around, who the hell knows. Broadway is not dead and I don't think it's going to die, and there's off-Broadway and regional theatre and stock theatre. And none of us are in it really to become national heroes. We're in it because that's what we want to do. (Schisgal Interview 162-163)

The current state of the theatre in the United States therefore, presents a discouraging array of obstacles and difficulties to playwrights attempting to get their work produced. Schisgal has confronted this situation in a variety of ways. While he continues to write plays that express his personal artistic vision and attempts to stage them in regional theatres,

off-off-Broadway theatres or through rehearsed readings,
he also has utilized his creative talents in the more
lucrative area of motion picture development. In effect,
the financial security derived from film-related
activities subsidizes his ongoing theatrical endeavors.
It *is* a sad commentary on the vitality of the American
theatre, and yet it represents one pragmatic approach
for theatre practitioners who wish to contribute to the
theatre in order to maintain it as a viable art form for
the future.

CHAPTER IV

Analysis of Three Schisgal Plays

A. Basis for Analysis

Each play that Schisgal has written during the past thirty years represents a dramatized expression of his thoughts and feelings toward a certain situation at a given period of his life. He has clearly stated that the plays must be allowed to speak for themselves; conclusions or generalizations derived from or imposed upon his work have no validity, as far as he is concerned. It may prove worthwhile, however, to look at three of his plays in order to illustrate how his ideas on the creative process and the production process, as stated in the previous interviews, have actually been translated into specific theatrical experiences and realized on the stage. The Typists, Luv, and Jimmy Shine represent the culmination of his creativity and business acumen coming together. These productions all had successful runs in New York's commercial theatres during the nineteen-sixties and although they primarily

represent an early phase of Schisgal's development as a writer, they are probably his most recognizable play titles to the general public.

In terms of the actual writing process, Schisgal has indicated that he rewrites each play extensively, at least ten or fifteen times, primarily by retyping the previous scripts, occasionally making notes directly with his pen. He noted, this process is crucial "because the act of typing a script is very important to me . . . the physical act of typing and re-hearing the lines and re-visualizing the people on the set in my mind are important to me because that's the strongest evidence I have whether the thing will work or not . . . "

(Followup Interview IV 232).

Once the process of rewriting is complete, Schisgal attempts to get the script produced. He does not read the play to anyone or use anyone as a "sounding board" for personal responses to it until he actually becomes involved in a production situation, "so that I would only be working with the director who directed it, since everybody has an opinion about everything"(Followup Interview IV 232). Perhaps because he rewrites extensively on his own, his plays:

. . . remain pretty much the same once they went into rehearsal. In other words, the production of The Typists that was done in

London . . . hadn't changed at all. Very minor. The same is true of Jimmy Shine and Luv. Luv., the New York production, the ending was changed and there were some additional lines, but nothing of any dramatic nature. (Followup Interview IV 232)

Once the play goes into production and the actors begin to work on the stage, "the problems start presenting themselves." The need for rewrites becomes "further exacerbated when you're in front of an audience . . . so the majority of rewrites happen during previews and rehearsals rather than prior to going into rehearsals (Followup Interview IV 233). Of the three plays under discussion, Jimmy Shine proved the most problematic in terms of the script and the need for rewrites. "It did require major rewrites and they were done out of town during previews" (Followup Interview IV 235). Schisgal recollected that rewriting occurred while they previewed in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.:

because the play didn't stand up in front of an audience and we tried to make it better by rewriting it And, of course, there is an attempt to be professional about it, but underlying it all is a good dose of hysteria The important ones [rewrites] are structural problems, those are the ones that

are most painful. It's not a question of lines usually. It's a question of clarity, its a question of intention, a question of design
(Followup Interview IV 235-236)

In the discussion that follows, each play will be individually examined to determine the playwright's purpose for writing it and the thematic ideas which are expressed. Important plot elements, as they relate to the creative process, will also be discussed. A review of critiques from the original productions provides insights into the public's perception of Schisgal's unorthodox style. The plays will also be evaluated in terms of their dramatic structure. This assessment will include this author's subjective response to the plot, characters, dialogue, production style and a determination of whether the playwright's purpose in writing the script has been realized.

B. The Typists

This early, one-act play contains most of the essential structural and theatrical elements which Schisgal continued to utilize and develop in his plays over the next thirty years. In The Typists, the lifespan of two menial office workers has been compressed into a single day. The dramatic action takes place in a realistic business-office setting where Sylvia Paxton, a young secretary, greets Paul Cunningham, a new employee about to begin his first day on the job. Paul attends law school at night and struggles to make ends meet. The work that Sylvia and Paul perform involves taking names and addresses out of the telephone book and typing them in alphabetical order on postcards which get mailed out to prospective customers. Specifics regarding the nature of their business are not disclosed, nor does Schisgal ever have their often-referred-to-boss appear on stage. Keeping these factors unknown enhances the universal qualities of the play. This "one" day in the office seems, to them, to drag on forever and acts as the metaphor for their lives. Although the dramatic action represents an eight-hour work day, comic moments are created by the idiosyncrasies of these characters as they age from their twenties, to their thirties, forties, fifties and finally

into their middle sixties. By means of the dramatic action, the relationship between Sylvia and Paul develops from that of co-workers to friends, then to confidantes, potential lovers and ultimately to that of life-long working comrades on the brink of retirement. Utilizing this fantastic device, Schisgal conveys the tedium and detachment of man's existence in a mechanized, modern society.

In one particularly funny moment, Paul and Sylvia get into a vicious argument because they cannot agree on when to eat their lunch. Paul tells Sylvia that he loathes her, and Sylvia retorts to Paul that the sight of him makes her ill. Paul rises ominously, goes over to Sylvia, and tells her that what he really wants to do is rip the clothes off her back, "piece by piece," and make violent, passionate love to her(The Typists 18). She admits to feeling the same impulse. Later on in the play, in an effort to demonstrate his prowess on the typewriter, he resorts to a series of "shticks" including typing with his back to the machine, typing simultaneously on two machines, and finally typing with his feet. As a contrast to these obviously funny bits of physical business, there are other moments of theatricality. All activity on stage freezes as each character delivers a monologue which provides insights into their feelings, failed expectations and unfulfilled

dreams. These reflective interludes provide a very theatrical counterpoint to the otherwise realistic style of the play. Schisgal has also established a variety of rhythms within the piece by using the clattering of the typewriters and the ringing of their bells to accentuate the dramatic action of many of the scenes.

Knowing Mr. Schisgal personally, I can easily think of the character, Paul, as the embodiment of the playwright. As previously noted, Schisgal has said that The Typists "was very subjective and personal. It was an experience I had I really envisioned myself caught in that trap . . . but I had been a typist and I have had that experience of feeling, working at the typewriter, feeling trapped and at five o'clock I walk out of here an old man, and that's my life"(Schisgal Interview 148). So, in a way, this play not only has autobiographical significance, but also represents a highly subjective rendering of his experiences. In a written introduction, Schisgal has provided further insights for The Typists which clearly establish the blueprint for this comedy.

I once worked for an employment agency that sent out typists to companies I was usually sent out with a fellow named John Bageris(today a teacher and painter of wonderful abstractions). We'd sit beside each

other, typing names and addresses on endless sheets of paper. When the supervisor wasn't in the room, we stopped typing and talked about everything under the sun. But as soon as the supervisor walked in, we'd start typing furiously again.

When I wrote the play I heard the clacking sound of the typewriters, I saw Paul and Sylvia age in front of my eyes, and I prayed with all my heart that I could live another life. (Luv and Other Plays 7)

Schisgal has endowed The Typists with all of the creative elements that he considers essential. He highlights the theatricalism by means of long monologues that Paul and Sylvia deliver directly to the audience, and uses typewriter sounds and slamming doors to heighten the tension and energy level of each dramatic moment. The irrelevance of previous events and relationships in the lives of his dramatic characters illustrate Schisgal's embrace of existentialism. Ultimately, we do find out a great deal about the private lives of Paul and Sylvia, but this knowledge has no bearing on the outcome of the play. What concerns us is the developing relationship between Paul and Sylvia as this day and their lives pass before us.

The original production of The Typists took place in

London in 1960, under the auspices of the British Drama League. A production was also presented at the Edinburgh Festival in 1961. The play opened at the off-Broadway Orpheum Theatre in New York on February 4, 1963 with Anne Jackson as Sylvia, and Eli Wallach playing Paul. Arthur Storch directed the production and the set design was by Wolfgang Roth(The Typists 6). The Typists was the honored recipient of the 1963 Vernon Rice Award, the Saturday Review Critics Poll Award, and the Outer Circle Award.

In spite of its success, The Typists received mixed reviews from the press. Harold Clurman noted in his Nation review that Schisgal has a gift for humor and "has found a way of saying things, bitter or painful in other dramatists, which in The Tiger and The Typists are presented with quizzical playfulness that is wholly engaging"(Clurman 166). He noted however, that the writing "lacks distinction." In Edith Oliver's review for the New Yorker, Schisgal's gift for humor was commended and she noted his "ear for the inane drolleries of New York speech"(Oliver 114). She went on to say that "with all their theatrical inventiveness and bits of irony and nonsense, they are essentially demonstrations of fairly standard ideas about people and their behavior"(Oliver 114) Howard Taubman, who wrote a review for the New York Times , also approved of Schisgal's comedic touch, but

added that his inventiveness "is not sustained and tends to dawdle"(Taubman 5). Nevertheless, he concluded, "Just when you are ready to give up on him as being complacently glib, he comes up with an unexpected twist or explodes a hilarious line."

What makes The Typists such an interesting piece of drama is Schisgal's device of moving the two characters freely through time as they age from their twenties to their sixties in the course of the one day depicted on stage. Schisgal acknowledges that the basis for this idea derives from:

. . . my own fear, my own apprehensions. I had many jobs before. When I wrote that, I was teaching. But before that, I had many jobs and I think it's a common apprehension that we all share that we're doing chores, mechanical chores, routine chores, and we're growing old and we're not living our lives. So we take a condensation of that personal and I hope universal apprehension, fear, of not wasting our lives, doing things that do not have any meaning for us. (Followup Interview IV 240)

As the play progresses, there are momentary flashes of hope and dynamic action in which Paul and Sylvia attempt to break out of the ruts which they have created for themselves. Sadly, the fear and pain associated with

the possibility of change proves more powerful than their need and desire to bring about that change. In the end, they are reconciled to their unhappy and tedious lot in life, and seem to find some sort of solace in the simple stability of their jobs as typists and in each other's comraderie.

In The Typists, Schisgal encourages the audience to consider some very serious questions about the nature of modern man: Why does he allow himself to get trapped in life? Why does he sow the seeds of his own unhappiness? How can he succeed in spite of his fears? They are disturbing questions that have no easy answers, yet Schisgal raises them in his uniquely original and dramatic style. What keeps the play upbeat, is his gift for comic dialogue and inventive business. These characters are defined by their actions and the choices they make. The play succeeds because audiences can clearly identify with these characters and their universal human frailties.

C. Luv

Murray Schisgal didn't become a successful playwright until he reached the age of thirty-seven, and then he scored grandly with the 1964 Broadway production of Luv. It was probably one of the funniest plays of the nineteen-sixties, with the title itself setting up the comic basis for everything that follows.

The fantastically ridiculous love triangle in Luv involves Milt and Ellen Manville, a miserably unhappy couple, and Milt's old high school buddy, Harry Berlin, who languishes in self-pity and despair. Not unlike the structure of Waiting for Godot, Act I and Act II are distorted images of each other. In Act I, anxious to help Harry and, more importantly, unburden himself of Ellen at the same time, Milt initiates an introduction between the two in the hope that they will "hit it off," marry and solve everyone's problem.

Early in Act I, Harry asks Milt, "What do you believe in?" and Milt responds, "I believe in love, Harry" (Luv 19). The problem is that each character's definition of love is so personal and so distorted that no one else could ever possibly share it with them, although these three characters certainly must get credit

for trying. As Act I comes to a close, the characters are upbeat and hopeful. Harry and Ellen head off together, hand-in-hand, to visit the Empire State Building, leaving Milt "salivating" in ecstasy over his freedom to pursue a romance with his girlfriend, Linda.

Act II takes place months later and supposedly, much has happened to change things for the better. Milt and Ellen accidentally meet on the bridge only to find out that they are more miserable than ever. Both of their new marriages are failures. This time, with a minor variation of the action in Act I, Milt wants to get out of his second marriage and begs Ellen to get rid of Harry so that they can get back together again. In the end, Harry winds up just as miserable as when we first met him, the odd man out as Ellen and Milt walk off into the night arguing over which of them loves the other more.

The simplicity of Luv's plot sets the stage for these three characters to follow through with Schisgal's funny business in what amounts to a series of comic sketches and skits. While these moments in the play seem reminiscent of vaudeville routines, the predominant style of the piece remains realistic, and the characters never directly address the audience. Aside from their mental states, we learn very little about these people, nor do we need to know more. Schisgal's tendency towards existential characters is firmly established here.

Everything of significance that happens, happens on the bridge before us. Thus, Milt and Harry find out the hard way that they have become victims of their own inflated dreams and expectations. Expecting too much from love and life has set them up for disappointment and made them look and feel ridiculous. Walter Kerr put it this way:

Mr. Schisgal doesn't necessarily deny that things are tough all over; he just sees how preposterous it is that we should take such pleasure in painting the clouds black. (Luv 5)

Over the course of the two acts, Schisgal unleashes a barrage of comic elements that run the gamut from intellectual satire and comedy of character, to farce and crude sight gags. One idea that Schisgal particularly enjoys playing with is "the contest of miseries" between his characters. The game of "If you think that's bad, wait till you hear this!" provides some particularly effective comic moments, especially when combined with Schisgal's flair for verbal wit and incongruous exchanges.

Harry. Did your mother ever kiss you?

Milt. Once. When I stuck my head between her lips and a picture of Clark Gable.

Harry. Well, that's better than I did.

Schisgal repeats a variation of the same device a few moments later in a scene between Ellen and Harry.

Ellen. I said, 'Did anyone ever try to rape

you?' When I was fifteen, Harry, only fifteen.

Two boys If I hadn't kicked and

screamed . . .

Harry. Where was it?

Ellen. Where was what?

Harry. That the two boys grabbed you.

Ellen. In Queens. On Parsons Boulevard. When I was walking home from the bus stop.

Harry. (vehemently) I've never been to Parsons Boulevard. Never, I don't even know where the hell Parsons Boulevard is!

Schisgal also created comic effects by using verbal wit to twist normal logic, as in this exchange between Harry and Milt:

Milt Do you know I'm more in love today than on the day I married?

Harry. You don't mean . . . ?

Milt. That's right. But my wife won't give me a divorce.

There is an equally funny moment late in Act II between Ellen and Harry:

Ellen. I'll never love you again, Harry. Now that I've lived with you I find you an utterly obnoxious person.

Harry. All right, that's a beginning; that's a start.

Sight gags and crude humor are also part of Schisgal's arsenal. There is a moment when Milt explains to Harry that his financial success derives from his determination to work hard fifty weeks a year. As he is saying this, he proceeds to empty the contents of a trash basket. First he pulls out a naked doll, waves it in the air and inserts it into his overcoat-turned-receptacle. A moment later, he removes a baby's chamber pot from the trash basket and turns it over in his hand before dropping it into his overcoat saying, "And let me tell you, Harry, nothing, nothing succeeds like success" (Luv 17). Another running gag involves Harry's retelling the humiliating experiences of having a dog urinate on his gabardine pants leg, an incident which precipitated his emotional breakdown. Appreciating the comic effect of repetition, Schisgal later closes the play with the dog chasing a terrified Harry around the stage.

Luv opened November 12, 1964 at the Booth Theatre and continued to sell out for over two years. It was an artistic and financial triumph due in no small measure to the collaborative efforts of director Mike Nichols and actors Alan Arkin, Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson, a factor not overlooked by the playwright. In a November 22, 1964 New York Times interview, Schisgal stated, "I don't think I will ever tire of saying that the contribution of the director and the actors equaled my own." He also thanked

his loyal producer, Clair Nichtern "because her desire to see the play done as I envisioned it was as strong as anyone elses"(Peck 1). Ironically, the original 1963 production of Luv in London proved quite unsuccessful. Schisgal attributed the inability of the English actors to convincingly portray American characters and the reluctance of British audiences at that time to embrace American playwrights as the main reasons for this failure. Fortunately, for the New York premiere production, the right combination of circumstances all seemed to come together(Telephone Interview March 25, 1991). A grateful Schisgal later noted:

I got lucky with this one. Lucky with the casting; lucky in the directing; and lucky in the day and month and year of its New York opening. . . And actors, director and writer were of one mind: we were all doing the same play. So it worked out well. (Luv and Other Plays 297)

Schisgal stated that the stimulus for Luv derived from its characters.

Out of characters evolve the ideas. The three characters in Luv had been sitting in my head for a good number of years and for no apparent reason, one day they just stood up and started shouting at me. They're composites of people

I've known but no one is any one person." (Peck
1)

With the stunning success of Luv, Schisgal was embraced by critics and the theatre-going public as a major American playwright and this country's answer to the "theatre of the absurd." In an article written for the Sunday Herald Tribune and reprinted as an introduction for the acting version of Luv, New York critic Walter Kerr proclaimed:

I like Murray Schisgal because he is one step ahead of the avant-garde

If the avant-garde, up to now, has successfully exploded the bright balloons of cheap optimism, Mr. Schisgal is ready to put a pin to the soapy bubbles of cheap pessimism."

(Luv 5)

In keeping with Schisgal's purpose as a playwright, Luv provides no answers to the questions it raises. The playwright's intention aims at providing the audience with a meaningful and enjoyable experience. In a 1964 interview with Ira Peck, Schisgal compared the experience of going to a theatrical event with viewing a modern painting, and viewers should ask themselves, "What am I experiencing? What is delighting me? What are my own feelings in relationship to it? . . . (Peck 1).

In fact, it would have been uncharacteristic of

Schisgal to try to come up with the answers to the far reaching questions that Luv raises. As his three anti-heroes emote, frolic, dance, sing, laugh and cry around the stage, all aspects of contemporary society are ridiculed: "alienation, loss of identity, inability to communicate, homosexuality, existentialism, Freudianism, self-expression" and cliché. In this particular instance, love functions as the greatest cliché of all (Time 81). As Schisgal pointed out, L-u-v is the perversion of l-o-v-e, which in modern society has become:

a repository for insincerity, for physical desire and perhaps primarily for money Love has become a commodity rather than an emotion. By commodity, I mean relationships. By pretending in personal relationships that what we say is what we mean. (Peck 3)

To try to explain this play however is to do it an injustice. Although Luv contained elements of serious social satire, it played as a riotous comedy. In his review in Nation, Harold Clurman wrote:

. . . the play is a clean hit, a continuously engaging event. The peculiarly American style employed is related to clowning in the manner of a sophisticated Sid Caesar. The comment is neither deep, nor cutting, but it is hilarious. The objects of ridicule are neither

confronted nor transcended; they are negated by a hop, skip and jump of irreverent tomfoolery."
(Clurman 415)

Much of the comedy in Luv involves physical action and business, and Oliver Smith's set design encompassing a bridge in "a single melodic curve scooping skyward over twinkling lights" provided a veritable playground for the actors to romp around on (Kerr 18). Howard Taubman, in his review for the New York Times apparently enjoyed the comic offerings:

Farce constantly rises to the surface and takes over. Comedy of manners in a raffish bizarre way is invoked. So are the techniques of vaudeville and low comedy.

Mr. Schisgal has mastered the trick of using stereotyped gag lines in freshly, humorous contexts (Taubman 43)

In one of the few negative reviews written, Newsweek criticized Luv as a "seriously flawed" piece of work. "Inherently a one-acter, it stretches artificially to two; unsure of its genre, it passes awkwardly from parody of Absurd Theatre to imitation of it. With no full comic vision, it makes do with bits and pieces." In spite of these statements, Newsweek still had to make this concession: "Yet as it is staged and performed, Luv is the funniest play in several seasons." (Newsweek 102)

Not to anyone's surprise, Luv received prestigious nominations for the Critics Circle and Tony Awards for 1964.

One final observation regarding Luv may prove worthwhile in terms of Schisgal's fascination with the idea of change and his characters' obsession with the need for it. In The Typists, the characters desperately wanted to change their lives and almost succeed in doing so, faltering however, at the crucial moments and at the end, silently accepting their lot in life with mild regret and resignation. In Luv, all three characters desperately want to change their lives and then succeed in doing so. The enacted changes, however, do not bring about their hoped-for results. In effect, Schisgal seems to be answering his question, "How do we live?" with the dubious response, "With frustration!"

D. Jimmy Shine

When Schisgal struggled as a young writer, he undoubtedly suffered both physical and mental anguish wondering if he would ever succeed as a writer, and if so, when? Essentially, that scenario also fits the plot of Jimmy Shine, which opened on Broadway on December 5, 1968 at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre.

From the opening scene of the play, it is apparent that Jimmy Shine has a definite problem with women. Aside from the somewhat endearing local "hooker" Rosie Pitkin, Jimmy has failed to establish fulfilling relationships with women, including Millie, the nymphomaniac. He fantasizes continuously about Elizabeth, the lovely childhood sweetheart of his dreams, who eventually marries Jimmy's best boyhood friend, Michael. In fact, Jimmy was so enthralled by Elizabeth that everytime she ever got close to him, he became overwrought and developed a bad case of diarrhea. Nevertheless, the catalyst for his daydreams and fantasies was usually the appearance of Elizabeth or some recollection associated with her.

Jimmy doesn't have much success with friendships either. All through high school, Jimmy fantasized about

his plans to share a Greenwich Village apartment with Michael, as they both pursued careers as abstract artists. Not surprisingly, Michael changed his plans at the last minute, leaving Jimmy to fend entirely for himself. In time, Michael even abandoned his plans to become an artist and went onto the lucrative field of residential real estate after marrying Elizabeth. Hurt, but still undaunted by the loss, Jimmy continued to hold tightly to his hopes of success as an artist.

Jimmy frequently daydreams about the past, recalling childhood and adolescent events and feelings shared with Michael, Constance and of course, Elizabeth. As the class "cut-up" and clown, he risked expulsion by lying to his teacher, Miss Green, in order to get a few laughs from the rest of the class. Jimmy also daydreams about crowds of art enthusiasts bidding outrageous prices for his paintings.

One of the particularly funny scenes from the play involves Jimmy's first experience with a prostitute, Sally Weber. Unfortunately, he has been set up--her muscle-bound husband jumps out of the closet just as they are about to climb into bed, leaving Jimmy scrambling out into the street for his life, minus his pants and all of his money.

In spite of the abuse that life heaps upon him, Jimmy "shines" on. He doesn't get too discouraged by life

and yet he doesn't have any direction either. He travels to San Francisco to visit his friend Lee Haines, a country singer-type. In an attempt to cheer him up, Lee introduces Jimmy to Millie, the Nymphomaniac, a member of the local "acid" colony and tells him "I'm gonna get you somebody who's gonna make you want to live forever" (Jimmy Shine 37). In another hilarious scene, Jimmy tries to alleviate Millie's depression over her nymphomania by explaining to her that she could overcome the problem if she would exercise self-control and discipline. She resolves to follow his advice and reforms immediately. Once again, Jimmy finds himself alone.

Jimmy returns to New York and takes a part-time job working at a fish store for Mr. Lepke. He quits his job on the very first day because he can't stand the thought of having to chop off the heads of the fish. This scene between Jimmy and Lepke includes every conceivable kind of funny business; a nonsensical song about the challenge of the fish business, sight gags using a machete as a tuning fork for their song, silly word games, verbal wit and exaggeration, hypocrisy and satire.

In the final scenes, Schisgal attempts to tie up all the loose ends within the limits of his usually vague approach to plot lines. His school friend, Connie, comes over to Jimmy's flat and starts hinting about the possibility of marriage. Jimmy wants to make love to her

immediately, but Connie refuses and Jimmy sends her away. Michael pays Jimmy a visit, tries to get him to give up painting, and offers him a job. Jimmy refuses and Michael taunts him about the incomprehensibility of his paintings. Evidently, these two have grown so far apart over the years that they no longer retain any common bonds or understanding for each other. Michael can now only serve as a destructive influence. A hallucination scene follows, indicative of Schisgal's creative use of nightmares. The result of Michael's gibing sends Jimmy into a state of torment that ultimately builds to a crescendo, unleashing ghosts from his past which suddenly converge upon him. They include Michael; Sally Webber, the prostitute; Miss Green, the public school teacher; and an array of doubters: voices and characters who question the very meaning of his life.

Suddenly, Jimmy gets an unexpected visit from Elizabeth. She is leaving Michael and heading to Denver to start a new life. She invites Jimmy to come with her. He is pleasantly surprised, but suspicious of her motives. He asks her to come to bed with him, but she tries to change the subject. Jimmy dances her to the front door and kisses her on the cheek as a final farewell. She looks at him dumbfoundedly.

The final scene ends as the play began, with Rosie, the friendly "hooker," badgering Jimmy for the ten

dollars he owes her for previous services rendered. He gets her to sit down, pulls off her tacky wig and starts to sketch her picture as she warns him, "Don't make my nose too big"(Jimmy Shine 57).

More than any of his plays that preceded it, Schisgal utilized a collage of theatrical styles and techniques in the writing of Jimmy Shine. The play consists essentially of a series of short scenes or skits which transcend time and space to unfold in a stream-of-consciousness chronology. The dramatic action seems to represent Jimmy Shine's highly subjective recollections. Schisgal has incorporated vaudeville style songs, dances, comedic routines, impersonations, sight gags and monologues to tell his story. Unlike his other plays, a great deal of Jimmy's previous life story is revealed. In spite of his name, Jimmy seems to be one of life's losers; an aspiring artist with no great gift or talent for anything, who survives at a subsistence level amidst meager surroundings and with only dismal prospects for future success.

Schisgal's intensive process of writing and revising his plays can be fully appreciated through an analysis of the original manuscripts of Jimmy Shine. The complete collection, entitled "The Murray Schisgal Papers," consists of the twenty-nine drafts of Jimmy Shine and is housed in the archives of the Wisconsin Center for Film

and Theatre Research at the University of Wisconsin/Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison. Donated by the playwright on December 31, 1969, these scripts document the play's evolution from the first draft of April, 1964 to the final production text of December 5, 1968.

The play that Schisgal first started writing in no way resembles the final script of the Broadway production. In the early drafts of Jimmy Shine, the dramatic action concentrates on the protagonist's strained relationship with his mother and father, and his parents' hostility towards each other. Interestingly, Schisgal's attempt to portray these family conflicts preceded by more than twenty-five years his attempt to deal with material of a similar vein in The Songs of War. The serious dramatic content found in the original drafts of Jimmy Shine alternates with the highly comedic scenes that deal with Jimmy's interactions with his friends, and his struggle to prove his manhood and succeed as an artist. The comedy becomes further enhanced by the inclusion of several vaudeville-style songs that Schisgal has written.

Of interest in terms of dramatic structure is his use of the chorus element, which chants rhythmic pieces of verse several times during the course of the play. The chorus consists of all the major characters aside from

Jimmy Shine and comments forebodingly on his death. This theatrical/formalistic device enhances Schisgal's ability to connect the realistic scenes of the play with the frequent intrusion of Jimmy Shine's memories, daydreams and nightmares. The mystical nature of this ritual-like chanting seems to prepare an audience for the dramatization of these altered states of mind. Unfortunately, by employing elements of comedy and tragedy, as well as aspects of realism, formalism and surrealism all in one play, Schisgal's draft proved uneven and inconsistent.

As the process of rewriting evolved, it became apparent that the playwright's comedic vision would predominate in the later drafts and this trend held true throughout the text of the play. Using Act I Scene I as a representative example, the following discussion deals with the nature and direction of the revisions that led to the final form of Jimmy Shine.

In the stage directions of the first draft, Schisgal describes a functional, nonrealistic set in which several performance areas exist. He has placed Jimmy's cluttered one-room New York apartment downstage center-to-right. The remainder of the set consists of a maze of smaller sets on a number of levels; steps and planks connect some of these sets"(Jimmy Shine draft #1 1). As the dramatic action unfolds from the present to the past, and into the

realm of his dreams and nightmares, minimal set pieces such as a stool, a bench, a lectern and a swing are used to suggest the wide range of locales.

The play begins with whispered voices chanting the following dialogue:

We live in a time

We live in a time

We live in a time

When the knowledge of death

When the knowledge of death

When the knowledge of death

When the awareness of death, to be more precise

More precise

Is an ever-present ontological reality . .

. . (1)

We die.

We die.

Like every other organism it should be pointed

out (1,2)

The voices of the chanting chorus give way to the sound of a ringing telephone which jolts Jimmy out of this apparent nightmare. Following the brief telephone conversation with his former school mate Elizabeth, Jimmy lies back in bed and the chorus of voices again begins to haunt him. This free-flowing transition between a dream-like state and reality, establishes the pattern

that Schisgal uses throughout the play. This time the chanting seems more agitated and ominous.

Voices:

Did you hear?

(Sound of gathering crowd)

Jimmy Shine killed himself.

Is that so?

Jimmy Shine?

He killed himself.

He's dead.

Who?

Who?

Who?

(all in chorus)

Jimmy Shine. Jimmy Shine.

Jimmy Shine is dead. Jimmy Shine is dead.

Jimmy Shine is dead.

(to crescendo)

Jimmy Shine! Jimmy Shine! Jimmy Shine! Jimmy
Shine! (4)

The setting now shifts to Jimmy's childhood, where his parents are arguing about him over the dinner table. Their recriminations become increasingly hurtful and bitter. As Jimmy enters, he immediately becomes embroiled in their argument. Each parent uses him as a sounding board in order to direct their insults against one

another. The ease with which they conduct the battle suggests that this scenario has occurred many times before, with Jimmy, as usual, trapped in the middle. At one point he scrambles into the room, gets down " . . . on all fours, like a dog . . ." and pleads with his parents to stop. They completely ignore him. He "falls back on his haunches panting . . ." and stares at each of them helplessly(6) . The spiraling intensity of their fighting finally becomes intertwined with the sound of a school bell, as Jimmy retreats to the safety of his subconscious. His mind takes him back to elementary school as he enters the classroom "on all fours, pulling a bag of books." Although Schisgal is obviously suggesting canine-like behavior by Jimmy in these scenes, his dramatic purpose seems unclear and he removed these references from later drafts. Expressionlessly, Jimmy begins to sing a lamentation song for himself:

Gone are the days
 When my heart was young and gay.
 Gone are the days
 From these cotton fields away,
 Gone from the earth,
 To a better place I know.
 I hear those gentle voices singing,
 Old Black Joe. (8-9)

As the scene comes to a close, the lights go out

Figure 1: A plot of the function $f(x) = \sin(x)$ for $x \in [0, 2\pi]$. The x-axis is labeled x and ranges from 0 to 2π . The y-axis is labeled $f(x)$ and ranges from -1 to 1. The curve starts at (0,0), reaches a maximum at $(\pi/2, 1)$, crosses the x-axis at $(\pi, 0)$, reaches a minimum at $(3\pi/2, -1)$, and ends at $(2\pi, 0)$.

Figure 2: A plot of the function $f(x) = \cos(x)$ for $x \in [0, 2\pi]$. The x-axis is labeled x and ranges from 0 to 2π . The y-axis is labeled $f(x)$ and ranges from -1 to 1. The curve starts at (0,1), crosses the x-axis at $(\pi/2, 0)$, reaches a minimum at $(\pi, -1)$, crosses the x-axis at $(3\pi/2, 0)$, and ends at $(2\pi, 1)$.

on Jimmy as the music continues to play softly in the background.

The above scene remained almost identical in form and substance through the following five rewrites between April 7, 1964 and November 30, 1964. In the sixth revised script of December 7, 1964, some subtle changes appeared. A few of the repeated lines in the choral chants were eliminated and Schisgal inserted the character Lee Haines, Jimmy's country singer friend, into the opening chorus with the line, "Where are you going man?" (Jimmy Shine draft#6 4). This line provided an early reference in the text to the fact that Jimmy leaves San Francisco and heads back to New York soon after arriving there because he doesn't feel that he fits in.

More meaningful revisions occurred in manuscript #11, dated September 30, 1965. In the opening stage directions, Schisgal ascribed, for the first time, a chronological period to the play of "A decade or so after the Second World War" (1). Setting the scene during the mid nineteen-fifties represents a significant difference from the later scripts which clearly attempt to capture the spirit of youthful rebellion and social unrest of the nineteen-sixties.

As the play begins, Jimmy "is on his hands and knees, scrubbing the floor almost in darkness" (1). The opening choral chant of "Simultaneous taped voices,

whispering liturgically"(1) now appears significantly shortened from the previous manuscripts. Suddenly, someone begins to knock on the door. At first, Jimmy doesn't seem to hear it and the chanting continues. As the knocking persists however, it forces Jimmy back to reality. Elizabeth has come to visit him and appears at his apartment with luggage in hand and dressed for travel. Elizabeth informs Jimmy that she has left her husband, Michael, and will relocate to Denver to begin a new life for herself. She invites him to join her, and gives him an hour to think it over. As Elizabeth exits, Jimmy begins to pace, looks out the window, and then resumes scrubbing the floor. The taped voices return, chanting the pronouncement that "Jimmy Shine is dead"(7). The scene continues as it does in previous manuscripts, with Jimmy's parents shouting at each other. When Jimmy appears, his father and mother, as if performing some kind of strange ritual, pull him down on the floor, roll him up in a rug so that "only his head is uncovered, protruding like a turtle's head from the rim . . ."(8). Through all of this, his parents don't miss a single beat of their argument. Several moments later, Ed and Betty's fight finally gets interrupted by Jimmy, as he shouts, "I have to go. I'm going to be late for school. Don't you want me to get an education!"(9). The lights fade as scene one comes to a close.

In manuscript #14, dated February 25, 1966, Schisgal significantly changed the opening of the play with a visual tableau of street people and a much longer choral chant. The discussion centers on Jimmy Shine's physical maladies and his apparent obsession with death:

Elderly Gentleman: Jimmy Shine

Man: Jimmy Shine.

Woman: Jimmy Shine.

Boy: What's wrong?

Vendor: What's wrong?

Girl: What's wrong?

Man: He can't sleep.

Elderly Gentleman: Can't work.

Woman: Can't eat.

Girl: Can't function.

Boy: Constipation

Vendor: Shut up!

Woman: Poor respiration.

Elderly Gentleman: Thinks of death.

Man: Obsessed with death.

Girl: Thinks of dying.

Boy: Wants to die.

Elderly Gentleman: Dying flesh.

Woman: Bleached bones.

Man: Fragile flesh.

[illegible]

The interaction between Elizabeth and Jimmy no longer occurs in scene one. Jimmy's parents, Ed and Betty, break away from the chanting on the line, "Is Jimmy home yet?" and fall right back into their heated argument, with Jimmy caught in the middle as before. No other important changes in this scene are noted.

Over the next year or so, Schisgal significantly rewrote Jimmy Shine, and these changes are clearly evident in manuscript #16, dated April 15, 1967. In the opening stage directions, the reference to time has been omitted and in his first appearance on stage, Jimmy is seated in bed and naked. Schisgal has removed all of the formalistic choral chanting with its ominous references to death. Jimmy's quarrelsome parents have also been cut entirely. Schisgal opens Act I with a comedic scene between Jimmy and his friendly call-girl named Mae. Although some of their discussion deals with Jimmy's fears and nightmares about death, they quickly shift to the topic of his inability to pay for services rendered by Mae. Elizabeth calls on the telephone and tells Jimmy

that she is coming over. He tries to get rid of Mae, but she refuses to budge, that is, until she remembers that she has a previous engagement. Just before Mae leaves, children's voices are heard singing in the background as a school bell starts to sound and Jimmy becomes jubilant over the impending visit by Elizabeth. Overall, this manuscript is the first one that approaches the predominantly realistic and comedic style of the final Jimmy Shine script. By removing the parents from the play, the dramatic action now focuses on Jimmy's relationship with his former school mates and his struggle to become an artist.

Schisgal changed the name of Jimmy's call-girl from Mae to Stella and made her Spanish in manuscript #17, dated October 19, 1967. Their opening conversation does not deal with death at all, but rather concerns the fact that his boss just fired him from "the platform"(loading dock) and he has also given up on his dream of becoming an artist. In this revision, Schisgal introduces the character Harrison, a union shop-steward from Jimmy's former place of work. He tells him that the guys from the shop are willing to fight for his reinstatement. Jimmy just wants him to leave and he finally does. Stella begins to press Jimmy to pay her the money he owes her, as Elizabeth calls and tells Jimmy that she is coming over to visit. He gets rid of Stella, jumps back into bed

and begins to hear the sound of school bells in the background.

Schisgal enlarged upon the comic moments in Jimmy Shine as the revisions continued. In manuscript #19, February 7, 1968, Jimmy peeks through the bathroom door keyhole to see why Stella is taking so long, and then he inquires, "Why are you shaving the hair under your arms?(No answer) That's my only blade I have, Stella, so do me a favor and don't . . ."(Jimmy Shine draft #19 3). He doesn't get to finish the sentence because stella squirts shaving cream through the keyhole into his eye.

Between manuscript #19 and #23, which is dated July 1, 1968, the revisions basically involved minor line changes. The only change worth noting occurs at the end of scene one, after Elizabeth has called Jimmy to tell him she wants to visit him. As Jimmy tries to hustle Stella out of his apartment, he tells her about the background of his relationships with his three childhood friends: Mike, Connie and Elizabeth. This dialogue functions as an obvious bit of exposition that Schisgal inserted into the script, although he removed it in subsequent drafts. Nevertheless, the telephone call stimulates Jimmy's imagination. The scene comes to a close as the voices of Jimmy and his friends are heard now as children in elementary school, playing games and

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joining together to sing a song, thus providing a motivation for the verse-song transition into the next scene.

Another note of interest regarding manuscript #23 concerns the playwright's actual technique of working on his revisions. Although Schisgal usually accomplished script changes on the typewriter, he also made markings and changes by hand. Page seven of this draft indicates a variety of examples and a copy of it follows on the next page.

The manuscript of November, 1968, designated "rehearsal copy" for the Broadway production, had copious handwritten corrections, many of which Schisgal did during the actual rehearsal. On page nine of this manuscript, which appears on page (131-2) Schisgal has written in a few lines of dialogue, indicating the name "Rosie" as the call-girl character, instead of "Stella." This name change had to do with the last minute firing of an actress and the hiring of Rose Gregario to take over the role, necessitating the designation of an appropriate name. In another change, Schisgal deleted the character "Harrison" from the play and eliminated all the business about Jimmy's former co-workers and the attempt to help him get back his job.

In the final script of December 5, 1968, Schisgal had apparently achieved the effective opening scene between

Jimmy Shine manuscript # 23, page seven
 illustrates Schisgal's corrections made by hand.

1-7

HARRISON

I hope I'm not disturbin' ya, Jimmy, but I tol' the guys
 I'd drop over before I went in.

(Slyly HE jerks his thumb at STELLA,
 trying to get JIMMY to tell him who
 SHE is: STELLA turns to him and HE
 smiles sheepishly at her, burying
 his hands in his pockets)

First a' all, Jimmy, the guys on the platform want ya t'know
 how sorry they are that Hanna bounced ya yesterday.

JIMMY

(Holding up can for him)

Beer?

HARRISON

No, no, I don't drink this early in the morning. Bad for
 my stomach.

(HE glances at STELLA)

Anyway, Jimmy, the guys tol' me t'tell ya that they're
 willin' t'make an issue a this, a kind a test-case. Now
 the guys know that you ain't been workin' long enough on
 the platform t'be a member a the union, but they're willin'
 t'recommend, number one,

(Throws out one finger)

your immediate membership, an' number two,

(Throws out a second finger)

your reinstatement on the platform on the ground that Hanna
 was pre ... pre ... precipi-tate in discharging you from
 the job.

JIMMY

I appreciate that, Harrison, but ~~_____~~
~~_____~~ I don't want anybody to get
 into any trouble ...

HARRISON

Now don't be too quick about it, Jimmy. Nobody's gonna
 get into any trouble. You don't have t'worry about that.

(HE glances at STELLA)

The guys are willin' t'push this issue right up t'the
 front office. All you have to do is give the word ...
 We'll get some action. I mean, we been through this
 before wit' Hanna an' he's gettin' jus' a little bit too
 big for his pants, if you know what I mean. (To STELLA) EXCUSE TH

(HE jerks his thumb at STELLA) EXPRESSION, LADY.
 turns to him, HE grins sheepishly)
~~_____~~

Forget
 Let's ~~use~~ it, ~~you~~ HARRISON. JIMMY

HARRISON

Okay, Jimmy. If that's how you wan' it ... I'll tell the
 guys. They wanna know jus' what your feelin's are. They're

Page nine from Jimmy Shine "rehearsal manuscript."
Multiple revisions are evident including last minute
name change of "Stella" to "Rosie."

JIMMY. ALL RIGHT, ROSIE, YOU CAN TAKE ANY PAINTING YOU
WANT I'M GIVING IT TO YOU AS A GIFT.
ROSIE: (NO ANSWER)
JIMMY: I SAID YOU COULD TAKE ANY PAINTING.
ROSIE: TWENTY BUCKS, JIMMY.
JIMMY
You really want the money.

1-1-9

STELLA

Yes.

JIMMY

You went to bed with me for the money, is that it?

STELLA

That's it.

JIMMY

No other reason.

STELLA

No other reason.

(JIMMY nods, displaying great
indignation; HE turns over on his
side, pulls sheet up to his chin
and feigns sleep.

(Shaking his shoulder)

Jimmy. Jimmy.

(Shouts)

Jimmy!

JIMMY

(Without moving; murmuring)

Go away. Leave me alone.

STELLA

I want my money, Jimmy.

JIMMY

I said leave me alone.

STELLA

(Shaking his shoulder)

Jimmy ...

JIMMY

(Sits up in bed; shouts)

What's wrong with you? I'm sick! Can't you see I'm sick?
How can you keep on nagging me about money!

(Clapping her hands and moving
away; STELLA explodes in Spanish,
cursing and swearing at him for a
full minute.

(Slight pause)

That was in Spanish; wasn't it?

I'M DYING, ROSIE! I'M DYING
EVERYBODY'S DYING
IT'S THE WHOLE
RITEN

Jimmy and Rosie toward which he had been striving. It functions to introduce the title character, prepares the audience for the comedic style of the play and sets up the basis for the final scene.

Underlying the business-like arrangement between Jimmy Shine and Rosie, there exists a true bond of friendship. Ironically, by the end of the play it remains the only meaningful relationship that Jimmy has to another person.

The New York production of Jimmy Shine cemented the personal and professional relationship between Schisgal and actor Dustin Hoffman, who performed the title role in his Broadway debut. Supporting Mr. Hoffman was a large cast including Rose Gregario, Susan Sullivan, Cleavon Little, Rue McClanahan and a veteran of New York's Yiddish Theatre, Eli Mintz. As producer, Schisgal again had the services of his faithful supporter, Claire Nichtern.

According to Schisgal, Jimmy Shine "has autobiographical stuff in it. That's always the starting point, it's more me than anyone else I know." Aside from that creative aspect, Schisgal had become "very much interested in doing something in an open stage. The visual stage is often an inducement for writing a play, for filling a stage." (Followup Interview I 215).

Due to the particular physical demands of this play, he needed a set that could change and become a variety of

physical environments. The final set, designed by Edward Burbage, established Jimmy's "painting studio" as the primary acting area, with many accessory spaces such as staircases, platforms and closets available as "make shift places"(Followup Interview I 215).

Unlike the praise that Schisgal generally received for his earlier productions, Jimmy Shine received some hostile criticism, although not exclusively. Almost universally praised was the "tour de force" performance of Dustin Hoffman. Clive Barnes of the New York Times even wondered, "Perhaps Dustin Hoffman IS Jimmy Shine(NY Theatre Critics Review 1968 154). John Chapman of the New York Daily News noted, "Nothing daunts Hoffman, who is an amiable comedian and a singer and nimble dancer as well"(NY Theatre Critics Review 1968 154). Richard Watts Jr. of the New York Post highly commended Hoffmans's performance and Schisgal's writing but raised an issue that was echoed in several other reviews:

Mr. Schisgal is a brilliant writer of comedy and his play is filled with delightful things. And Dustin Hoffman, an oncoming actor of notable skill and ingenuity, is a constant gas in the title role. I enjoyed almost every moment of 'Jimmy Shine' and yet I can't get away from the fact that for all its incidental excellence, it never seemed to get anywhere. (NY Theatre Critics Review 1968 155)

Writing for the Wall Street Journal, Richard P.

Cooke noted:

Mr. Schisgal knows how to create the wild, off-line circumstance, the unexpected bit of business, the flash of insight that takes a direction we're not anticipating, but in 'Jimmy Shine' he has to work too hard for his effects. It doesn't seem to be Mr. Hoffman's fault that a mood is never really formed that might sustain the play. There are flashes of the author's peculiar vision, a few well-separated bursts of humor, and that's about it. (NY Theatre Critics Review 1968 155)

Walter Kerr, who wrote very supportive critiques of Schisgal's earlier plays, seriously questioned the artistic merit of Jimmy Shine in his New York Times review:

The fact is that Mr. Schisgal is either forcing or fumbling about with stereotypes that better men have done better and lesser men done as well. It's as though he hadn't become Murray Schisgal yet, hadn't discovered the antic angle of eye that suited him best. Which may well be the case. I'm told that the play is an early one, revamped somewhat. But revamping won't help if what you're doctoring doesn't yet have an identity. (NY Theatre Critics Review 152)

This aspect of not "appearing to go anywhere," actually became the focus of praise in Martin Gottfried's review for Women's Wear Daily:

His [Jimmy Shine] vulnerability, his insecurity, his vague decency, his impatience with formal convictions, his uninterest in the straight world and its values--these are the hallmarks of today's young [1968] and they are incorporated into this one character of especial reality. When the play ends, he is still nowhere--still painting though now relieved of taking himself seriously--and so at last capable of doing something. For Schisgal(and for me) the only thing that counts is what you do. Properly, the ending is neither sweet--though it may seem that way--nor sour. It is merely right and the play of course is the story of an artist. (NY Theatre Critics Review 1968 156)

In spite of the decidedly mixed reviews that it received, Jimmy Shine ran for almost nine months and "ended when Dustin Hoffman left to do a picture"(Followup Interview I 215).

An interesting side note on this production was that its director, Donald Driver, was replaced by Tyler Stone a few weeks prior to the opening. Schisgal's comment

about this, "It shows a play's in trouble. It's very bad to replace a director at the last minute"(Followup Interview I 215). The midstream substitution of its director certainly may have affected the cohesiveness of Schisgal's overall artistic vision for this play.

Another interesting aspect to the production was the extensive musical score written by John Sebastian of the rock group "The Lovin' Spoonful." Praised unanimously by the critics, the songs commented on the dramatic action and also enhanced the sense of the sixties, an important ingredient of Schisgal's play.

To those familiar with Schisgal's style of writing, Jimmy Shine should not have represented a major departure from the work which preceded it, notwithstanding some of the critical commentary. As has already been pointed out, all of the major components of his creative process are present in this play.

In many ways, Jimmy Shine is not as dark a comedy as Luv or The Typists. Rather than becoming obsessed with the negative aspects of his life, Jimmy Shine plods on, hopeful that something worthwhile will come of his efforts. All the questioning of materialistic values and middle class work ethics were characteristic of the youth of the sixties and it was out of this social landscape that Jimmy Shine arose. Surely, it was not a throwback to a period prior to the 1960's, as Walter Kerr's comments

suggest. Again, for critics who maintain that a play must provide definitive answers or conclusions, Schisgal's work will leave them dissatisfied. In terms of his dramatic purpose, which is consistently to investigate an issue or examine how we live, Jimmy Shine succeeds. Not surprisingly, the underlying thematic ideas of this play are no longer avant-garde, and have been long since absorbed into the mainstream of contemporary thinking. For example, in a free society, individuals are entitled and encouraged to pursue vocations that are self-fulfilling. To be happy, Jimmy had to paint. Mike, Constance and Elizabeth wouldn't love or accept him on his own terms and he couldn't live with himself on theirs. For Jimmy Shine, the act of pursuing his dream was enough. Success and happiness are subjective states that cannot be imposed upon one person by another.

In terms of its dramatic structure, Jimmy Shine has certain characteristics which are atypical of Schisgal's work. The play presents a fairly complete psychological portrait of the main character. The plot's depiction of Jimmy's memories, dreams, nightmares and present circumstances is presented out of chronological order in a kind of filmic flashback technique. As a result, we begin to understand the motives behind his actions. Furthermore, unlike previous plays, Jimmy Shine ends in an upbeat fashion. The protagonist seems to have

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discovered for himself what he must do with his life, even if it leads to failure. Not to have ever tried to succeed as an artist remains a totally unacceptable alternative to him.

In all other respects, Schisgal imbued Jimmy Shine with strong elements of theatricalism. The text includes monologues and several songs. Established playing areas represent many different locales depending upon the dramatic circumstances. There are surrealistic dream sequences in which very stylized dialogue is utilized to establish different rhythms and dramatic tension. The most powerful theatrical moments are those in which Jimmy completely falls out of character and assumes various impersonations of former vaudevillian stars doing their well-known bits of comic business, including Jimmy Durante, W.C. Fields and Groucho Marx.

Utilizing this melange of standard Freudian psychological motivation, the philosophical rebelliousness of the nineteen-sixties and the presentational stand-up comedy techniques of vaudeville, Schisgal has ambitiously explored a range of dramatic elements with which to tell his story and entertain his audience. He has, after all, contended that "the theatre is an experience To have that experience is to participate in a theatrical event." In Jimmy Shine, the audience can do just that.

CONCLUSION

To appreciate Murray Schisgal's method of writing plays, this study has attempted to isolate and analyze the basic components or "seeds" of his creativity and then illustrate how the dramatic structure develops by means of his use of comedy, as well as his "absurdist" perspectives. Schisgal's stated purpose as an artist encompasses a need for self-discovery with a desire to examine how other people cope with the circumstances of their lives. These interests, as discussed, have resulted in plays that possess innovative themes and structural diversity. His ability to get his work produced has also been investigated and the views expressed seem particularly valid in light of Schisgal's thirty-year career in the theatre. The culmination of all these skills rests with the success of the productions of the plays, three of which have been assessed in this study.

In a most candid and illuminating fashion, Schisgal has expressed his distaste for categorizing and classifying his work. His point of view certainly seems reasonable in view of the fact that each one of his plays is quite different and his method of writing, as articulated by him in this study, arises from a spontaneous and haphazard

process. This author's references to the "absurdist" traits do not derive from a need to "pigeon-hole" or label, but to enhance an appreciation and understanding of the plays. The comparisons between his plays and those of the "absurdist" are compelling and provide a valid approach to a discussion of his work.

From the beginning of his career in the early nineteen-sixties, Schisgal's "absurdist" tendencies were recognized by critics who had witnessed early productions of his plays in the "fringe" theatres of London and later in Edinburgh. They frequently compared his work to that of Ionesco, Beckett(The Stage October 20, 1960)(Syna 5C) and Jean Genet(Litte 25). In fact, Schisgal displayed an impressive understanding of the "theatre of the absurd" in a public address that he delivered to the Herald Tribune Book and Author Luncheon at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York on January 19, 1965. He closed his remarks on a hopeful note:

. . . Once the theatre-going public becomes aware of what the playwright is about, he will be more anxious to share in the discovery of new plays, plays which are impatient with a logical progression of events that bear no relationship to our own experiences and a naive use of language, dead language, hackneyed language, language that conceals rather than reveals what

is for the most part unspoken. ("The Revolution of the Absurd" 25)

Schisgal's idealistic prophecy of an American public eager to sample experimental forms of drama has yet to become a reality. Mainstream American tastes still desire realism in dramatic presentations and those artists, including Schisgal, who persist in running against the popular currents must satisfy themselves with limited audiences and critical skepticism.

Since 1965, Schisgal has recognized the reality of his situation and acknowledged the problems facing avant-garde playwrights. In a 1982 interview he noted:

Whoever decides to follow his own star, so-to-speak, finds himself with a very small audience. Here and there we have little fireflies of adventuresomeness by the playwright. But there's nothing motivating us to continue along these lines. On the contrary, we are discouraged.

(Syna 5C)

In asserting Schisgal's "absurdist" tendencies however, it is important to again qualify the conclusion by noting the differences between his plays and their European counterparts. Schisgal's strong use of the elements of comedy softened the intensity of his examination into modern man's existence and opened up his plays to much

wider audiences. His brand of American "absurdism" raised the important probing questions, but swathed them in hilarious comic elements which won widespread approval on the commercial stages of Broadway, an ironic situation in and of itself.

After interest in the European "absurdist" movement faded, Schisgal continued to write plays that challenged the ability of American audiences to accept alternative approaches to drama. In effect, his writing over the years has moved further away from the theatrical mainstream as he continues to experiment with a variety of theatrical staging conventions and unusual themes, defying anyone to attempt to make generalizations about his work. The only sure thing about a Schisgal play is the uncertainty of the nature of the next one. In this way, he still embodies the essence of the avant-garde/absurdist dramatist--always searching, always experimenting, always probing into man's relationship with himself, another person or the world. Unfortunately, the opportunities to perform new plays continue to diminish as the financial plight of theatres becomes increasingly precarious. The more this trend intensifies, the fewer opportunities there will be with adequate financial resources. Fortunately for him, Schisgal has reached the point in his life where he writes primarily to please himself, regardless of a play's commercial viability.

In view of the haphazard and unpredictable direction of his writing to date, one can only speculate on his future areas of interest. I asked Schisgal recently whether in his view, there are any limits to the nature of the material appropriate to the creation of a play, keeping in mind his comedic approach and the sensibilities of an audience. His response was quite clear:

I think that there are no subjects that cannot be handled comically, absolutely! Human experience can embrace all of it so long as the viewpoint is coherent and it maintains some level of verisimilitude. Now, if you find no truth in it, then the whole thing is merely a burlesque.

(Followup Interview II223)

In his ongoing search for truth, Schisgal has headed into some very interesting areas of investigation. Undoubtedly, he and other artists like him will continue to explore the precarious condition of modern man, providing audiences not only with something to think about, but probably with a couple of good laughs along the way.

As this still quite active playwright continues to create, future areas of research may lie in a comparison of his earlier plays to more recent ones, especially now that commercial viability is only a secondary consideration for him. Another topic worthy of further exploration involves the substantial interest that Schisgal's work

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enjoys with foreign audiences. On a more personal note, Schisgal's theatre-going tastes and preferences may provide interesting insights into his own creativity. Finally, a particularly challenging area of study would entail an assessment of Schisgal as part of the collaborative process of theatre by long-time associates such as actors Dustin Hoffman, Eli Wallach, Anne Jackson; and directors Mike Nichols and Arthur Storch. This investigation would undoubtedly introduce new perspectives into this playwright's personality and creative contributions.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Transcripts of Tape Recordings

Conversations With Playwright Murray Schisgal

December 12, 1989

KB-- Let me just start off by saying what I saw as some of the main influences or themes or trends in your plays and I'd like to see what you have to say about some of them. For example, I see two big issues addressed in your plays, and this is a very gross generalization, but you talk about different kinds of love. You seem to examine every facet and every angle of love relationships between people: romantic love, platonic love, immediate-gratification-hurry-up and lay-down-in-bed love; and also the other thing that I see addressed in so many of your plays is the absurdity of life and how meaningless and purposeless so many people seem to find their lives have become. Is that based on any particular kind of philosophy that you have?

MS-- Yes, but a personal philosophy, no doubt, not any philosophy that has derived from reading or study or anything like that. I believe that I write from a need to explore certain issues that I feel warrant exploration, and I don't choose my way in any methodical fashion. I just always go into what I am taken with at the time; I'm not interested in necessarily following any particular train of thought. If I had to say what I am about it would be first of all, writing for me is a form of self-analysis, a form of discovery, self-discovery. It's a way of examining one's own life, one's own emotions, etc., etc. That may very well be primary because I do, more often than not, write from a very personal point of view about things that concern me as I am. So I am very subjective in the main, although there are exceptions because I write for money also. And those things may take me into areas that have nothing to do with my own personality. But given the choice and given the time

and given the opportunity, I will always go back to examining my own life. That's the bottom line of it, I guess. Two is, I am interested in one question and that question is, "How does one live given the circumstances of the hands we are dealt?" So I would go to those two as being primary. In so far as examining love or any of that, those are merely off-shoots, they are not primary, they are merely going along with an examination of social habits, etc., in order to find out what's real and what isn't real; what's true and what isn't true. So I would call that secondary, not primary.

KB-- Do you think that our lives are absurd, Do you think that there is a purpose, a reason . . .

MS-- I think that part of my problem as a writer always has been the disinclination to summarize anything or to generalize to the extent whereby one can say that life is this, or reality is that, and if you did this, that wouldn't happen and if you didn't do that, then the following could happen, or any of that. So I don't answer those questions. I'm not concerned with answering questions.

KB-- You mean you're not concerned with the generalities of any given situation?

MS-- Well, any way you want to put it. If you ask me a question as you just did, I wouldn't attempt to answer it because I'm not interested in the answer, because answers aren't, in my opinion, capable of being defined into cute little aphorisms, one or two lines that would sum up what the experience is. So I avoid them like the plague. What people do like, however, is to have these little handles to hold on to so that they can say that this play is about a man who has the wrong set of values in a society that is, that has inculcated him with fraudulent notions of how one should spend one's life or however you want to talk about Death of a Salesman. But we have these cute little test answers that one can learn by rote and I find all of that just nonsense. In fact, as soon as a play can be defined in those terms . . .

KB-- You start to get bothered by it.

MS-- No, I'm not talking about the cryptic or the obscure for the sake of obscurity. I'm talking about the nature of the material and what it represents.

KB-- When you start out to write a play, do you have a particular process that seems to have repeated itself? You've written a lot of plays. Is there anything, you just draw from your own personal life and then fantasy takes over, or do you start out with the thing finished before you sit down to write it? Is it different for each time?

MS-- One always lives with the apprehension that one won't have an idea to work on and there are periods where you don't have ideas, so it's a mixed bag. You never lose that apprehension that you may not have, I envy people that say, "I have ten projects waiting to be done." I've never had ten projects waiting to be done. If I have one to do, I'm quite pleased because the act of writing is a rewarding one, and gives one pleasure and torment and anxiety and a host of other things, but it's an act that one wants to, yearns to, tries to always be involved with, whether it's a love of language, whether it's a love of structure, form, whether it's going into a fantasy life. Nonetheless, one entertains the notion that the writer looks to writing as what he would like to be doing, how he would like to spend his time. So whatever the idea is, there are bad ideas, there are good ideas, whatever. Usually I will, out of desperation, take the best idea that occurs to me and work on it. If it works out, fine. If it doesn't, throw it away. Sometimes I have the ending in mind when I begin, sometimes I don't. I like to have a little outline, ideally. It's wonderful to do something that you've outlined and the outline holds up. But then again, if you don't have anything to work on and you just, say a little skit comes to mind, you'll be working on the skit so I don't, I am loathe to develop some kind of methodology that holds true at every instance, or that one can learn and say, "Oh, this is how you go about writing." You scramble and you scrounge, is pretty much my way of doing it. Mostly scrounging

for ideas, things that would interest me to sustain spending a period of time on a single project.

KB-- Basically you start out with something that's close to you?

MS-- If I have it. If I don't have it, I'll start out with something that's close to someone next door to me. If I don't have that I'll, you know what I mean. It depends on what my mind has brought to the fore and what I've been able to dig out. Ideally, yes, I'd like very much to be able to write about things that are very close to me. If I don't have ideas about that. I may write about a friend, try to use his life in some fashion and connect my own life to his so that it will have a genuine engine, or I can project into it. So to answer your question, yes, I look always to be very subjective and write from uh, very personally. If I don't have an idea that lends itself to a play I will look at my friends, I will look at my relatives, I'll look at what's around me to see if I can pull out something from their lives that might serve as a point of departure. The Typists was very subjective and personal. It was an experience I had. The Tiger wasn't. That was a character I used in that I identified very strongly with that character and felt a real thing happening to me, nonetheless that character was not me, as I envisioned it. Clearly part of it was, but I had a friend in mind. I didn't when I wrote The Typist where I really envisioned myself caught in that trap.

KB-- In one of your books, I read that you wrote that you had actually been a typist.

MS-- Yes. I had never been a postman, as in The Tiger, but I had been a typist and I have had that experience of feeling, working at the typewriter, feeling trapped and at five o'clock I walk out of here an old man, and that's my life.

KB-- How about the rest of it? I mean, that's just the starting point for it.

KB-- There's so much in that(The Typists) play.How about the ideas of well,just the decision,where does style for a writer come from?

MS-- Uh--

KB--You're works are very witty, they're very New York--

MS--You see, that's why they say,"Who influenced me?" I am more influenced by the vision I have and the sounds I hear when I am working than I am by any particular playwright.I don't think of Pirandello,or Ghelderold,or Ionesco or any of those guys when I am writing or when I'm even thinking about writing. And I'm not truly interested in that, or what they wrote.I'm not. What I'm interested in is seeing before my mind's eye the people come to life that I'm writing about and hearing their voices.Not only their voices but with The Typists, hearing those typewriters.And it's structured musically so that the sound of those typewriters were as vivid to me as any sounds that I or any of the characters ever uttered.And the punctuation of the typewriters were crucial to giving that thing a structure.So that's what I look for.I look for the vision and the sound and to structure it so that it has an energy.But I don't ever feel,and I suffer for this I'm sure in my work, because everything I do,I stumble into, or fall over or make mistakes.But I don't feel I have, I have never felt I had a mentor,a sense that I identified strongly with other writers;great respect and admiration for many writers, but I have never felt that I'd be interested in any way doing something as either an offshoot of,as a consequence of--

KB--Oh sure,you're an individual,that's for other people to worry about.

MS--But there's a great advantage in doing that.I've never been cerebral about writing. It's always been visceral and I pay a price for this.I've written alot of crap.I made a lot of mistakes in writing.But that's alright.I feel at this stage of the game that maybe some of it has seeped through and I've learned a few tricks here and there. But that's been my method. In other words, to jump in and flail about and try to grab hold of the rein.

KB-- But your style, not in any way trying to compare it to anybody
elses, but like a situation like in Luv. You've got two guys that are
desperate, they are on the verge of suicide, they're very unhappy, and
yet the play is filled with wit and irony. I mean, that's your style,
as opposed to somebody like Miller who makes it a serious--

MS-- I could not write like that anymore. See, that's why you can't
freeze it, you can't put it in the refrigerator like ice cubes that are
all in the cube tray. I could never write Luv today. I probably
couldn't write it a year after I wrote it, or write like it.

KB-- You feel differently?

MS-- Not only I feel differently, I'm not interested in it anymore. I'm
not interested in maintaining a stylistic integrity, so that my works
are all cut out of the same piece of ice. I'm not interested in that.
Maybe I should be. Clearly, one looks at Beckett's plays and they all
bear a strong resemblance to one another and they all are cut out
pretty much in a very similar style. His early plays, his late plays,
they all are "Beckettish." I've never sought that. He has a coherent
philosophy no doubt, feelings about reality, I don't. I don't have any,
I define nothing and therefore it's pretty hard to hold to any style or
perspective for any period of time. As I say, I'm always examining and
looking into, but I can't say I've ever resolved or answered anything
so that the next thing I do will reaffirm that knowledge or put it to
the test. I don't know why that is, it is a very peculiar thing no
doubt, where we have so many writers and critics who seem to view
reality in the way that has definition for them but nonetheless,
that's--

KB-- Well how about your view of reality. I mean you uh, knowing you
just for the short period of time that I do, you seem to have a very
good sense of humor. You're a wit and this comes through in most of
your plays. And even people in the depths, the edge of despair, they
always somehow maintain some semblance of wit.

MS-- It may not be wit. It may be hysteria.

KB-- Okay, whatever it is, it comes through. Is it from your own outlook on life?

MS-- When you asked me what's my view of reality, I go back to what I said originally in that insofar as my view of reality is one that asks the question, "How do we live?" That's my view of reality. How do we live! How do we experience joy!

KB-- So, you feel that when you go back and you look at all the plays that you wrote, is it almost as if they were written by somebody else. Is it that different?

MS-- No, no, not that they were written by somebody else, but that I'm really not interested in going back to them in any way. I don't reread them. If there's a production, I won't see it unless there's a special reason. As a rule, I usually see the play once it opens rarely. We work on it before it opens, but once it opens, I don't like seeing it, my own plays again. I don't enjoy it and I'm preoccupied with what I'm doing now. I'm really not interested in what I've written before. So that I never reread them and I rarely see them when they're produced.

KB-- Is it painful to write a play Murray? I mean is the process of sitting down and writing every day, is it painful?

MS-- Not for me. What is painful is the frustration of not achieving what you're going after. Working on a play every day is precisely what I want to do. It's not painful. It's frustrating and it can become painful if it turns out not to be as good as one's expectations. It does hurt to do bad work, yes.

KB-- Who's the final judge of whether it's good or bad?

MS-- Yourself. I am, of my own work, because I primarily, you see, I primarily am concerned with putting on paper the play I want to see. I may never see that play, but it has to be on paper, so that when I read it, I get a sense of it visually. And the process of writing must, in view of the difficulty of theatre today of getting plays on etc., must give me a sense of gratification. I think it was possible, and still

is possible no doubt, for a playwright to derive his primary joyful experience from watching a play in production. Today, that is such a helter-skelter kind of effort that I have put upon myself the burden of realizing the play on paper. Hopefully of course, I'd love to have it produced and I'd love to have it look well and go well. But if it doesn't, that doesn't deter me in any way. Very few playwrights are connected with companies so that they can work on their plays with actors on stage. So it becomes a very private, cloistered kind of thing. And I think it's necessary to make that adjustment. I can have actors come up here to read my plays, I can read them in theatres, I can probably get a play done every year one way or the other; but it is not a daily theatrical life that I'm living. I mean, the truth of the matter is, the playwright has pretty much divorced himself, because of circumstances, from the theatre. So anyway, to get back to the point I'm trying to make, I try to put it on paper so vividly and so accurately that looking at it, reading it, visualizing it gives me a sense of accomplishment, even if I never see the damn thing produced. Otherwise, I couldn't keep writing. So that's the challenge.

KB-- Can you name two or three of the one's (plays) you've written that you've been particularly satisfied with?

MS-- Well, I have five plays that I have written over the past couple of years, I've had readings of them or whatever. One of them was produced of the five, one produced and . . . the others haven't been produced, hopefully they will, but those are my last plays. You know, I'm doing this play in Paris that I wrote twenty years ago. It's being premiered for the first time, Popkins, even though it was published here.

KB-- That one, you like that one?

MS-- I wish I could see it and work on it while it is being done. I may be able to, but it's up to the director because I don't want to burden

her with my presence if she doesn't want it, so it's her choice. But my point is, it is still a twenty year old play and I'm not that much involved with it emotionally any more.

KB-- I asked you which of the plays that you've written have been satisfying to you. You said that the final judge has to be yourself and and that's the reason that you write--

MS-- Yes, yes. None of them. I'll answer that right away.

KB-- Truly, none of your plays has been satisfying?

MS-- Truly none of them.

KB-- So you're still waiting to write your perfect play.

MS-- Yes, there's no such thing as a perfect play. You see, the funny thing with plays is that they are productions, not plays. What we're interested in seeing is a production of a play, not to read a play. That's a very tricky thing. It's betwixt and between. But I'll tell you what I think the best thing I've written is. Well, there are a couple of things. They're not very good. They have flaws. They're probably the best things I wrote in my opinion. One of them would be The Flatulist. Did you read The Flatulist?

KB-- Yes I did.

MS-- Well, now I think that that's a play that should be done in every high school and college in the country, to wake up the students. I do have thoughts on it, but I don't care to express it because I don't know if I'm right, for one. Two, I don't think it's very important what I think.

KB-- Oh I think it's-- I'm certainly interested.

MS-- Well I kind of like The Flatulist because I think it's outrageous and I think it says something. And it's very autobiographical, and it's very short which I like also. Of the plays I've written recently, the one that I'm most interested in and the one that I will probably never see done because it's offbeat, is Theatrical Release. Of the things I've done recently, that's the one I would most like to have produced. And it's already been turned down by about twelve rep companies so the odds are against it. That's about all I would say about that.

KB-- The thing that puzzled me about what you said a minute ago that I asked you, "If you enjoy writing?" you said, "No, it's not painful. You have to be the judge of the final product, as it's written. Some of them are satisfying, some of them aren't." But do you get the complete picture until there is a production? Is a play a piece of literature or is a play, you know, a collaborative process which has to have its ultimate realization in a production on the stage?

MS-- No, no. The ultimate test of a play is its production.

Nonetheless, it is literature. It can be enjoyed on the page, not as much, not as satisfyingly, not as fully as a production, but nonetheless one can sit down and read Genet and get a charge out of him and enjoy him. So, you know, it's not one or the other, it's a mixed bag but ultimately, the test is its playability. Clearly, that's what its function is, but that's not the whole story since we all read plays and derive great pleasure from that experience.

KB-- Are there certain ways that you like to work with a, I mean, I would think a play that you have written is very personal, uh, a labor of love, and when you turn it over to a director, you would like to have some input. Have you had experiences where some productions are more fulfilling because of that than others? Or do you just release it and hope for the best?

MS-- No, no, because I involve myself in rehearsals I would not give out a play, as a rule, that I did not have input in, in terms of casting it, in terms of possible rewrites, in terms of staging, in terms of everything. That's why ideally, I love to work with friends, with people who are on the same wavelength with me. That doesn't always happen. You end up firing directors, fighting with them. It's a mixed bag. What I seek is to work with friends, people I've worked with before, who share something in common and we have a place where we can discuss and argue and fight and everything else, but do it towards the work and improve the work. it happens sometimes, it doesn't always happen. I worked with some people a number of times. I felt the last

play I did this summer, I did with my friend Jerry Gardeno, a director. This is the third play I did with him, and I enjoyed it. However, nonetheless, it is a rather difficult play and we had three weeks to rehearse and we had two-three previews and we opened. So enjoying it we did, but nonetheless, the circumstances are so harried and to squeeze it in and do all the work with a new play had its problems.

KB-- What role do you actually play as this thing begins?

MS-- Well, I send the play to my friend Jerry, he knew a theatre that was interested in doing it. I went out there and picked the actors with Jerry and the producer and then I was there. I left them alone for the first week of rehearsal, so that Jerry could work with his cast and not have my presence there which is intimidating frequently. The second week of rehearsal, I was there. The third week of rehearsal I was there. Through the previews I was there. The third week of rehearsal I was there. Through the previews I was there and I listened and I suggest cuts, I suggest staging, I suggest everything. I mean, I talk to my friend about the production. I have input and he may disagree with me, we may argue, he may agree with me, but we work it out so it's something we want. I may lose one or two and he may lose one or two, I don't know, but this is collaborative and it's good to be collaborative with friends who will be objective about the work and not get into a whole personality thing with you, which frequently happens when you work with people you haven't worked with before. You're suddenly worried about his ego, your ego, hurting, not hurting each other, all the rest of that stuff.

KB-- What about the concept of the play in terms of all the production elements: the set, the costumes?

MS-- Well, the director will usually spend a good deal of time on the phone or in person going over that with you. I have a list of questions to ask them and will have some thoughts about the style, about the sense of it. If he has any answers, actors have questions, we address them. Yes, it's a very time consuming effort to do, but you need the

time. Unfortunately, you know, except for very rare circumstances, you just don't have the time and you don't have the money either. So it's always an uphill battle. When you think of how many regional theatres, but how many of them become known to a general audience. When a play is done in New York or Los Angeles or Chicago, they stand a good chance of being known. But short of that, it's pretty hard.

KB-- In the plays, the published ones that I've read, it seems to me that in the last dozen or so, there are some very strong issues that you seem to be concerned with. I was wondering if these issues, these situations that you've set up come from concerns that you have or how you felt about them personally.

MS-- What are they?

KB-- Well, for example, you seem to examine situations that deal with women's rights, women's liberation in society, and uh, you don't take a strong stand, I mean there's no overwhelming trend that says you're in favor of it or against it. You just seem to show the situation that occurs as a result of these things in society.

MS-- Yeah, but you haven't read the four plays, the last four plays I've done.

KB-- You mean these here.

MS-- Yeah, so I don't know if what you've read is "lately." Uh, I go back to the original thing. I think in terms of "how do we live?" The attitudes we have about our relative positions to each other sexually is a very important one. So I give it some, I look at it. I'm also interested in change, personality change, how much can you change, is the change lasting? Are we doomed to be the same? Is it impossible to change? And the word "change" is one that concerns me greatly also. You have to draw the conclusion whether looking at women's efforts to gain complete equality in relationships with men is the primary exploration of that particular play. It may not be. I would say it probably isn't. It's a part of something else that's interesting to me because I would never write a play merely about that point. My plays may have that point in it.

KB-- Right.

MS-- Like, I added to Oatmeal and Kisses recently, where I had him make a speech about how strongly he feels for women's rights. I mean, it's comic but nonetheless, Dr. Wellington says, "I get very excited when I talk about women's rights." She doesn't even want to talk about it, he's carrying on! Now, I have that, but that isn't the point of the play. The point of the play is something else. And that something else has to do with how the hero of the play, what conclusions he draws in terms of (the) life he's going to live once he has had this minor heart attack. How has it changed his life? How is he going to live? That's what the play is about. Can he live with the woman? Can he have a life? Is he, now that mortality has touched him, is he so out of it that he has to become something of a recluse or--it's all done comically and light. It's a fluff, but nonetheless--so that's the primary thing. Even though I may be talking about women's rights etc., it's not the main point of the play.

KB-- But I mean, it's a dynamic that affects male/female relationships.

MS-- Yes, of course. We're gonna talk about male/female relationships today, we'd have to be pretty dense not to get into a concern for sexual identity and for sexual equality. In every relationship now, I really think women are very conscious of the fact that they will not be treated like second rate citizens and a bright woman will make that very clear and will not take any shit on that account, where that may not be true twenty years ago.

KB-- What about the situation of the Impasse on Nuclear Energy. The notion of this man coming home from a trip abroad, he's the nuclear regulatory commissioner and his wife has grown a beard, and she's expressing her secondary sex characteristics. That's certainly the notion of women's rights taken to almost an absurd--

MS-- Yeah, that's probably primarily is absurd. Yeah, I don't know where the idea came from. I've done a few plays with bearded ladies,

but I don't know where it came from. Yes, that is absurdist and it is primarily about the relationships between modern woman and modern man. Yes, so that is, you're right. But it's a short play so they won't do it. I don't think that play's ever been done, although it's been published for a couple of years now.

KB-- What about something like Brussel Sprouts and A Need For Less Expertise

MS-- Yeah, well those two I wrote for Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson. I wrote it to make money.

KB-- Did they?

MS-- Yes. They went on Broadway and they did well and I sold the stock rights for a good piece of change. But those are the only things that I could think of at the moment that I actually wrote for two actors and actually made some money. There are obviously some things I wanted to say, etc., etc., and I tried to be somewhat artful about it all.

KB-- When you write for a couple, Anne Jackson/Eli Wallach, do you see them in your mind as you are writing? Do they then replace you, and friends and family?

MS-- Not totally, not totally. But I take into consideration the fact that I'm writing for a man and a woman of a certain age group, or a certain location, in other words, New York people. So although I'm not writing their lives or out of their experiences, I am writing it out of my own. Nonetheless, certain characteristics of these actors become part of the play.

KB-- How well did you know them when you wrote the play?

MS-- Very well. They're lifelong friends, they did The Tiger and The Typists. And they did Luv

KB-- But you didn't write those (plays) for them.

MS--No.

KB-- Okay. How does it come about that a playwright is asked to write for a particular actor. Are you actually commissioned?

MS-- Well, the producer . . . I did a one-act play, Brussel Sprouts. We did it out in East Hampton. It worked very well. The producer came up, he said, "Write another one and I'd like to do it on Broadway." And I did. I didn't get any money to write it, but we took it out of town, Washington, D.C. We played it at the Kennedy Center and we played Wilmington, Delaware. Then we brought it to Broadway. It wasn't a big hit, but it ran and it's being done all over. I do get checks on it so I'm very pleased about it, although I don't have any great affection for either play.

KB-- So the first one, you just wrote your normal way of writing?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Then it was the second piece of that--

MS-- Now I may have written the first one for them too because there was a theatre out in East Hampton, they may have asked me to write it, I don't remember. But I do know I wrote it for, I would think I wrote it for them out there, that theatre out there, then I wrote a second. I think so. I suspect I did write it for them, both plays for them. The first one we did as one act in East Hampton, then a producer asked me to write a second.

KB-- In Dr. Fish, again we have a situation, we have great tension between a couple, they go to a "shrink", he under protest, and in the outcome, she loses him. He walks out with the mother-in-law who knows how to feed him well. Is that some kind of a statement about--

MS-- I don't like that play very much.

KB-- Really? I think that was hysterically funny. Is there something there--

MS-- I don't even remember the play.

KB-- Is there something there that you're trying to say about "shrinks"?

MS-- I hate "shrinks." That's a-- I hate "shrinks" a lot.

KB-- That's a good reason.

MS-- I don't have any particular affection for them as a profession and I will frequently "whack" them when I have the opportunity. I use them

in The Need For Less Expertise. That voice of the phoney therapist or something, I use it in Oatmeal and Kisses, where I have this Dr. Wellington. These experts, so-called, every time I take a "whack" at them I enjoy doing so.

KB-- Of course All Over Town. That guy's a real "bimbo." Have you ever gotten flack from a psychiatrist in the form of a letter or a comment?

MS-- No.

KB-- How about the concept of the older man chasing after the younger woman. That's a theme that's been around since Shakespeare and Moliere and you certainly played with it in Old Wine In a New Bottle, among other things.

MS-- That's never been done I think, because of herpes. Isn't it funny how these things--

KB-- Yeah, yeah, it's a back seat issue now, isn't it?

MS-- Well, no, what happens when I wrote it, herpes was not this dreaded disease it became. When I wrote that, herpes was like gonorrhea.

KB--Right, you could laugh at it.

MS-- Yeah, now you can't laugh at it. It's pretty serious business.

KB-- You can't laugh at herpes?

MS-- I can because you know, but I mean that's why I feel why it doesn't get done, because I rather like that play. So I did Oatmeal and Kisses frankly, as a play that was coming out of Old Wine, but which avoided herpes, and had pretty much the same kind of characters, except I have the girlfriend in this, I don't have the wife in it. But if you see both plays, you'll see what I've done, and that is, when I realized they weren't going to do Old Wine because of the herpes thing and they didn't (I could never get it done) I wrote Oatmeal and Kisses hoping I could get that done. Mind you, these are my commercial performance plays, and I tried the same theme again pretty much of the older man and the younger woman. This time I went into nutrition and all of that. You must remember that a good part of what one is doing is an effort to make money. Now, as you know, that I am employed as a

consultant of film, I pretty much write what I want. I don't have those concerns anymore. So that, Oatmeal (and Kisses) is five years old. I wrote that before I had this deal. I've been doing this for about four years. But the last four plays of mine, if you read them, you'll see a marked difference. Where they make no effort to write stuff that I think is going to be commercial, like Theatrical Release and Songs of War.

KB-- These plays you were writing, which you say were not written to be commercial, still and all, you could have written about anything, but you seem to address issues--

MS-- Yes, but my personality is perverse. The perversity of it is that my sense of what's commercial is far off the wall, I mean unfortunately. I thought I'm being commercial. Then everybody tells me it's off the wall and it's this, that and the other thing because the truth of the matter is that I can't change the way I see reality.

Whether I'm commercial or not commercial, whether I think I'm commercial or I think I'm not, it doesn't matter. I see things the way I write them and so it's a game I play with myself because when I try to be commercial, when I deliberately try to write something to make money, it doesn't come out as a commercial vehicle for most producers. It's too off-beat one way or the other. It's "herpes," it's a "bearded lady," it's "gorillas," a whole menagerie. And so, everything has to be taken in context in so far as ultimately I pretty much see things the way I see them and I can't suddenly become a "sit-com" writer for television, which I've tried. I've tried to write "sit-com" for television and I've never been able to do it. I've tried to write film. The reason I was lucky with Tootsie was because I worked closely with my friend Dustin, but I've written about half a dozen screenplays which have never got done. Two, I did Tiger Makes Out and I did Tootsie. But I've done a half a dozen more and I've never been able to get them done because they're too, they're just not right. They're not "Sally meets Irving or Harry." I just don't know how to do that. I can't sustain it. Not only don't I know how to do it, but it's that I

don't know how to maintain an interest in it. I'll say to myself, "I'm gonna sit down, I'm going to write a screenplay, and it's going to be for Columbia Pictures." It comes out that I'm writing about a guy who plays eight different parts. I wrote one which I called Popkins. I took it from the play Popkins. They look at it and they don't know what the hell you-- that has to do with the reality of movie making, and I'm very good at being able to analyze a film, know what a film means, you know, but to do it myself, forget it. I mean, I just can't sustain interest. That's the real problem. I get bored writing dialogue coming out of these mundane, realistic situations that general audiences respond to. You saw My Left Foot, which I think is the best play I've seen this year. You see where it's playing, I'm sure-- was it crowded?

KB-- No.

MS-- It's the best play, I mean movie, this year.

KB-- It's a beautiful movie, brought me to tears several times.

MS-- Right. And wonderfully acted, on all their parts.

KB-- When you examine the plays of let's say, the absurdist, that were "hot" in the (nineteen) fifties, well they were never really "hot" but when they were writing and there were a group of them: Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Pinter--who has really gone to the mainstream since then-- I mean, the dilemma that you're talking about sounds like the kind of thing that they were faced with.

MS-- Well, uh, not as much. You see, I've had this rather good experience of working in Paris. I've done three plays there already, I do the fourth in March, all goes well. Not quite the same. I really think that there is more tolerance for theatre, there's greater diversity of theatre in European countries. In London you've got fifteen or twenty critics, you've got a good chance of knocking off four, five, six good reviews which can sustain you. I spoke to Peter Hall about this recently, and he told me it's just death here. It's not the same, it's not. This is a "tough cookie" country for theatre. It is tough! And for things that truly aim at something, that try for something, I'm telling you we do not have today, in my opinion, one

single prominent playwright, one single prominent playwright of the generation let's say of Sam Shepard, David Mamet, who can make a living at playwriting. Neither one of them do, they are both into films every chance they get, and who has any, in my opinion, any impact upon not only theatre audiences, but on society in which we live. I could not tell you any of the characters in their plays that is a "Willy Loman" or a "Blanche DuBois," anything like that in the national consciousness. And even for the generation before, say I came up in the early (nineteen-)sixties with Albee, Arthur Kopit, Frank Gilroy, Jack Gelber, Jack Richardson, those guys coming up out of off-Broadway in the early sixties, late fifties, early sixties, etc. All those guys, including myself, have been pretty much wiped out in terms of having a life in the theatre. They hang in there, they do something, as I do, but there's no real productivity, there's no real vitality, there's no real yearning for anybody. I guess of all us guys, Albee had the biggest reputation and the most success. He won two Pulitzer prizes. It doesn't mean baloney. He can't bring a play into this town if he stood on his head. The money isn't there. So, my point is; my point is, how important is theatre to the American public? How much do they want to support it and what are they interested in, in terms of theatre? I think a cynical reaction or response to that would be, "not very," and theatre is going the way of ballet and opera. It's going to be subsidized.

KB-- An elitist art form, with only very small appeal.

MS-- Sure, I think that's in the cards. However, does that stop Don Quixote or prevent him from going after his Dulcinea? No, it doesn't because there will always be a theatre and it could always turn around, who the hell knows. Broadway is not dead and I don't think it's going to die and there's off-Broadway and regional theatre and stock theatre. And none of us are in it really to become national heroes. We're in it because that's what we want to do.

KB-- Right. If you look at some of the clippings and I've done this you

know as far back as the (nineteen-)twenties there were, there were dire predictions back then. I think Broadway had the biggest number of plays ever in 1923 or 1924. And then after that, there were dire predictions that Broadway was on its way out. But you've already said that you write plays for yourself first and foremost.

MS-- Yes.

KB-- But I guess there has to be that sense that it's then going to be experienced--

MS-- One tries very hard--

KB--for other people or it becomes a--

MS-- I've only been doing it for four years this way, so I don't know.

KB-- You mean, where you had no stress, no pressure to make anything--(commercial)

MS-- That's right, that's right.

KB-- Has your process changed at all, I mean, are you still writing the way you've always been--

MS-- No, no, the same. I have to find something that interests me. Once I find it, I try my best to write it as well as I know how, that's it.

KB-- In Popkins, there was a section where he goes to jail and he starts to, he has that evangelical gospel meeting speech to all the prisoners that he's trying to stimulate them in their writing. And you listed four rules of writing and I wanted to ask you about that. Why did you put that in there. What were you trying to say? Were you literally trying to give rules for writers?

MS-- No, I was satirizing all these writing schools and these professors and all those who believe there are rules for writing. No, I was being facetious.

KB--It's all tongue-in-cheek.

MS--Yes. In fact, I use a song there. I've been looking at it recently because I did some rewrites for the Paris production, so like "use your erasers to a beer-barrel polka; let's write a novel today." Yeah, I meant to be facetious.

KB-- Because well, some of them are funny, but some of them are not. Like you have here, "A writer can't write unless he has piece of mind."

MS-- Yeah, well that's bullshit. I don't believe that for one moment. No, I was being facetious.

KB-- Okay, of course "Neatness counts in the writing. Don't hesitate to consult your dictionary, your thesaurus, your reference materials."

MS-- That's all bullshit.

KB-- "The subject of writing is personal experience." I guess that's self-evident.

MS-- Yes, that's a cliché. No, it's not personal experience, it's wet dreams.

KB-- Could you talk a little bit about use of your own, I mean, a lot of your plays deal very strongly with family, your relationship with your, and also your book, the influence of your father, your mother, and the domestic situation at home and that sort of thing. I mean, how much of that do you draw upon, how factual are you being?

MS-- I'm not interested in the factual at all. What I'm interested in is exploring the past to help shed light on the present and address the question, "How do we live?" So I would be as subjective as I could to come up with some insight into my own life. I mean, if you remember I said two things. The first is self-analysis, so very consciously, I'm very interested in knowing myself and this is one of the ways to get to know myself. So that's what primarily--factually, I can be factually or I can't be. I'm not concerned with the facts. I may be bashful, I may not be bashful. Clearly, my father did not have a sex change operation as in the novel. Nonetheless, it bears some resemblance to an exaggeration that perhaps is personality. So, but I'm not interested in the facts. I may be interested in facts if that's how I'm attacking. I don't know. In Songs of War, I did it pretty close to the nitty-gritty.

KB-- What about something like The Flatualist? That's another sort of "stepped upon father."

MS-- Yes, yes of course.

Kb-- Used and abused.

MS-- Yes, yes of course.

KB-- Then there's Seventy-Four Georgia Avenue. Even there, the father, when you go into the realm of the black man's reincarnation. We come across again a weak father.

MS-- Yes.

KB-- I guess there's something that you're feeling that seems consistent in some of the plays.

MS-- I would, it would be interesting, I hope I haven't finished with it, but I may have because Songs of War for me, pretty much as I say, looked at it in a way that I came to feel I learned all I can from that experience, growing up. I somehow suspect I won't do plays about my parents again. At least I feel in Songs of War I reached some kind of resolution in a rather realistic way.

KB-- So it's like a catharsis kind of thing? Do you feel better about it? Looking back on your part?

MS-- No, I don't feel better about it.

KB-- It's just an area that you've explored and done enough already.

MS-- Exactly. In other words, I reached certain conclusions about it and I don't think I have anywhere to look anymore. That's my opinion at the moment. Someday, something may pop into my head, I may feel "wait a second." But at the moment I feel I've exhausted looking at my own childhood and my relationship with my parents. At a certain age, I think we come to terms with it one way or another. At least, I feel I have for the moment right now. And that can change also, but I have no desire to go, to do more in that direction.

KB-- Do you think of childhood as a happy time?

MS-- Well, read Songs of War because that raises a question that is a study of-- the protagonist says at the top, there is only one question

that interests me. And that is, which one of my parents is responsible for my miserable childhood? And that's what the play is about.

KB-- And does it really reach, at least, I only saw Act I, but it doesn't seem to reach a definitive conclusion.

MS-- It does.

KB-- Oh, it does?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Okay, I'm going to have to read that one.

MS-- Definitive in my terms, maybe not in yours, because it reaches a conclusion so far as things are resolved.

KB-- How important is Judaism in your plays? You touch on it in a very peripheral manner in several plays. It just seems to be a factor that very--

MS-- I go into it more in Songs of War and I go into it-- It may have some answers for you in there because I do have a grandfather in there who's a cantor.

KB-- And in Seventy-Four Georgia Avenue, that play has a lot of Jewish feeling in it.

MS-- Yes, anyway, I feel lucky in the sense that I have been able to reach the point where I have been able to deal with certain material and things in my life, that I've had the opportunity to wait this long a period of time to look at because I clearly was incapable of doing so previously. When I first started off, I couldn't handle this stuff. So I do have the opportunity to deal with these things. Where it will lead I don't know. Did you read Summer Romance?

KB-- Yes.

MS-- I'm back to writing about gorillas.

KB-- Really? What thread are you following?

MS-- I don't know. That's the thing. I don't have a thread. It's just what interests me. You see, I wrote a line, I don't believe in, I don't believe it's possible to incapsulate experience in any neat little aphorism. Reaching conclusions or trying to sum up things is a form of laziness. I wrote this line and it's in terms of what we're saying,

what brought me to writing what I'm writing now. And the line I wrote was; it violates everything I say but I feel attracted to it, but I wrote, "Play, all the rest is a nightmare." So writing for me is a form of play, as well as the other things I said, self examination, trying to explore certain questions. The idea of play, why do I choose to write this thing which is so fucking off-the-wall, and where did it come from? It's a form of play for me and I love to play. It took me a long time to admit it. I love to play with my imagination and with characters and with language and with play. That's where it comes from.

KB-- If you write a play or if you start to write plays that seem beyond the grasp of audiences, well it's really not beyond the grasp of audiences, but I guess you're not getting producers to grab on to these ideas because why, they think it's too profound, too avant-garde, too silly?

MS-- All those things. But you see, no one is getting producers.

KB-- So maybe they're not being done for--

MS-- Right. So on the one hand I'm not getting produced for the stuff I've been writing lately which I'm sending out because my stuff is, for want of a a better word, "perverse." And I could say, "Gees, this is terrible. I got to get my work produced because it's half alive and half dead until it's done." I don't know how it's actually going to work out until it's-- I can't truly hear those lines and watch those actors moving about spatially. On the other hand, I always comfort myself, I think or my peers. I mean, I don't find anybody on easy street who I admire or I respect. So I don't hit myself over the head too hard if I can't get my stuff done. That may all be a rationalization, but that doesn't stop me from going to the typewriter every day, which I do. And that's the most important thing, that I don't permit the reality of how difficult it is to get a play done to prevent me from working. And that's what I'm truly interested in, working. And since I'm a writer, the bulk of my work is writing. I would love to be involved in a theatrical situation . . . but I can't, I can't. So I probably could you see, but I choose not to because I don't want to, because at this stage I really haven't, I'm writing what I want to write. So to get involved theatrically, just to playaround and work, I just--

KB-- It's too distracting.

MS-- It's too distracting and also I can do it when I want to, like you were at the reading I had. I have readings, I go to the theatre, the Apple Core Theatre, I have friends there, it's available to me. I go to-- the Circle in the Square is available. I mean there are theatres available to me. But so long as I'm writing what I want to write, I obviously forego that. I'd love to be able to go to Paris and get involved in that production as I did this past summer in Garden Grove. I was there for three-four weeks.

KB-- How about if we talk about-- I'm curious. You've written probably many more one-act plays than two-act plays. Is that a reflection of any particular philosophy about your writing?

MS-- Yes, yes. Frequently I'd be trying to do a film or something for TV and what I was going to answer was that consequently, I didn't have time to write a full length thing, but that isn't the truth. The truth of the matter is that most ideas are proper for short plays and not full length plays and too many full length plays would be infinitely better if they were short plays. But because of the commercial considerations, everybody runs for the long play. I do one-act plays because the idea that occurs to me suits itself to a one-act.

KB-- Do you think more in terms of situation than of character? Very often in your plays you don't give a heck of a lot of character embellishment or exposition. You just want to see what happens to these people in a given situation.

MS-- Yeah, I fight boredom all the time. In other words, no doubt I pay a price for it because I don't have those fully drawn, probing, profound characters who answers in the course of a play all the big questions about his or her life. And so you're absolutely right. In other words, I avoid at all costs or I try to avoid at all costs the familiar because I deal a lot with cliché in so far as it reflects people in their own time. I do use cliché because I fight always naturalism. I fight always exposition, I fight always the familiar. And so I do a little dance to get around it. I really think that the play of "character" as it is historically known will, let me say, it's of little interest to me. You see, it's of little interest to me. I know, when you read reviews of plays and they talk about the richness of the character, well that's pretty hard to do without being tedious.

KB-- So what about a situation like what we see in Waiting for Godot? Now there, there is very little character and yet it doesn't seem to go anywhere.

MS-- That's right.

KB-- You could use that style and still avoid getting into exposition. But you chose not to.

MS-- I try to find a way of doing the same thing in a way that's germane to my own way of seeing things. But if there's anything to the notion of a modern theatre, it is a theatre that does not concern itself with psychological character. It doesn't concern itself with character; it doesn't concern itself with psychological character; it doesn't concern itself with sociological character. It concerns itself with existential character, and as such, you do not need in order to fully probe your character, narration on the chronological events of a man or woman's life. So I am not interested in psychological, sociological character. I am interested in character that lives in a state of constant apprehension, and I do it different ways, at different times without the consistency or the obviousness of most existential theatre, but the truth is, my interests are quite similar. You see, it's very hard to, oddly when you think about it, we don't get to see all that Ionesco does, just as we didn't get to see all that Genet did. We do, I guess, eventually become familiar with all that Beckett's about. But if one is going to spend a life writing and does so as a form of play, self-examination and in search of some knowledge of what we're about, my own temperament, which is feverish, I guess I just hop about, dabble and this and that and the other thing. Try one thing and another.

KB-- Were these people that you just mentioned, people that you had read prior to your becoming a playwright?

MS-- No.

KB-- Because the very things that you're describing, the quality, the existentialistic quality, seems to be right there from the very beginning.

MS-- I never read them.

KB-- So this was something you came to on your own.

MS-- Well, I wanted to be a novelist. I wrote it somewhere down.

KB-- Sure.

MS-- I wrote short stories and I wrote novels. I couldn't do it. I couldn't get anything published. I started writing plays. When I started writing plays and among my first plays were The Typists and The Tiger, I had no intimate knowledge of theatre and I never studied or was trained in theatre. I was just--

KB-- But had you read these peoples's works?

MS-- No.

KB-- Not even read them?

MS-- No, because if you will remember the first thing here that came over of Beckett's was done in Florida. Alan Schneider directed it and I believe that was in the early sixties and I had already written my plays by the time I had heard of Beckett and I saw Beckett. I had already written at least Luv and The Tiger and The Typist, Fragments and Windows.

KB-- So it was a general response to influences which were imprinting on your life: World War II, Atomic era, the madness of modern life, the zaniness of city life, all these things. It didn't have anything to do with any other writer influencing you in the art.

MS-- Not that I know of, because the truth of the matter is, the-- and I don't know why it is, I have great affection for those writers as I do for many others. I've always drawn on my own sense of things and I've never sought literary kinship with any school, style or mentor. Perverse, because I pay a price for it by making so many mistakes, but what the hell, why not!

KB-- Have you met any of those people? Ionesco or Beckett or Pinter?

MS-- Yes, I once met Pinter. I have no relationship with any playwright. I count among my friends Joseph Heller, Frank Gilroy--

KB-- Subject Was Roses?

MS-- Yes, but I don't have any close friends who are writers, who I hang out with, who I exchange ideas with, do scripts with. At one point I did have a relationship that was meaningful to me with Howard Zacklin, the writer of The Great White Hope. That was quite a few years ago and that was a very important relationship to me and I've written

things out of it. But I never hung out with writers.

KB-- Are dreams an important creative stimulus for your plays? Some of them, the more abstract ones, the more avant garde ones, the ones that are more way out, almost, like the one that you're talking about, Summer Romance or the bearded lady, I can almost see that as the realization in play form of some kind of a dream or a nightmare or whatever.

MS-- Nightmares.

KB-- We're getting into surrealism.

MS-- Nightmares. I'm conscious of that. You see, I go through periods. I went through a period where I would try to put a cat in plays I wrote or I'd put a knife in plays; all images that come out of my nightmares: the cat, the knife or whatever. I will consciously look for the opportunity to insert. Even if I do a humorous thing, even I would say as I would when I'm just writing, what is now, I said uh, "Meowing like a cat in a garbage can." I will put that in and it may even be a joke line, I don't know; but I would put it in because it is out of my nightmares and I mean it's very vivid to me. I remember writing three plays in a row where I put a knife, a naked knife or a knife blade. Yes, I take out of nightmares because those images are so vivid, convey such magic that I'd go after them. Yeah, that was done once, from Summer Romance. I got a check for fifteen dollars. Somebody-- it was amazing, who the hell would do that?(play) And how would they do it. I never saw it, and I would like to see it, to see if it works. I don't know. You know what I thought of one night when I did that? I could think of one play, although in a very amusing way and that was The Hairy Ape.

KB-- Yes, O'Neill, sure.

MS-- Yes, I did think of The Hairy Ape when I was doing this.

KB-- Well, your plays are very poetic--

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Big on imagery and difficult to do a literal representation.

MS-- Well, I see it, oddly enough. And I don't always see it on stage. Very frequently I'm not on the stage when I'm visualizing what I'm writing about, hearing it. But with Summer Romance, I was in Central

Park. I had no sense of--Sometimes I'm on the stage and I can actually see the stage boards and I can see the sides, my mind puts me on that stage. Sometimes the stage disappears and I'm in reality, in a different way. So it shifts on me. I prefer being on stage because then I can count the steps it takes to get from here to there. Accurate or not, but that's very important for me. See, I'm overwhelmed by the spatial aspect of theatre. Bodies on the stage fascinate me. The dimensionality of characters on the stage is of greater interest to me frequently than any other aspect of theatre, including language. The body on stage, how it sits, how it stands, where those arms are; I can never put down all those directions that I see because I hate stage directions.

KB-- You don't write a lot of stage directions.

MS-- I know. You'll notice in Songs of War there's a lot of stage directions because the stage manager wrote the directions. I'm trying to wheedle them out there but this idea-- the theatre that I can't stand, besides naturalistic theatre is verbal theatre. I cannot stand going to the theatre and seeing people sitting in the living room talking. Whether they're wisecracking or not or joking, I'm not interested immediately. And I can't help it because the stage is a magical place and placing the body on stage becomes a magical being and therefore it is not ordinary. It is not natural. It doesn't mean it has to be rhetorical and doesn't mean it doesn't have to be true, but it is something else. And to watch that body on stage to me is one of the main reasons to go to the theatre.

KB-- The visual becomes more important to you than the spoken?

MS-- I'm exaggerating it because clearly if you have to choose, language is the primary aspect of theatre that attracts us all to it, but I'm just saying, I personally give great weight to the physicality of the actors on stage and I cannot stand theatre which is in the main or purely or wholly verbal. The lack of imagination of turning that set into a special place disturbs me and I frequently leave theatre after the first act. I don't stay to see it because I just cannot sit and listen to people talk. Very few writers have that magical gift of language where they truly can entice you by what's being said. I think

Tom Stoppard is an exception to that, where he is terribly verbal but his talent is up to it to a large degree, although I wish he'd shut up too.

KB-- How about Neil Simon? I guess he must talk too much for you, for your taste.

MS-- Yeah.

KB-- You've played with a couple of farces. Farces, I would think, are very difficult. I mean, there have not been many great farces written.

MS-- You mean American farces?

KB-- American farces, and now that when you talk about how movement on stage intrigues you, did that have something to do with the fact that you wrote American Millionaire and All Over Town? Right? Are farces?

MS-- Yes, sure it did, but there are two things. It's not only the fact, and that is true that—, I'll tell you the real connection. The truth is that farces are interesting to me because of movement and they're choreographed. But too, equally important is that farces are at heart, existential. They don't deal with character, they deal with the frenzy of social relationships and I think that Feydeau was a very important existential writer. One can enjoy his work on more than one level. So, yes, I have no desire to do any more farces. I did at one time.

KB-- Were you satisfied with either one of those productions?

MS-- Not American Millionaire, which I think is terrible, terrible play. But All Over Town was wonderful because Dusty directed it and I had a wonderful cast. I had Cleavon Little, I had Barnard Hughes, I had Payton Wright, I had Polly Holliday, I had Zane Lasky, I had a wonderful cast, and that was a good experience It's not a bad play.

KB-- No, I thought it was, I liked it very much. In many ways your plays remind me of the kinds of plays that the Greeks wrote. The Old Comedy Greeks, Aristophanes, the "happy idea." I mean, they're comedies about ideas, they're not domestic, necessarily domestic—

MS-- That's the curse of my life.

KB-- situations.

MS-- I don't know why. I'd much rather do domestic comedies. I'd make so much money.

KB-- They would do so much better, wouldn't they? But I can't help get away from this. I mean, you examine all these terrific issues and situations that people do find themselves in and could it be perhaps that for example, if you look at somebody like Marshall Mason and Langford Wilson, you know, a situation like that for you could make the whole difference.

MS-- I don't think so because I don't think that Langford Wilson at present is in a very enviable position. I mean--

KB-- It could be that his work would be seen a lot less if he didn't have a company that was taking all his plays and putting them on the stage.

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Just from that viewpoint.

MS-- Right, right. What was the last thing he did? I know he did something out in East Hampton. What did he do last?

KB-- Isn't there one playing right now?

MS-- You mean off-off Broadway? Yes. It must be an old play.

End of conversation.

APPENDIX B
Transcripts of Tape Recordings

Conversations With Playwright Murray Schisgal

December 13, 1989

KB-- I never realized in looking through your books (scrapbooks) how besieged you must have been when Luv hit. It must have been-- I mean you're a pretty down-to-earth guy, but I'm sure going through all that stuff has to do something to you, doesn't it?

MS-- Yeah, I guess. I don't know.

KB-- Instant fame and--

MS-- Don't forget, I was thirty-seven at the time so I was hardly a new, wild kid.

KB-- Does that affect your writing do you think, Murray?

MS-- Yes, I think it does to a degree in so far as it's very hard to be private about your writing. You have access to so many theatres and producers that it does affect it. To what degree and how substantially I don't know, but there must be some influence exerted as a result.

KB-- Could we talk a bit about the process that you have to go through today to get a play, hopefully, produced? For example, taking this one. Is this one of your most recent ones? Isn't it, Theatrical Release?

MS-- About three, four years old, yes.

KB-- Could you perhaps just talk about, starting from your first attempt to put it down on paper, and then all the steps that go from that?

MS-- I don't follow you.

KB-- What I'm interested in is the creative process and then the production process involved-- a knowledgeable playwright trying to get something produced in New York today.

MS-- I have no thoughts at all to express about the creative process. The word itself--

KB-- What I mean is specifically in this play, you had an idea and you started to type it. Did you have this play finished in your head before you took to the machine?

MS-- No, I didn't. I had some parts of it, I sketchily outlined it in half a page and I knew how it would end.

KB-- Is this autobiographical in any way?

MS-- Everything I write is autobiographical. No, some are more explicit than others, but it doesn't make any difference at heart. So, I did have a half-page outline. I did know how it was going to end, I did have a sense of it and I wrote it.

KB-- What happens next?

MS-- Then I sent it out and so far its been rejected by about twelve regional theatres.

KB-- Have you heard it read yet?

MS-- No, I've not heard it read yet, no. The Apple Core heatre wants to have a public reading of it and they're sending it out to actors. That may happen or not, but I keep sending it out. I just sent it to the Old Globe Theatre and to Jack O'Brien there. It's been turned down by Lincoln Center, by Mark Taper Theatre, Davidson out there, and as I say, about a dozen theatres have turned it down so far. That's par for the course I guess.

KB-- Is there an alternative route that you can use?

MS-- Not for this material because it's too off-beat to try to get it done commercially. I think it is.

KB-- Are you finding this with the recent ones?

MS-- I don't know.

KB-- Songs of War, how about with a case like that? That would have less resistance.

MS-- I sent it to a director who had a relationship with a theatre and they did it. There's no hard and true rules. You scramble and you hustle and try the best you can to get people to read it. If I did Songs of War in July, and I'm going to do Popkins in March, I guess if I can do one play a year, that's not too bad. I don't feel deprived or panicked or anything. That's not where I'm at. What I'm interested in now primarily is what I'm writing now. Hopefully, I can get something done. I would like the plays to be done but if not, they're written and they're there and I just keep moving.

KB-- Is the playwright's job today to not only write his plays, but hustle with them?

MS-- Absolutely. It always has been.

KB-- Don't you have agents? And what do they do?

MS-- I have an agent. No, as a rule, not. You have to understand that that many plays don't get done. A lot of these repertory theatres which

now is where it's at, certainly not on Broadway, off-Broadway you can't do all kinds of plays. You can do small plays, you can do plays that have four, five characters who sit and talk the whole evening. You really can't, there are limitations there. So the real life of the theatre today is in repertory theatres and LORT theatres throughout the country. And they do not do that many new plays. They do a lot of classics, a lot of tried and true plays. They'll do four plays and one will be a new one and three will be remakes. So--but what's the difference. One doesn't write to buck the system or change the system or fight with the system. That's not where it's at. I mean, I'm just interested in the problems I'm having now. These plays that I finished, I keep sending out. Hopefully, something will get done, something will happen. If it doesn't, so it doesn't. What is one to do about that? Tough titty.

KB-- Is the response to a play like Theatrical Release different. I mean, do you see the difference between this and the response you had to the ones that were successfully produced like Luv? Did you have to send Luv out to twelve different theatres?

MS-- No, you can't compare the theatre today and go back twenty-five years to 1963-64. I mean, they're not the same theatres, so why compare this to Luv?

KB-- Just the receptivity.

MS-- But the environment was different. No, of course not, what are you talking about. No, it was a different ball game. There was different action. I mean, Broadway in the early nineteen-sixties was doing a lot of new plays. A lot. That's not true today at all.'

KB-- So there really is no one doing a lot of new plays today.

MS-- That's right. And it's all so institutionalized. Off-Broadway there used to be quite a number of off-Broadway producers as well as a lot of Broadway producers. Well, will you do me a favor and name me three off-Broadway producers or three Broadway producers who are not institutions, and who are producing plays on a regular basis? Will you name those names for me and tell me where our producers are? There are none. So--

KB-- How about trying to get your work done in London again. Is that a possibility?

MS-- No. It's not a practical possibility because when I did it, I did it in very small theatres and under very limited, uh, I don't choose to have it done there now unless it was done well. If the National Theatre wanted to do a play of mine, fine. If they wanted to do a play of mine in the West End, fine. I don't think I write that kind of play that they'd be interested in. That's my educated guess.

KB-- What about some of the experimental theatre groups? How about educational theatre?

MS-- Those experimental theatre groups that I know about or I have heard about do not do good work. They do not have the money, they do not have the resources, they do not have the acting and directing talent. They are really fly-by-night outfits that get by as best they can. But there isn't one "EXPERIMENTAL," in capital letters, group that has any credibility in terms of the theatre audience that I am aware of. The best theatre I've seen has been at La Mama. And what did I see at La Mama? I saw the direction, the work of one director who I believe is an extraordinary man with an extraordinary talent and I think he is the most exciting playmaker today, and yet if I mention his name to you you won't know him and certainly very few people do know him. He is a Polish director named Thaduce Cantor, with his own theatre, and they come over in Polish and they do his work and they are phenomenal. But what does it mean? I mean, so he does it at La Mama and gets an audience at La Mama and it hasn't gotten anything near the kind of audience it deserves. What are we talking about-- experimental groups? No, I don't know any experimental groups where work can be done and be done well! Now, what do you mean by it being done well? That means you need time, that means you need talent, those ingredients are wholly missing from most, all of off-off-Broadway or experimental groups that I know of. They have neither the time, money nor the consistent talent that's needed to do a good piece of work. What's the advantage of doing it there? I got a letter, would I like to do a one-act play, which I did before, in the Ensemble Theatre. They sent me a letter. They're doing their marathon of one-act plays, would I like to contribute something? I did one there before called The Pushcart Peddlers which

I enjoyed and got killed by the critic on the Times (N.Y. Times). By the way, that play is being done all over, it's been published in a number of school books and I think it's pretty good personally. But nonetheless, Mel Gussow, the critic of the Times didn't agree with me and so I did it at this theatre for no money, under terrible circumstances because the actors are always running away from you to take on other jobs or one thing and the other and there's no money, etc. So I did it there, I was very glad I did because I was able to work a little on the play. Now, I get a request, would I like to do another play there? I say, "Why? What for? What have I got to gain for it? Well is there time to do it correctly, is there money to do it correctly? Can I find actors who are willing to work under those circumstances for no money?" And the answer is "No" to all of them. So this time around I say, although half of me wants to be working on the play and doing it, I'd say, "Forget it." I have nothing to gain by showing a play publicly of mine that has to be done so piecemeal.

KB-- What about educational theatre?

MS-- What does that mean?

KB-- Companies supported by universities.

MS-- Who?

KB-- NYU, you've got companies associated with Syracuse University, Cornell University. They all have theatre groups that might be very interested in taking on one of your projects. But I guess it's something you have not considered.

MS-- No. because the truth of the matter is--

KB-- I mean, they have the time, they have the money, they have the facilities. They may not have professional actors.

MS-- You believe that, but that's not true.

KB-- It's not?

MS-- It's not true at all, and the last thing you said is the most important thing. They do not have professional actors. Well doesn't that factor--

KB-- Well of course it's a factor, but they've got actors that--

MS-- Well, I'm not familiar with educational theatre. No one has ever written me asking me for a play to do there. Experience has taught me that unless you have a foot in the door, you're going to be short shrifted. Some reader's going to read you're play, some student in graduate school or whatever, and turn it down, or I don't know what, pass it on maybe. I don't know. I sent to Harvard, I sent to Yale.

Theatrical Release was turned down by Harvard and Yale, by Brustein and by that guy that runs Yale's drama school (Lloyd Richards), who does, you know, he's the director for the black playwright (August Wilson), who's doing something up here, Piano Lesson, he did Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. Anyway, they turned it down, both of them. So I do send it there. I'm sending something now to Arthur Storch at Syracuse. I've worked there. I've done a play there. So yes, if I know someone there I will do it, like Brustein or uh--

KB-- It all sounds very bleak.

MS-- No it doesn't. Why does it sound bleak? You're working from the motivation that what I'm doing--

KB-- I can't in my mind dissociate the fact that if you're writing the plays, your hope is to see them performed.

MS-- Sure. Absolutely.

KB-- But you're painting a picture of an environment that is not in any way allowing these plays to be aired.

MS-- Right, but the environment may change.

KB-- Okay. So do you see any glimmer of that, I mean is there any specific reason to think that it is changing?

MS-- I'm really not interested in addressing that question. I don't have time to be uh--

KB-- Concerned--

MS-- Not only be concerned. Obviously, to a degree, I'm affected by it and I don't pretend I'm not. I'm disappointed when I'm rejected, but that is something I've grown a bit thick-skinned about over the years. And I am affected by the fact that it is so hard to get a play uh--

but I refuse to permit it to be important to me. You see, I don't have time to make it important to me; I don't have time to make a study of all the theatres in the United States and find out who's running what and how much money they have to do what and how their track record is and who they attract and who they don't attract. I can't, you know, I'll send it out to Mark Taper(Theatre), or to the Old Globe Theatre, or Harvard or Yale or something I've heard of or read about. If I saw Sweeney Todd recently at the Circle in the Square and I liked the work of the director named Susan Schulman, I send her a play. I say, "I enjoyed your work. Here's something I've written. Are you interested?" I haven't heard from her yet, but as I say, I keep in there, I go to the theatre a lot and I send out my stuff. This week I sent something to my agent in Paris, I'm sending something to Arthur Storch; last week, who did I send to-- I mean, I would say I send out a script a week.

KB-- Oh really?

MS-- Yes, I'm sending them out.

KB-- So that's how a playwright works.

MS-- Yes. I send it out. They don't send it back. They send me a note because I don't enclose a stamped envelope. It's too much of a hassle getting a script back that I find a little uh-- I don't need them. Let them throw it away and send me a post card. But uh-- mind you, all this is possible because I am no longer financially dependent upon making a living writing plays.

KB-- Thank God.

MS-- Yes, thank God and that's the name of the game. I would never have chosen to write some of the plays I've written now if I had to make a living at it. I tried, I try to be commercial. I would try, even though it turns out I can't cut it; my instincts would always be to try--

KB-- When you say you would try to be commercial--

MS-- I would try to write sit-com comedies, I would try to write screenplays that are ". . . when Sally met Irene . . ." or whatever. I mean, you know, I would try. That's what I did, I did it for twenty years. I wrote for twenty years. I wrote sit coms, I wrote screenplays, I wrote the stuff that I tried very hard to get into the commercial end of it. It so happened I don't have it, because if I had, I would have

hit. And I haven't hit at all, certainly not worth speaking about so what, that's it.

KB-- You said yesterday that you made a lot of mistakes in terms of writing.

MS-- Yes, a lot of mistakes, because my method is trial and error. In other words, I was trying to read an article in the Dramatists Guild Quarterly. I pick up this article and I'm trying to read it. It's on Baker (George Pierce Baker), the very well known uh--

KB-- First teacher at Yale?

MS-- Yes. O'Neill was in his class. Thomas Wolfe.

KB-- Playwriting.

MS-- Philip Barry, Sidney Howard, S.N. Behrman. They were all in Baker's class and he had a book that he wrote that encompassed his idea about dramatic writing. And in this, I start reading. And it says things like, "A cluttered play is always a bad play. Selection with one's purpose clearly in mind is the remedy for such clutter. How may we know whether our motivation is good or not? First of all, it must be clear. First comes structure, ordering for clearness and correct emphasis in the storytelling." My God, I couldn't read more than a page of this, I find it so boring and tedious and such academic bullshit. You--if I had to sit down and write a play and answer questions as to its motivation and clarity and to define it in terms Mr. Baker evidently thinks is necessary before sitting down to write the play, I could never write. I'd rather write the play, as I do, using what experiences I've acquired, certainly trying to learn from what mistakes I've made, but doing it with as much spontaneity and as much visceral feelings as I can muster, as much life and energy as I can muster. So the mistakes I have made have been, in a way, a learning process for me. I don't think I make as many now, although maybe I do.

KB-- Well, are they mistakes then?

MS-- I don't know. They are mistakes in the sense that say approximately two years ago, I did a show called Roadshow, very offbeat kind of thing.

KB-- Right, I liked it.

MS-- Now, the mistake there was the production, because of the theatre

and the set-up and because my director and I weren't on the same wavelength, I couldn't present the play, I couldn't have the play produced as I had envisioned it, so that when it came out, it fell short of the mark, to say the least. So that's a mistake too. The mistake need not be only in the writing, it can be in the production. I feel I've made a number of mistakes in getting my play on: by miscasting it, by having the wrong director, by being in the wrong theatre, by not having solved the third act. I mean, there are a million ways to make mistakes and I imagine I've made pretty much a million mistakes. So I consider that a mistake too because the obligation of the playwright really is to see that the thing produced in some way resembles what he had in mind when he wrote the play. And you have to fight for that, you don't get it. Nobody gives it to you. You have to fight-- I'm talking about the initial production, which is the one that really counts, in terms of giving a life to the play.

KB-- Does that come back to what you said yesterday about working with people that you know, people that you trust and would have a vision similar to yours, or at least take the time to find out what your vision is?

MS-- Yes sir, yes sir. But I am convinced that we will always have a theatre so long as human beings are human beings as we perceive them today and there will always be the presentations of drama in front of an audience because it's irreplaceable. So believing that--

KB-- It's almost instinctive, isn't it, as a human activity?

MS-- Yes, so if I don't get something done this year, maybe it will happen next year, and if not next year, maybe the year after. My job primarily is to keep working and to keep working is to keep working writing plays, not to keep working running around town trying to kiss ass and get someone to give me a free lunch and a lecture on how difficult it is to raise money in the theatre today.

KB-- In Theatrical Release and I saw it also in Roadshow--

MS-- You didn't finish it.

KB-- No I didn't, but already in the first half of it, you have characters doing monologues that go out almost Shakespearean; they

are directing their comments to their mind's eye and to the audience and so forth.

MS-- I did it in Songs of War.

KB-- And Songs of War.

MS-- I did it in my first play, one of my first plays, The Typists. The two typists come forward downstage and talk to the audience. Light hits them and they tell their personal experiences because they don't want the other person to hear their inner monologue.

KB-- Is that a presentational device?

MS-- Well, it's a way to break up the naturalistic format of the play, to break through the wall, the fourth wall, which I think is essential to do when you can do it, when it works. As I told you, I loathe naturalism. I loathe the conceit that the actors have to pretend to be unaware of the audience like the audience isn't out there watching them every minute and listening to them; the actors are going about their business as if, "Wow. Nothing's out there, nothing's happening. I am home here in my little apartment in the Bronx."

KB-- Is that anything that comes from any understanding of Brecht or any appreciation of his style or are these characters always these characters when they address the audience, whereas in Brecht, he wanted to break the whole format of the play?

MS-- I don't give a shit what he wanted. Most of the Brecht I've seen has bored the shit out of me. I've seen a couple of good things. I truly respect him as a playwright and as a poet and think Three Penny Opera, to say the obvious, is by far, the best modern musical ever written. It's wonderful and I love it. And I love many parts of many of his plays. But frankly, I have no real identification with him; his temperament, his milieu, his interests. So I, you know, really I don't, you know.

KB-- But when you have a character in a play address the audience directly, is that because that's the best thing, that's the only alternative that that character can do at that point?

MS-- In my opinion, yes.

KB-- Okay.

MS-- It's the most dramatic thing I can do at that point with the material I want to write. And I wish I can use it, I mean, I would use it more because it's a good device, it's one that I haven't used and now I'm using it a lot. What I'm working on now I'm not using it. It depends on the material and its style. And my style is not consistent. I don't write all my plays with the actors talking to the audience. I went through a couple where I did: Roadshow, Theatrical Release, and Songs of War, they do in those three. Yellow Cat, which is a very light, frothy thing, that I wrote to amuse myself, they don't. Just two characters.

KB-- Does it have anything to do with the effect that vaudeville used to have on theatre?

MS-- Yes, I am very enamored of vaudeville. I think vaudeville is a great theatrical way of presenting an event. I really feel a closeness to vaudeville and would love to find ways-- that's why frequently I'll use song and dance and break it up with jokes like skits or whatever. I think there's something to the vaudeville rhythms in a theatre, the authenticity of it is what attracts me, the upfrontness of it, that is, the performer downstage talking to the audience and who can forget the way Olivier did The Entertainer, both in theatre and film. How wonderful that is.

KB-- So you just can't get away from the fact that you're an actor on the stage with an audience there and why pretend they're not there. How about music? You were a musician, correct?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Could you talk a little bit about that? Maybe, how you used music in your plays, because you do use it a lot.

MS-- Yes.

KB-- You suggest specific pieces.

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MS-- Well, I do something else. I always try for rhythms. In other words, I consciously try to write to a beat and that includes dialogue as well as introducing the chattering of typewriters, the slamming of doors, the ringing of bells. I will deliberately look for a rhythmic pattern to what I do. If I can find it, it pleases me. The Typists, the whole thing was written, almost was orchestrated as was say All Over Town. And it's not only introducing music. It's the rhythm of dialogue and the rhythm of the choreography. And I try to get all those elements together. And my failures mostly come about--in my mind-- is when I can't sustain those ideas so that the whole is imbued with a rhythmic base.

KB-- Now are you talking in terms of something like verse, like the way Shakespeare wrote?

MS-- No, I'm talking in terms of music.

KB-- Meter.

MS-- I'm talking in terms of meter, music.

KB-- Is this something the audience is to be aware of or is it a subconscious thing?

MS-- No, it's not subconscious. I consciously pursue it. But I don't do--

KB-- But does it effect them in a subconscious way or are they to be aware of it?

MS-- No, consciously. No, I'm not interested in-- if I were, I would write it in verse. No, I'm not interested in whether they're aware of it or not. I do it to create tension primarily. In other words, it gives me a grid on which I could proceed.

KB-- How about your selection of background music?

MS-- . . . has always been a favorite of mine. I had great admiration for his rendition of that number. It's a jazz classic and I used it there when they danced to it. So I use music that usually, that I have some feeling for or that evokes certain emotions in me personally and I try to communicate that through the piece to the audience.

KB-- Now, if you've written a play and you haven't had it produced, then all you can do is envision this background music right? Or do you play these pieces as you're working on the play, as you're sitting there typing away and you've suggested certain pieces of music, do you put them on and listen to them as you type?

MS-- Oddly enough, sometimes I do, yes. I sometimes do. I'd like to take Songs of War, which has about a dozen songs in the First World War and the Second World War, I had those recorded and I listened to them as I was working on it. Not too much, because it's too distracting. I'd just do it off the cuff. I'd do it, but not too much. It's too distracting.

KB-- When you were a musician, was that a period of time when you knew that you still wanted to be a writer or was this something you thought you wanted to do with your life at that time?

MS-- If I could have been a good musician, I probably would have stuck with it. I was, I tried to be a musician. I've always had the desire to write. I always had the desire to listen to stories, to tell stories and to read stories. But when I was a teenager, it seemed, because I was such a bad student and I was such an emotional mess I guess, I concentrated on trying to be a musician. So I went through that period. I was not a very good; I was bad, I was embarrassingly bad as a musician.

KB-- Was it anything like your description in Days and Nights of a French Horn Player?

MS-- Is it in there? Well, I was bad. I don't remember what I wrote there, but I was bad, embarrassingly so, so it took me a while to just get rid of it and recognize that. What I did was sold my saxophone and clarinet and I went to Florida to work there and travel around the south awhile. When I came back from that trip, I must have been twenty-one, twenty-two, I--even though I went to college then and I went to law school, the idea of being a writer grew bigger and bigger in my mind.

KB-- Was it some romantic notion of what a writer does?

MS-- Well, I was always influenced by visualizing myself in certain situations or professions. In other words, truly the reason I chose

to join the Navy is because of the Navy uniform and the lifestyle of sailors. The freedom they seemed to enjoy, the debauchery that they seemed to have available to them, all of that. When I thought of being a writer, the first thing I thought about was being a journalist, like Clark Gable was in It Happened One Night, with a cigarette dangling from my mouth, with a nice suit, tie and shirt, with the tough-talking manner about me, with whiskey at the bar where you meet the other journalists and shoot the breeze. These romantic images have influenced me a great deal. Certainly that of a writer, certainly that of the musician. I saw myself as a black musician living out of my case, working till four/five in the morning, hanging out with guys and boozing, doing things of that sort. Yes, those images were important to me. Those "windmill" images.

KB-- You wrote in your introduction to Luv and Other Plays that "I spent a couple of years at sea reading everything I could lay my hands on, writing words and their meanings and committing them to memory. What was the purpose of that?"

MS-- It was to have a, to build a vocabulary so that I could write and express myself more clearly and better.

KB-- Do you remember now what it was you were reading? Novels? Standard classics?

MS-- Every ship had a library. I read a lot of Russian novels, English novels, American novels; I read everything. In the main, fiction. I was never interested much in the sciences. I was never interested much in non-fiction.

KB-- And your earliest writings were novels and short stories, right?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Almost sounds "ala Chekhov."

MS-- Oh, there was a big difference. The thing is that when I started writing, I could, I didn't have a background that warranted my even trying to write. In other words, once again I just sat down and wrote. I wrote, if memory serves, three novels and sixty-five short stories, none of which were published. I just write, I mean, without truly being equipped to write. In other words, I never took courses on it. At the time when I started writing, I hadn't even gone to college yet.

When I came back from the Navy, I went back to high school to finish school and then I went to college and I went to night school. My education in college and in night school, it all was pretty much self-education. I didn't have a solid background, education, I didn't. I just did what I wanted to do and got by on everything else. Although I was going to night school in college, I was a pretty good student, only in comparison to the other students. This was Long Island University at night. There were a couple of floors in the Con Edison building, so, I don't know. I have this great impatience that has consistently and relentlessly pushed me forward to do what I feel I have to do without taking time to either prepare myself or ground in any way or research in any way. It's just an overwhelming impetuosity that keeps me today in the same breathless state as I was when I first started writing. My big concern is to finish what I'm doing now and to try to do it well, not to be impatient, to rewrite it when it needs rewriting, to work on it every day and all other concerns and considerations just take a back seat. That's why when you say about getting the other stuff done, yes I try.

KB-- So it's very secondary to you.

MS-- I'm not there.

KB-- Because you're an artist, you're not a businessman.

MS-- Well, I don't know about -- I've always been the same. And it fills me you see. It fills me emotionally, this impetuosity, this heedlessness, this stupidity. I wrote a book called Days and Nights of a French Horn Player. I took about, maybe a dozen lessons on the French horn, from a French horn teacher from Juilliard, read a few books, listened to records, a great many records of French horn concerti and that was it. I mean, while writing. I mean, I know about as much about the French horn as the man in the moon. With a minimum because I wasn't-- I couldn't wait to write what I wanted to write. And it truly wasn't that important to me. I wasn't interested in the mechanics of the French horn, but yet truly the work must suffer because if you're going to do

something decent, you should know, have a good knowledge of what the hell you're writing about. But my main concern in writing is not that. My main concern in writing is always, for want of a better expression, "giving birth." I am truly filled with it. I must get it out. And the compulsion is to get-it-out because it is forcing itself on me and so all other things are thrown to the side. Like my friend Dusty will rant at me for hours and I jump in and I do something and I'm out of it. I'm in and out of it before he's even begun because he does take his time as an actor, he will spend six months or a year if he has to on something. He is meticulous and fastidious and he is an artist certainly and he will frequently upbraid me for being impatient . . . (phone call interruption) she was doing that play after so many years and I couldn't get it done here in one place. It's off-- well you read Popkins.

KB-- Yes.

MS-- I made some changes because it's so dated, because of AIDS, it becomes such a problem, so I, fortunately she agreed with me. I put in "1984" it says in the program. That's one way to deal with it and two, I've made some line changes here and there to try to make it work today or 1984. So there's always a problem with plays that they can date.

KB-- You had in the copyright of that book, it says that originally it was called "A Doll's House II." I guess from everything you've told me about your hate of realism that Ibsen is not one of your favorite--

MS-- Well, you know he is such a master at structure.

KB-- writers.

MS-- He wrote with such social consciousness that one must be responsive and feel affection about him. But I love Peer Gynt and Brand, they were written as verse plays, but I love the freedom and expansiveness of it. I have great respect for him, one can't help have it for a master artist, but I'm much more responsive to Strindberg

if one has to make choices, and what Strindberg was trying to do in the theatre, than I am of Ibsen.

KB-- Dream plays.

MS-- Yes.

KB-- All that sort of thing. Was it just that you felt that a take off on A Doll's House would be a gag kind of thing, is that how it started out?

MS-- Why a gag? As I told you I'm interested in change.

KB-- But I mean, just using that as a spin off, a starting point.

MS-- Well, because of the lines that Ibsen wrote. He said very clearly and it's in the play. He has Nora say that " . . . before I come back to live with you, the most wonderful thing would have to happen and that is that we would change, we would be different people." Now I take that as the key to the play because I have them change and they are different, but they're quite messed up. I mean what happens to them. So change, in and of itself, is not necessarily a desirable goal. There is a naivete to that notion that if we change we're better, and it's that that's the crux to the play. So I truly-- because change is what America's about. We all want to change. We want to be smarter, we want to be thinner, we want to be healthier, we want to be fit, we want cosmetic surgery, we want toupees, we want this, that and the other thing, as if it's going to make our life necessarily better. Well, it may very well not, so that's what that play is about. That's why I use Doll's House as a point of departure, only to talk about change.

KB-- At the end of that play you really don't know whether they're better off or not, whether they're going to make it or not.

MS-- Well, how can they be better off, they're two messes. I mean, they're emotionally-- I don't think they're better off.

KB-- Not better off, but how about just more compatible.

MS-- I don't know.

KB-- We don't know that?

MS-- How could we?

KB-- It doesn't take you far enough along.

MS-- One guy says he's a bisexual ex-criminal and the other one says she's a workaholic, so who knows!

KB-- Also having had a lesbian situation. So, who's to say? You have to reach your own conclusion on that one, right?

MS-- Well, if I had to say, I hope it gets across in production that, one, that to say we want to change and be different from what we are does not necessarily mean we're going to be better off than we are or better than we are. And that's something we don't consciously think of when we think of changing ourselves. Change is a powerful notion; personality change, behavior change, people changing fascinates me because like everyone else, I guess, a part of me always seeks to change and I just question whether that, in and of itself, is a goal, a desirable goal. Of course, you have to look at what changes we're talking about, whether those changes are realizable.

KB-- Well, isn't it understood that when somebody says that, they're assuming it is a change for the better?

MS-- Absolutely, that's the assumption, yes.

KB-- Like when you said to me yesterday when you wrote that, you said you wouldn't write that way today. I asked you about Luv, which was a tremendous hit.

MS-- Right.

KB-- And you said you can't even imagine how you felt then. If you were to write it today, it would be a different play, obviously because you feel differently and you've changed.

MS-- Absolutely. I mean--

KB-- Is each time you write a play, does it get easier? Do you learn from the experience of writing other plays?

MS-- No, not at all.

KB-- You struggle just as much?

MS-- In fact the usual story is that a young playwright has one or

more hit plays and then falls into the pit of oblivion. Experience and age and knowledge and learning and all the rest adds up to a big zilch. What usually happens is he becomes too self-conscious-- (telephone call interruption).

KB-- Well, you were in the midst, you were talking about change and you said that, I asked you if you had written some of these same plays that you wrote before and had to write them now, they would be different plays. You said we change, sometimes it's for better and sometimes it's for worse.

MS-- Right.

KB-- But I can't help think, I'm not a writer, I mean I'm not a creative writer. I do a lot of writing. When I do the kind of writing I do, which is research, papers, criticisms, analysis, comparing dramatic literature, I mean the more you write, the better you get at it. When I do my publicity writing, but this is obviously not the case in playwriting.

MS-- Right, exactly. It's not. It's true of novel writers too. I mean, I don't think that one would argue that James Jones' best book was uh, what was it again, his first book, the war book?

KB-- Here To Eternity.

MS-- From Here To Eternity. I don't think he wrote anything to compare to that. I don't think Joe Heller wrote anything to compare to Catch 22 and he's a dear friend of mine. I don't think he'd mind my saying that. Catch 22-- I don't think that most writers as a rule--I mean that, by the way, is a definition of genius probably, the ability to get better, clearly the great writers have.

KB-- Hemingway.

MS-- Well, I don't know about Hemingway. Not for my money.

KB-- No?

MS-- No sir, not at all. I would think The Sun Also Rises is the best novel he wrote. That's my opinion. I'm not so sure about him. The same is true about Faulkner. I would say his early works are his best works. It's not true however, of writers like Dickens, Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy. But most writers, I would think, their early works are the best work and they never reach that height again. True genius, I guess, is able to

improve upon itself and get richer and more profound, etc., etc. Anyway, what was the, oh yes. That experience and knowledge and learning does not necessarily help produce works of art. Other factors are equally important and come into it and so that generalization doesn't hold up in my opinion.

KB-- Well that's whose opinion we're interested in today. When, at one time you wrote that you had a correspondence with a friend and mentor, George Balin, and you wrote to each other nightly, although you only lived only a few blocks apart, you said, "In our lengthy letters, we detailed our plans, our ambitions, our opinions and our observations and then ultimately you got into an argument about religion." What was that all about? What kind of-- that sounds like a very special friendship that you had. Can you talk about that a little bit? Obviously it had something to do with writing, it was during an important part of your life.

MS-- Yes, he helped me very much become a writer, because he was a brilliant young man. In fact, at a very early age he started teaching high school. Uh, he just was very influential in making me aware of language, of books and poetry, of a whole world that was not easily accessible to me, and he kind of opened up a lot of doors for me.

KB-- Literally or just intellectual doors?

MS-- Yes, intellectually, yes, not literally. There's not more to say than that really. The rest is a whole story about our relationship and I don't choose to get into that.

KB-- No, I'm not interested in the personalities. I just meant, what kind of ideas were exchanged?

MS-- Well, as I said, he introduced me to literature, poetry, to language in a very important way and as I said, opened up doors for me as neighborhood friends, before I uh--

KB-- Did he, was he one of the people that made you think about theatre?

MS-- No, I never thought about working in the theatre until I wrote several one-act plays because I couldn't get my other stuff published and I did it as an act of desperation.

KB-- Had you seen plays when--

MS-- Yes, of course I'd seen plays, but not so that I would call myself knowledgeable about it. I never studied theatre and I never saw plays beyond going to the theatre once every couple of months. I went to the movies a lot, I always went to the movies, but not plays. Plays I'd go to, but rather infrequently. And I chose to--

KB-- What did you see though, in those infrequent times you went?

MS-- I remember seeing uh--

KB-- Did you see vaudeville?

MS-- No, no, no. I saw Iceman Cometh when it was first done at the Circle in the Square, I remember I went there a couple of times. I saw Summer and Smoke with Geraldine Page, I saw off-Broadway. I don't recall going to Broadway very much. When I was much younger, I used to go to the theatre with relatives in Brooklyn. It was a Jewish theatre and I would see plays there, the Hopkinson Theatre.

KB--In Yiddish language?

MS-- Yes, in Yiddish, even though my knowledge of Yiddish is not that good really.

KB-- You got the gist of it.

MS-- Yes, I got the gist of it. And also, they had other plays besides Yiddish plays at this theatre. They had companies going into Brooklyn from Broadway and doing theatre. I may very well have seen a few of those. But I was never interested in writing plays or seeing plays or the theatre per say. I wasn't particularly interested and I read a lot of plays, but I wrote it because I couldn't get my other stuff done, I couldn't get any response, any positive response. And then I had an idea to try a play. I don't know where it came from and I sat down and I wrote five one-act plays, among them The Typists and The Tiger (formerly The Postman), and damn if those first plays I didn't write got done, so there you go.

KB-- It was almost by accident. There's one play in particular of the early ones that really intrigued me. And it's, I think it's beautifully written and I would be interested--It's Windows. Could you talk about

that a little bit?

MS— Yes.

KB— I'm intrigued by that play. Where did that idea come from?

MS— It was done in California once, I went out there. In fact, Gordon Davidson did it before he took over the Mark Taper. It was done in the early nineteen-sixties and it was done with Mike Kellion and with Nina Fuch. I'd be damned if I remember where it came from. All I know is it's autobiographical, it's personal, it was a nightmare of mine. Not a literal nightmare, but an emotional nightmare. I don't remember where the images came from, but I knew the central situation was something I was very apprehensive about. So it's very personal. It's odd that it doesn't get done at all.

KB— It's a very strange play. It has almost elements, it reminds me a little bit of, although it was written before he ever got anywhere in his career, but it has almost that sense of menace that Pinter has. These people looking out the window, there is a definite feeling of menace in there. And also, the thing with the baby. This woman is carrying a, what? A dead--

MS— I don't remember, what is it, she's pregnant?

KB— She's pregnant and she's carrying a dead fetus.

I think it's in the lines of the play.

MS— I don't remember the play that well. Yes, really? Wow, that sounds interesting.

KB—"Francis is carrying a pregnancy of eight months, but the baby is apparently dead."

MS—God, I must have read that somewhere.

KB— The situation was--

MS— Unless, my wife was pregnant at the time. I don't remember.

KB— Okay. And then we have those three college kids come in.

MS— Yes.

KB— And it seems to me then, to be a thing about hypocrisy. Here he starts telling these kids about how the generation of the sixties has no values and they have no sense of respect, of establishment. And

then, two minutes later, when two of the kids leave the room, he makes a pass. It shows the great moral level that he has arisen to. It's a fabulous play.

MS-- It's never done anywhere as a matter of fact.

KB-- People out there are missing their bet. If I ever get to the helm of a theatre company, I know one of the things I'm going to work on.

MS-- Those kinds of plays they don't do in this country. I mean, they really don't. It's so hard to find stuff which isn't down-the-middle being done.

KB-- And then, how about your exploration into— and you haven't done it in that many plays, but your exploration of homosexuality. Were you pleased with the results of Closet Madness? It's a lot of people's very favorite play.

MS-- Well, unfortunately, the AIDS destroyed the play (telephone interruption).

KB-- I had asked you, just before the phone rang, when you started talking about how Closet Madness doesn't work anymore today.

MS-- Well, it's a real problem because of AIDS. When I wrote it, one could genuinely envy the lifestyle of gay people because there's something very attractive about it in terms of looking at it from the outside, the community, the sense of warmth, the fun that gay people seem to have together, the energy that they exude, their appearance which is usually fastidious and they take care of themselves. And that, that was the background when I wrote it, but then AIDS came along and it's such a frightening prospect that one can't legitimately feel envious of the life style or the sexuality. So that, to me, hurts the play greatly.

KB-- It kind of stole your thunder.

MS-- What?

KB-- It kind of stole the thunder of the play, didn't it?

MS-- Well I think so.

KB-- It's a hysterical piece.

MS-- What I would do, what should be done is they should put a date on it, "1984." If they had "'84" or "pre-AID's," then it would work. It really has to be then, otherwise it doesn't work for me.

KB-- That was that play, The Boys In the Band, I guess it's the same

kind of a thing, isn't it? That play was being done quite a bit. You can hardly laugh at it anymore.

MS-- Go see that wonderful first act, Terence McNally's Lisbon Traviata at the Promenade. Wonderful. It's about gays. Wonderful first act.

Mason Williams is a brilliant actor.

KB-- What happens after that. Falls apart?

MS-- The second act has nothing to do with the first act.

KB-- It seems as if there's a lot of things that you really can't laugh about anymore that used to be very funny material.

MS-- That's right. That is very true and that's something comedy writers are always aware of.

KB-- It starts to box you in, doesn't it?

MS-- Yeah. That's very true, especially if you write about things today. Today changes tomorrow, and it may not hold up in terms of its comedy.

KB-- Comedy is very topical.

MS-- Popkins I think was hurt by the AIDS thing. Closet Madness was hurt by it. Those are the only two I can think of.

KB-- Old Wine In A New Bottle--

MS-- Yes, that was certainly hurt by herpes. God almighty, I'm really being killed by history.

KB-- Three good plays. What are the big areas of topical humor now? What do you see as source material?

MS-- Well, two plays that I did, one last year, and-- both of them have to do with sexual identity. It's a rather old hat idea, but which I'm nevertheless writing.

KB-- And I guess lifestyles and this absolute obsession that some people have with being fit and health food. That seems to be a big deal.

MS-- Oatmeal and Kisses.

KB-- Oatmeal and Kisses.

MS-- That's why I sent Oatmeal and Kisses to--they rejected it about a dozen times also--to the Jewish Repertory Theatre. And the guy writes me back that they don't like doing plays that has anything in it about somebody being sick or having a heart attack because their audiences are so old that they don't laugh. Must be.

KB-- Yeah, would think situations about senior citizens and all that and the grace or the lack of grace of growing old in America to be a good, rich source of material. You play with it a little bit in 74 Georgia Avenue.

MS-- Play with what?

KB-- This idea of getting older(Interview interrupted by telephone call).

KB-- I thought this quote might be significant because I see elements of it in a lot of the plays of the "Absurd" and also I think it's something that you'd be interested in. I was just interested to hear your reaction. It was from Martin Esslin and his book The Theatre of the Absurd, and when he talks about Pinter he says:

Pinter's clinically accurate ear for the absurdity of ordinary speech enables him to transcribe everyday conversation in all its repetitiveness, incoherence and lack of logic and grammar. Yet Pinter denies that he is trying to present a case of man's inability to communicate with his fellows. 'I feel,' he once said, 'that instead of any inability to communicate, there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that, there is continual cross talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship.

Is there anything that you would like to comment about that? Do you agree with that.

MS-- Yes. That's the kind of nonsense and generalization that means absolutely nothing to me. When they say, "They are evasive, they make an effort to talk at cross purposes and not communicate, they--" Who the hell is "they"? I don't know what that means. Who? I mean, there's something offensive about it to categorize people in this great big block, not "me," not "I," not "us," but "they" are the one's who are

deceitful , who play games with their lives, while "we" don't do that. "We" communicate and "we" get to the rock bottom of what we feel and exchange--that's all bullshit. It's all words, it doesn't mean anything. The only thing that does mean something is "I." "I don't do this." "I don't do that." "I try not to communicate," "I try to communicate." "I am deceitful, I am honest." That means something to me, but "they"? "They" means nothing to me.

KB-- Generalities have no meaning.

MS-- Not for me. It's just bullshit. It's the kind of talk you do on reflection and it's a lie and it's hypocritical, but "they" enjoy that kind of banter because "they" can talk about "they."

KB-- I suppose if you put a general label on it like that, you can go ahead and say anything, right?

MS-- Like they talk about the "Theatre of the Absurd." And I have never yet met a playwright who was a member of the "Theatre of the Absurd" who says he's an absurdist. I never heard-- Beckett denies it, Pinter denies it. No doubt Genet and Ionesco deny it. I'm sure Ionesco denies it. I don't know what it all means. It's all academic bullshit.

KB-- Well, it's an attempt of observers, of critics, to pigeonhole people.

MS-- Fine.

KB-- Now if you want to deal with people in a group rather than individuals--

MS-- The word "absurd" means literally nothing when thinking subjectively. No one looks at the world or reality "absurdly." One looks at it hopelessly, painfully, full of awe, full of despair, full of apprehension; you could go on and on with--

KB-- Adjectives.

MS-- With adjectives, with descriptions of what it is, but "absurdly"? How do you look at the world "absurdly"? The word itself is so academic, so dry, so divorced from human thought and feelings.

KB-- And to the person who's viewing it it's a lot more than that, isn't it.

MS-- I would hope so. Especially if he's writing about it, I assume he's not writing because he's amused by the ironic absurdity of life and death.

KB-- But you do relate to the genre don't you? I mean, you've given talks on it, you had a very interesting piece that I read in your scrapbook there that you wrote for the Herald Tribune about the "Theatre of the Absurd," the characteristics that seem to be inherent in that type of writing. You compared it to abstract painting in art and so on and so forth.

MS-- Were you referring to something over twenty years ago?

KB-- Yeah. Well people really aren't talking about "Theatre of the Absurd" unless they talk about twenty years ago today, right?

MS-- What do they talk about? Musicals?

KB-- Today they talk about musicals. At least they were talking about it then. But I mean, the term does seem to connote certain specific types of drama.

MS-- The word is dead. The school of the "Absurd" is dead. You can't have a movement that started in the fifties and sixties and has not been fed or has not flourished, has not been nurtured. It's all archaic bones in the dust. It doesn't mean anything. There is no--

KB-- Society is very different now than it was, different factors, it's a different world.

MS-- Fine, so what are we, uh-- if you're talking historically, who gives a shit! Who gives a shit about the "Theatre of the Absurd." It's not feeling theatre, it's not exciting to audiences. It's history. Yes, there were a group of writers that critics, for whatever reason, put together under the title and they were, they wrote plays that expressed a certain attitude or whatever. That's no longer true. Who cares!

KB-- Now we seem to have mainstream theatre and that's about it.

MS-- That's right. And I would call to your attention that there were no Americans included in "Theatre of the Absurd" with any respect or lasting or permanent place. There were none. If they want to say--

KB-- The only one that seems to get included occasionally is Albee.

MS-- Yes, but that's nonsense too. I mean, he's not an absurdist. I mean, he has no real relationship with Beckett or Ionesco or Pinter in

my opinion. There's, you know, he's a very subjective writer and I think he wrote from his own experience, but I don't think he shared that view of things with them, whatever.

KB— How would you describe in your own words then, the kind of plays you are most recently writing? Not in terms of categorizing, but I mean just from your—

MS— Well, why do I have to describe them? I don't understand. What do you mean "describe them"? You mean give them a label? I don't understand why you even want that. I mean it may be nice to have a phrase to use, but who cares?

KB— So every piece has to be just read and —

MS— I don't know. Maybe my answer should be, "Go ahead and do it." Do I have to do it?

KB— No you don't.

MS— You want to do it, do it. Find a common thread or whatever and do it. I don't care.

KB— So it has no meaning.

MS— Not for me. I'm not interested in giving labels. It doesn't mean anything to me. You know what the trouble was with communism? As a political, economic and social institution is that a couple of men sat down and they said, "The world is going to the dogs. What we need is a new deal. What we need to do is recognize the exploitation of the masses, of the working class, by the capitalists." And if we did this, that and the other thing, if we had a socialistic system and if we had temporary tyranny until things could become democratic and we did this and we had the means of production in the hands of the workers and we had a limit on private property, then they had Das Kapital and, and this and they wrote it down and this is how we should live, this is how we should form our government, this will solve our problems and if we do this, the working people of the world will have a better standard of living, they will have more freedom, they will have more happiness, they will be a truly—an overhaul of the present unfairness and inequality of all political systems in the western world. And so they proposed this book of rules and regulations and attitudes and systems and methodologies on government. This is what you have to do and if you do this, everything-- none of this came out of the roots of the particular society that it was addressing, none of it came out of

the real exigencies of the people in concrete terms that would make it possible for them to fulfill all their emotional life which it would seem would be religion for one, which for two, would be art, culture, which for three would be private enterprise so that if they had the stuff they could really grow and really, uh, become a capitalist, become an entrepreneur. All those things were buried in the sand for the other things. So that today, almost of its own accord, the whole system goes "kaput." In plays, the thing to always concentrate on is the source from which the play derives, the impulse from which it derives and that, in my opinion, must always be the subjective self. Whether it be light, fluffy comedy, whether it be heavy, serious tragedy, but it must all be germane to the subjective self. What it comes out to be finally it will be. But the problem so frequently is that one proceeds to write epic theatre according to the rules of Brecht, who wrote epic theatre that defied all his rules, contradicted all his rules and when he was successful, ignored all his rules. I mean, rules and regulations, how to do a thing isn't to me very important. What is important is the authenticity--to use an overfamiliar term-- the authenticity of the experiential subjective self. That's it. I don't know what I answered, but you must have asked something that it was an answer to, If I didn't--

KB-- That was very interesting. Well no, I think it was a response to attempts to categorize works and so on and so forth. And yet, I mean other people will say simply, "What is art? If I enjoy it, if I like it, then it's art." I mean, it's a subjective piece of writing.

MS-- I'm not interested in what is art either.

KB-- It's subjective and--

MS-- Yeah, I don't. I'm reading this criticism of Hilton Kramer in the Observer, which is a "freebie," a newspaper, a weekly newspaper, on Juliet Schnobel's show, which is at the Base Gallery. It's very vitriolic and he says it epitomizes the plight of art in the eighties, the hype, the complete disregard for aesthetic values, the madness to sell paintings for incredible prices, the auction house paintings. And

he goes about it with great gusto. The truth is the word "art" itself, should be treated with great disrespect. It really doesn't matter. What does matter is the ability of any given form of something to grab you by the lapels and force you to pay attention to it, which becomes harder and harder as we become more and more jejune, more and more impervious because of so many--

KB-- What was that word you used, "jejune"?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- What does that mean?

MS-- I don't know. It's just something I like to say.

KB-- "Jeune" in French means "young," but--

MS-- I just throw out words sometimes, I'll look them up later to see if--

KB-- I don't even know what the connotation of that is.

MS-- Uh--so, you know, it's too late in the day to talk about art and artists. It's too late in the day--

KB-- But you need a hook, don't you? Doesn't every person who has something to sell, need a hook? You've got to get their interest, you've got to get people to come and see your piece, whatever it is, your play, before you can hit them with this subjective experience that you want to deliver to them.

MS-- Yes, of course. But ideally, they go hand in hand. But ideally they go hand in hand. Yes, you do need a hook, of course. To get someone's attention you do need a hook.

KB-- You've got to get them in there. Okay. I think the only other question I have is, and I don't know where this will lead us, but it seems to me that you seem to have a very happy marriage and you've had only one marriage in your life, is that right?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- And in so many of your plays you have marriages shown that are breaking down or reaching crises. And I was wondering why you, uh--

coming from since what you write is so autobiographical so often and so subjective, how are you relating to that experience, since it isn't your own?

MS-- A lot of what you're talking about, writing from nightmares, apprehensions, anxieties. But you make a mistake I think, uh, I think I have a good marriage. In other words, I want no other and I don't look for any but don't, don't once again categorize marriage as a happy or unhappy marriage. I mean, see that's in stasis, that's in concrete. I don't think the term's applicable, I don't think you can use the term "happy marriage." Just like I don't think you can use the term "happy life." I don't think you can say someone had a happy life. That means nothing.

KB-- It's what's happening at this moment.

MS-- Yes, I mean, it's so volatile. Who's so arrogant to think he has a happy life? My God, that phone can ring right now and the world can come to an end for me or for you or for all of us. Who lives happily? We've had happy days, happy weeks, happy moments. To have a happy day is pretty good, to have twenty-four hours without something hitting you in the head, or some fear taking hold of you by the throat and saying, "Good God! I better do something quickly or I'm going to be living in the gutter!" So I, you know, I define my marriage only today in the sense that I am fully committed to my wife, heart and soul, and have been for a long while, but not necessarily during our thirty-one years of marriage. I'm sure that there were occasions when we've experienced all the ups and downs that all marriages must of necessity. I would not describe my marriage as a happy marriage. I would describe it today, today, today in retrospect, etc., as one we both want with all our heart and soul, we want it and we fight for it and we don't want it to change. And it's still not necessarily a happy marriage. It's that kind of thing. I think the word "want," "wanting," to me is a very meaningful, significant word. "To want" to me is incredibly important because wanting is in large measure the lives we lead, what we want, and to want the wrong things is always a possibility.

KB-- So you can even draw upon moments when you've had an argument ten years ago and then you have a nightmare about it or you think about it or it bugs you or it's in your subconscious. You can draw even upon that as an experience and develop it into a play.

MS-- Well, uh--

KB-- Like I'm thinking Old Wine In a New Bottle. There's a guy that seems to have every reason to want to be with his wife, yet he has a "chippie" on the side and that turns into a nightmare for him, what he winds up doing.

MS-- Right. Once again, it has to do with wanting. The real challenge of most marriages is that you don't really want it anymore. It doesn't give you pleasure anymore. You really want something else, you really want out. You really don't, I mean, you know because there's no marriage in the world that isn't filled with challenges and obstacles and pain and all the other sides of human relationship, but you go through periods when you just don't want it. See, wanting-- so anyway, the guy in that play, it wouldn't make any difference what his wife did. In truth, he's in love with that younger woman. I mean he just, he wants her. Wanting is so important. It's, I mean it's so weighty, so filling. It's like, my son doesn't know what he wants to do in terms of a career. He's graduating from college. How important it is to try to find out what he wants and you yourself have had some horrendous experience in terms of career, in trying to define "What do I want" and then reaching a conclusion and committing yourself to it isn't easy either because what you want may be, you know, beyond the pail or whatever. It may be a death wish, like entering the theatre.

KB-- I may want to be a diving champion, but I'm not going to make it, or a ballet star.

MS-- Well oddly enough, the things we want I do feel there is a safety catch on it in some way. I do feel that the things we want--

KB-- Are within reason?

MS-- Yeah, I think they're expressions of our personality. I don't

think that they're necessarily that unreasonable or that far-fetched. Anyway--

KB-- Well, I've never heard that before. "Wants" are very different than needs, aren't they?

MS-- Absolutely. Well, I'll never forget my friend Howard Sackler, I'll never forget it. He said, we were in London together and he said to me, "You know they have this large shaving brush. This was in the early nineteen-sixties and they have these enormous, like Alfred Dunhill, an enormous shaving brush with a lot of hairs, bristles on it. They were beautiful. They were enormous, with an ivory handle or whatever. He said, "I saw this shaving brush in a window of a shop and God, I don't know whether to buy it or not." And I said to him, "Well, do you need it?" and he said to me, "If I want it, I need it." And that always stuck in my mind. And that's the kind of guy he was. "If I want it, I need it." And I-- emotionally it took me a long time to understand what he was talking about. He was a very self-centered sort of fellow. He knew how to take care of himself. But anyway, yes, want is--

KB-- It has an impulsive quality.

MS-- That helps give a, that is for me one of the real motors of plays. Wanting, I want something, "I want to be king," says Macbeth, you know. To want something badly so that it forces the action and doesn't let the action sit still. That you can push that right through. You can push that right through for your whole story, because that "want" is so ferocious. And to want things, to want things, and it can be spiritual things, I'm not talking about material (things), is the motor that keeps most of us pushing through life. It's to get something, to get some recognition, spiritual.

KB-- If we get to be too practical or too realistic, we no longer have the meat for a play, do we?

MS-- Well uh-

KB-- It starts to become hum drum, rational thinking.

MS-- Sure, sure. If you want to be a high school teacher and it's pretty hard to imagine that you will be required to act ferociously or obsessively and those are the terms and attitudes that are needed in

terms. You can't come in small, you shouldn't anyway. You should be terribly, terribly hungry for something if you're forced into a play. That's why, I just reread Pirandello's Six Characters (In Search of An Author). It's such a wonderful play. Why? Because these people want so much to live their lives on stage, have it written out. They want it, they need it, they're lost. What a wonderful idea. What a wonderful idea and it's, it is an appetite on the part of every character, the six characters. Their appetite is so desperate, so enormous, and they don't have to shout about it. It's persistent. It's persistent. Ah, it's wonderful.

KB-- Do you need to be neurotic about something, do you think?

MS-- That term is meaningless. Neurotic is a label again. Is there anyone who isn't neurotic? What does it mean? I do. No one isn't neurotic. Not everyone is obsessed. What you need is obsession to be a character in a play.

KB-- You do? It needs to be that strong?

MS-- For me it does and it clearly, you know, I tend to exaggerate and play it and go to extremes. For me it does, for other writers, no. Like Driving Miss Daisy. I guess I didn't see it, but I imagine it's a kind of drawing room comedy in essence. But for me it has to be that strong. I love to hear the characters shout. Not that they have to shout, but I mean that--

KB-- They want to shout?

MS-- I mean that in their emotional selves, in their emotional selves. Everybody's jumping about like cats on a hot tin roof. And it may not be anything like that, but underneath, somewhere buried deep between the lines or behind the lines there is that great energy. Energy. What else we got. Is that a rap?

KB-- Yeah.

MS-- Okay, terrific.

End of conversation.

APPENDIX C

Transcripts of Tape Recordings

Conversations With Playwright Murray Schisgal

December 15, 1989

KB-- Well, I just finished reading Theatrical Release and I wanted to find out from you where the title of the play comes from.

MS-- It came, well--

KB-- What does it mean?

MS-- It includes film in the play, it includes photographs, songs and music and it is a theatrical release also subjectively in so far as in the play, I seek a catharsis, a personal catharsis and a theatrical release in film terms is a movie that's made as a feature film to be released in major movie houses. So all those various ingredients led me to the title of Theatrical Release. But perhaps the two most important have to do with the fact that it utilizes film and that it is metaphorically a personal expression of a subjective need.

KB-- Is this a take-off on a friendship that you actually had, because it seems like a very real friendship. Is this an adaptation of an acquaintance or a retelling of a friendship that you had in your own life?

MS-- Obviously yes and no. Obviously I'm drawing from my own experiences so to an extent that it resembles a relationship, yes. And obviously no, in so far as I've never worked as a Wall Street broker, nor did I have a friend who was guilty of stock manipulations in the manner of Boesky and Milliken.

KB-- I thought perhaps this might have had something to do with that very close friend you had years earlier, that you used to write to.

MS-- As a matter of fact, no.

KB-- It didn't draw from that--

MS-- Not consciously or specifically, but maybe it washes over.

KB-- How about the legal background that you have.

MS-- What about it?

KB-- Did that have anything to do with the writing of this?

MS-- All these people are stock brokers.

KB-- I know. Has the law background in any way-- do you think the fact that you practiced law for two to three years, two years, and of course you had to go to school for it, did that have any impact on any particular play, because I don't see it in any of them, but I can't see how you could necessarily divorce that kind of training totally from your writing.

MS-- Have I ever consciously used my legal experience in a play?

KB-- That you're aware of.

MS-- No, not to my knowledge.

KB-- Having known many lawyers, their minds work in a certain fashion.

MS-- One of the things, if you truly enjoy language, I think you get to dislike the law because so much of it is words by rote and so much of it is unoriginal and phrases and the style of legal briefs and documents, etc, are truly very boring, and rarely, although with someone like Supreme Court Justice Cardoza and Marshall and others, they truly are extraordinary with language, but they're the rare exceptions. Most of the legal reading is drudgery and a bore. And if one wants to write, I think it is a bad way to get into it.

KB-- Too logical. Is it too logical an approach?

MS-- Well, I think it treats language shabbily and I think it forces you to become very stylistic in use of language and written language in a way that's detrimental to truly being able to express yourself in the way in which you write. So it works against that a little.

KB-- You spend what, two and a half to three hours every day sort of cloistered in your office writing?

MS-- Three to four.

KB-- Do you manage to get something written every day?

MS-- No, I may not--

KB-- I was asking you about your discipline as a writer, the fact that every day you lock yourself into your room and spend two and a half to three hours--

MS-- Four hours.

KB-- Is this something you have always been doing?

MS-- No, I used to do it a lot more. I used to work mornings and

afternoons. Now I pretty much only work mornings. Sometimes I'll work afternoons. I average four hours a day and I work everyday, except when I'm traveling or out of town.

KB-- Do you always work on one play at a time?

MS-- No, no.

KB-- Sometimes concurrently, different projects?

MS-- Yes, yes.

KB-- And are there days that you don't work on anything and you just pace or--

MS-- Yes, sure, but I'm in the room, but I'm in the room.

KB-- You listen to the radio, you're in there and if things come--

MS-- Yes, yes.

KB-- I notice you're like me in this regard, you use this old typewriter.

MS-- Yes, portable.

KB-- Why don't you get yourself one of these fancy computers or word processor things?

MS-- I know it can be done in a couple of days or weeks. I don't have the patience to mess around with it. And also, there's something I find satisfying about the sound of a typewriter. In fact, it's not electric. There's something, it's like having a wristwatch that you wind yourself every morning and it becomes the rhythm, becomes part of your rhythm or whatever. There's an interchange, there's a kinship, relationship, something happens between you and that machine. I've always, when I try to work with an electric typewriter that, and I never worked with a computer or like that, I find all of that different and strange and uncomfortable. So I don't have to, I mean, I don't. You know, if you write a page a day that you're satisfied with, you're doing terrifically. There isn't that much typing involved in playwriting, you know. You retype it and there's nothing wrong with retyping it because as you do, you change things and you hear it differently maybe, so that the mechanical act of doing and redoing and erasing and inserting, there's an advantage to it. At least that's what I tell myself.

KB-- It was interesting to read in the reviews, the clips, I didn't know this, when you had Dustin Hoffman direct All Over Town, that was

his first directing job.

MS-- On Broadway. He's directed before.

KB-- Oh, he has directed?

MS-- Oh yes, he did direct, sure, sure. Not in New York.

KB-- How did it come about, I mean, that you would want to use him as a director as opposed to having him in it, not that there was any role there that was really--

MS-- When he read it, that was the response. He said, I gave it to him, He read it. He said, "I'd love to direct it," so I said, "I'd love you to direct it," cause I had worked with him enough as an actor to know that he genuinely had a talent for directing. Frequently he'd have ideas which he'd throw at the director, and he'd make contributions and what isn't generally known is that on his films generally he has great input as to the screenplay and the roles and he will--he's a very creative guy. And he comes up with a lot of good stuff. So I was aware of that, so his wanting to direct it is not a surprise and I continue to encourage him to direct films, which I think he'd be terrific at.

KB-- But he hasn't so far?

MS-- No, but he will soon, he will. I'm sure of it.

KB-- The other directors that you seem to like to work with, this Mr. Arthur Storch--

MS-- Yes.

KB-- You worked with him quite a bit.

MS-- Yes, he's up in Syracuse now. He runs the Syracuse Theatre and is the head of the drama department up there. In fact, I just sent him Oatmeal and Kisses yesterday, to see if he's interested.

KB-- Is there a particular quality about his work as a director--

MS-- Well, we both come from similar backgrounds. We both talk similar language, we both shared similar experiences, his being a contemporary of mine, so there are a lot of common attitudes, behavior, the way of looking at things which is always nice.

KB-- What happened to Claire Nichtern, the woman who produced your earliest plays?

MS-- She stopped producing. I mean there are so few producers left in the theatre that she doesn't produce anymore.

KB-- She was just getting on in years and bowing out gracefully?

MS-- She's in town, but she pretty much stopped producing, as have most producers. I mean, how many producers are there? You can name me--

KB-- Merrick is out. Prince? Harold Prince?

MS-- Yes, Harold Prince is one. I don't know if you'd call him producer or director, I mean, a producer who produces plays or musicals. Prince certainly isn't doing that anymore. He started out as one, it would be hard to tell me the last thing he just produced. I don't know, I can't remember now.

KB-- I don't know either. I know he directed Phantom, but I don't know what he's produced lately. And the three novels that you wrote and the sixty short stories, you trashed those? You mean they're lost? There are no copies of them?

MS-- Right, they were terrible. I was embarrassed by them. I did turn a couple of short stories into early plays, none of which I have ever had done, or, I have about ten plays that I wrote, one act plays that I wrote at the beginning, at the start and some of those plays were taken from short stories. I've never had those plays published and no one has ever seen them as a matter of fact. Oh yes, someone must have seen them originally, I don't know. I do have copies of them, but that's all I have left. I do not feel good about that work and I think it was quite poor and I threw it away.

KB-- Okay, that's pretty much it, Murray.

End of conversation.

APPENDIX D

Transcripts of Tape Recordings

Conversations With Playwright Murray Schisgal

Followup Interview One--October 15,1990

MS-- Jimmy Shine: " . . . it has autobiographical stuff in it. That's always the starting point, it's more me than anyone I know. Also the idea of a friend, a painter, in the main . . ." Schisgal used "myself primarily as the source of that . . . very much interested in doing something in an open stage. The visual stage is often an inducement for writing a play, for filling a stage."

He didn't write Jimmy Shine with any particular actor in mind. The main set was a "painting studio." Other areas were "make-shift places." The play ran about nine months and ended when Dustin Hoffman"left to do a picture."

Out of town tryouts prior to New York: Philadelphia and Washington, D.C.

Director Donald Driver was replaced at the last minute by Tyler Stone. It shows "a play's in trouble . . . very bad to replace a director at the last minute."

APPENDIX E
Transcripts of Tape Recordings

Conversations With Playwright Murray Schisgal

Followup Interview Two--November 7, 1990

KB-- It's just odds and ends of questions. You mentioned to me that they're doing a production in Italy right now, or they will be doing. Which show?

MS-- Closet Madness.

KB-- The article that you gave me, Murray, the one about "To Israel With Luv." Do you remember that one?

MS-- No, what about it?

KB-- Well, it's the one I'm using different parts of it, references to it. It's the one where you talk about your trip to Israel with that group, including Tovah Feldshuh.

MS-- Manny Azenberg.

KB-- Now, there's no date on the thing. It says the weekend edition of the Jerusalem Post.

MS-- You want to know when I was in Israel?

KB-- I'd love to know the date of this article.

MS-- The article? Well, I'll tell you when I was in Israel, you add a month and you make that the date. You want me to get the date for Israel?

KB-- You have it accessible?

MS-- Well, I have to go in the other room and get it.

KB-- Okay sure, I'll hold on.

MS-- I was in Israel, here we go, I came back from Israel the thirtieth of May, 1990 and I went to Israel on--

KB-- 1990, Murray?

MS-- Yes, this year. This year I went.

KB-- Because in this article it says, let me see--"I just finished a play about a man who falls in love with a gorilla," Summer Romance. Now that was written quite awhile ago, wasn't it?

MS-- No, it's another play I wrote.

KB-- Oh, okay. So that threw me. I thought it was an older article. Okay, so it's 1990.

MS-- Yes, it's 1990, May 20, I went to Israel. Came back the 30th, and that play is called Snowball, and I'm still doing another draft.

KB-- So what would you think the date of this article was?

MS-- I would say that article, I'm pretty sure was about--it came out on a Friday, I believe, the first week of July, whatever that Friday was.

KB-- Friday. The first week of July, so let me see, I have a calendar. That would be the sixth?

MS-- Yes, that's my recollection.

KB-- It's close enough. I don't think anybody's going to check it. July the sixth, that would have been two days after July fourth, you know, Independence Day, so you'd probably remember that. Okay, great. So that's a brand new article. Alright. You mentioned to me about Reese; you said she was a film producer?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Could you tell me something about that?

MS-- She produced the movie called Power, directed by Sidney Lumet, starring Richard Gere, Julie Christie and Gene Hackman; prior to that she worked for many years as east coast story editor for Warner Brothers. And then she worked for Dustin Hoffman's company as an executive vice-president of development.

KB-- You do something like that now, right?

MS-- No, mine's a little different. I do develop film things, but I'm much more actively involved in meeting with directors and actors and writers and putting together packages or properties that Dusty is interested in doing. So it's not too dissimilar frankly.

KB-- How did she get into that field?

MS-- She got into it by starting to work as a reader of screenplays. I believe her first one was with Dusty. She worked with Dusty as a reader first, then went over to Warner Brothers, then went back to Dusty and then became an independent producer.

KB-- You both met when you were teaching. Were you both teaching at Cooper together?

MS-- No, no. I met her while she was a teacher, an elementary school

teacher. I was out of work. I didn't become a teacher until several years later.

KB-- Oh, because one of the articles said you met while both of you were teaching.

MS-- No, not true. I was unemployed when we met.

KB-- Okay. The guy that you have--we talked about a little bit, this George Bailin fellow. When you, again, I'm just trying to put this in chronology. It seems like in your introduction to your book Luv and Other Plays, you say that you met him about the time that you were starting law school. Now is that about right?

MS-- I knew him when I was discharged from, he was a neighborhood guy. I knew him, but I became close to him after my discharge from the Navy and during the years that I went through law school, so that was a period from when I was about twenty to twenty-five, say. For those five years I was very close to him.

KB--So he was like, just an acquaintance? Was he an older fellow?

MS-- He was a good friend. No, he was maybe a couple of years younger, but he was extraordinarily bright and his knowledge of literature and poetry, he was a poet and a teacher. He taught in the public school system in high school, but he was also a poet and he was very influential during that period of time when I was trying to write.

KB-- But you knew him as a kid?

MS-- I knew him as a kid, but I was never close to him until I got out of the service. He was a couple of years younger, not many, maybe two years younger.

KB-- You made it sound in your written introduction that it was mostly a friendship of correspondence. Did you guys actually get together and rap about things?

MS-- He only lived a few blocks. What was unique was that we saw each other frequently as a way of writing. We enjoyed writing letters and exchanging ideas and putting it on paper. It kind of enriched the relationship. I talked to him frequently, I mean we hung out together.

KB-- Okay. The play, one thing they wanted me to write about was to write a thing about your comedic theories and I'm using, I'm not going to bother you about that because you'll read it when I'm all done with it. But, I was very interested-- two of the plays that I picked of your later works to talk about were The Flatulist and Impasse on Nuclear

Energy. The Flatulist was performed at Rip Torn's Sanctuary Theatre.

Could you give me some idea of what the audience response was to that?

MS-- Unfortunately, we had no money or we would have opened the play officially, but we didn't have the money to do so and it ran primarily, we did about four to five performances over the weekend and we passed the hat on that. It was, uh, yeah, there may have been a slight admission charge. There was an admission charge, yes, maybe five, ten bucks. I don't remember how much, but it was just wonderful. When that thing clicked, I mean, I am sorry that our theatre is constituted so that we are not adventuresome enough to try all sorts of things. But when that thing had the audience that wasn't open-mouthed and agasp by what they were witnessing. It was some of the biggest laughs I've ever gotten in the theatre. It was just wonderful.

KB-- Were any people appalled by it?

MS-- Yes, of course, of course. In fact, one man, I tell the story of a man who walked out, a middle aged man, and I was pacing him back and I followed him out and I said, "Sir, I can understand your being offended by this play and I'd like to give you your money back. He said, "no, no, I don't want money back, I don't want it." I said, "No, really, I wrote the play, I'm the playwright and I can understand that you're sensitive and you took offense and please let me give you the money." He said, "No, I don't want the money." He said, "I loved that play. I think that play was terrific. And then that guy started farting on the stage and I couldn't take it anymore."

KB-- Oh, that's great.

MS-- I wish I had three more ideas like that.

KB-- Too bad you didn't have it taped. How did they handle the sound effects of this thing?

MS-- It was wonderful. My son did it on tape. He did it with his hands, rubbing his two hands together simulated the sound. In fact, if you look at the book, I gave him credit for flatulence.

KB-- Oh, that's terrific. Now, how come it died?

MS-- Because it had no money.

KB-- Did it get reviewed?

MS-- Harold Clurman came to the theatre with Vincent Canby. They were friends of David Margolies, an actor in it. He invited them and Harold

Clurman of blessed memory, asked permission to review it. He didn't take to it but as the man who directed Clifford Odets, I can well understand that.

KB-- Now, Rip Torn's name is on it. Was he the artistic director of the theatre?

MS-- He ran the theatre. He had a theatre in the Village called the Sanctuary Theatre. He eventually took over direction of the thing from the fellow who was given credit for it, Tony Petito. It's in the book, but he owned the theatre and he was wonderful, he was very helpful. He's a gutsy guy. He wanted to do it. In fact, the other play, Walter, was done with it and they just had a reading of it in New York at the Ensemble Studio Theatre here in New York. I understand it went well. I didn't go to it, so I don't know.

KB-- Now, the part at the end, where he literally kills the agent, how did the audience respond to that?

MS-- It was wonderful, I mean, Joe Leon, who played that part is really a pro, very good actor. He was in Jimmy Shine and he was in All Over Town. So I knew him and they enjoyed it and it was done as real as we could make it, but, by its very nature, absurd so that everything had a subtext that allowed us to enjoy it.

KB-- Did they laugh at the ending, or were they sort of shocked?

MS-- No, it didn't take on the dimensions of that reality that would shock them at that point--

KB-- The comedy controlled it.

MS-- If they were in the theatre, they were with it. They understood it, the level of it. Ultimately you have to take it on a fantasy level, although it's a fantasy that I imagine many writers have about their agents. Oddly enough, I wasn't writing about my agent, who at that time was Audrey Woods. I was writing of another agent.

KB-- What was the set like? Was it realistic?

MS-- Yes, absolutely.

KB-- It was a realistic set.

MS-- We had the fan, the fireplace, the candles, everything. It was really well done. I felt very good about that production and I went to every show there and I truly enjoyed it.

KB-- I wish I could have seen it.

MS-- Well there's some people around who've seen it, who, if you ever want to talk to them, I can put you in touch with them.

KB-- Now, Impasse on Nuclear Energy, I think you told me it was never performed.

MS-- To my knowledge it has not been performed.

KB-- But they had what, a reading of it?

MS-- I had a public reading at the Apple Core Theatre. It went wonderfully. Mike Tolan was in it with-- I forget actress' name. It was semi-staged and the theatre, they wanted to take an option on and do it. They found out it would take sixty thousand dollars to do it. They couldn't raise the money, so the whole thing fell through. The night we did it, we had a full theatre of about four hundred seats and I had Bob Dishy do another play and I enjoyed that evening too.

KB-- How did people respond to that play?

MS-- It worked wonderfully well, and the other play that worked even better was Consequences of Goosing. Those two worked marvelously. The third play was overly long and I cut it in the printed edition from what was done that evening. So those two worked very well.

KB-- Did people find, I mean, just at the very opening, this guy comes home from his overseas trip and his wife is standing there with a beard. I mean, did they laugh or were they puzzled? Could you give some inkling of how people reacted to that?

MS-- When, you know, first of all, they had just seen a comedy called The Consequences of Goosing, and this thing starts and it has the tone and they know my work generally, in the sense that I usually do come from a, if not a comic, certainly an absurd point of view. I don't think they're surprised by my stuff, and the audience is made up of invited people, people I knew, the actors knew. It was an audience of some intelligence so they knew right off what we were doing and I don't think there's any shock. I think they enjoyed it. No problem.

KB-- The part where he starts to, where she starts to make him up, you know, she puts lipstick on him, she puts the wig and all of that, I mean to me, up until then, that would be, I mean, up until then it's funny and yet it's serious and it keeps clicking back and forth. But

once he starts to put that wig on and she makes him up in drag, I mean it's just like a burlesque, it's a hysterical--

MS-- Well, you know, I really think the problem sets in, if I do that play and I have an audience, I know that the audience may not like what I'm doing, but what I'm doing is what I want to do. In other words, that's what I want to present. And the audience is usually responsive and respectful. The problem comes when they read reviews and the critics come in and they're not happy with what I am trying to do. They are not very happy with what I am trying to do and therefore, they are going to convince the audience, which they do unfailingly, that what they're watching is whatever they want to get across. The problem doesn't exist between an audience and a writer as a rule. The problem exists once the critics come in and the audience is no longer as capable of exercising their own minds.

KB-- But what I'm interested in, I'm intrigued by the fact that you've got this guy, you've got the woman with the beard, the guy made up in drag, and they're having this very serious conversation about nuclear power. I mean, how, what, I mean, you're hitting an audience with a serious message and an absolute, you know, burlesque, and I'm trying to figure out how people would respond to that.

MS-- Well, I think, you know, I never thought it would be possible to have a comedy on the holocaust and concentratrion camps. Yet, when I saw Lena Wurtmeileer's Seven Beauties and he's in a concentration camp and he's eyeing that fat Nazi woman and trying to make it so they can get some extra food or whatever, I must say, I couldn't stop myself from laughing and being amused by it and I never thought the two would meet. Unfortunately, or fortunately, I don't think there are categories of serious or comic-- human experience can embrace all of it so long as the viewpoint is coherent and it maintains some level of verisimilitude. Now, if you find no truth in it, then the whole thing is truly, merely a burlesque. But the point of that particular piece has to do with the macho-ness of nuclear armaments. In other words, to take away the bombs from the little boys, the fear of them to be "the man" by restriction, limitation, sanity, are rather underlying subtextual themes in that piece.

So what I want to say, and if it doesn't come across clearly I'll say it, that this man would rather deal with the end of the world than with being deprived of his male prerogatives, that is, to make war and to carry around a six shooter.

KB-- So you see no limits in terms of, you feel a subject of this seriousness can be very effectively handled with the most comic, any comic means you care to utilize. Is that right, pretty much?

MS-- Yes I do. I think there are no subjects that cannot be handled comically, absolutely! I believe that. I just want to say, it was never done, so you know, I don't remember Consequences of Goosing being done. I don't remember that being done. I don't remember, yes, Summer Romance, the gorilla play was done once. I did get one check on that one. Anyway, no matter, The reward is in the doing it, as they say.

KB-- Well, I'm interested in just the writing aspect of it now. In the four new ones that I have: Yellow Cat, Theatrical Release, Songs of War--

MS-- Yellow Cat. They now want to do at the very small theatre here called "Theatre for a New City" on First Avenue. What others do you have besides Yellow Cat?

KB-- I have Yellow Cat, Theatrical Release, Songs of War and Oatmeal and Kisses.

MS-- Oatmeal and Kisses is being published by Dramatists Play Service. It should be out any week. I could never get a production of that done, but maybe once it's published I will. Theatrical Release and Songs of War have been optioned for French productions. My French director is coming in next week. I will be meeting with her.

KB-- Oh, super. What I wanted to ask you about those four, as compared to these plays that you were writing in the mid-eighties, like the ones we were just talking about, you seem to be heading more towards, oh I would just say, what, more conservative comedy? Does that represent anything of significance from your point of view?

MS-- No. Take something like--

KB-- They're not as crazy.

MS-- Take something like Oatmeal and Kisses and Yellow Cat. I wrote them with the hope of making money. It's not being conservative or

anything else. Certainly, Theatrical Release and Songs of War are not conservative plays by any means. I don't know how you push the style of Theatrical Release, which is primarily expressionistic, into the commercial mold. I assure you, most theatres find it too either depressing because of the ending--

KB-- Really?

MS-- Well, I have not been able to get it done in this country yet. I don't find Songs of War or Theatrical Release more commercial or more conservative. The other two I do. It's not more because throughout the years I've written stuff that I've been trying to just make money.

KB-- But I mean, lets put it this way. Some people would find them less offensive.

MS-- Well, I don't know.

KB-- So there's nothing conscious there on your part.

MS-- No, not in that sense. In the sense of my Snowball, I hope it's offensive enough. I hope it satisfies most people's sense of it, but, I don't know. My thrust is not to be offensive. My thrust is to turn myself on. In other words, I have to get interested in something to write it and what I'm interested in, there is something there for one reason or another that gets me going. And it isn't to offend the audience. It is however, it's more to turn myself on than it is to offend an audience. I do like however, the notion of doing something that is outrageous. That word I have an affinity for. Anyway, that's neither here nor there. So what else you got?

KB-- That's basically it.

MS-- Okay, if there's anything else, please let me know.

KB-- Thank you so much.

APPENDIX F
Transcripts of Tape Recordings

Conversations With Playwright Murray Schisgal

Followup Interview Three--November 30,1990

KB-- Could you tell me what the years were, if you can recall, that you were in the Navy, at sea?

MS-- At sea, I would say from, uh, I went in '44, in December, I would say from December,1944, until I was discharged, which was June of '46. I was always stationed on ships once I was shipped out in December of '44 and I never was stationed at base for any length of time.

KB-- How come you were sent to both oceans?

MS-- Because when I returned, which was after the war, I was on a ship that was making a good will tour of various countries in the Far East: in Ceylon, in Singapore, in Egypt. So it was part of a program of a good will tour and we got home in South Carolina, Charleston. The war had been over when I went back across the Atlantic.

KB-- You sort of went in at the worst time didn't you?

MS-- The only battle I was involved in was Okinawa, although there were various kinds of encounters, that was the only major area of action I was involved in.

KB-- When you were teaching at James Fenimore Cooper Junior High School, something I've never asked you about, we've talked about almost everything else, how did you like teaching, what did you feel about it?

MS-- Oddly enough, I named some of the characters in The Typists from my students at James Fenimore Cooper 'cause I was writing also at the time. I must say, I tried very hard to do what my job was but in truth that was half my day, the other half was spent writing and I just walked the line. In other words, I would not--it was always a means to an end. I never had it in mind to be a career teacher or anything like that. So that I just tried to do my job as well as I could, but I didn't make a total career commitment to teaching or anything like that. I don't like teaching, I don't like the position of a teacher in

a classroom. And although I did it afterwards at the New School of Social Research, and at City College for semesters, I really loathe the notion of teaching people anything.

KB-- Really? How long when you were teaching at the junior high school, how long were you there?

MS-- I believe I was there two years. That's my memory of it.

KB-- Okay. You spent two years as a lawyer, two years as an English teacher, my God, you put such effort into all these things. I don't have to feel so badly about my twelve years as a dentist now.

MS-- Right. What I really started out wanting to be was a musician, I mean, I put a bit of time in that, studying and practicing and that was a total waste in so far as I didn't have the ability.

KB-- You know that friend of yours, this George Bailin, when you mentioned in your book that you had a philosophical disagreement over religion or something like that and you stopped writing, was that the very end of your contact with him?

MS-- In effect, yes. He was going through a phase of great religious study and yearning. Eventually he joined an ashram of sorts and I believe he's at one right now up in upstate New York. He's devoted to a certain sect, Buddhist or Hindu sect, I'm not sure. I've lost touch with him completely, although a couple of years ago his daughter got in touch with me and I did have several lovely evenings with her, talking about him, although I have not seen him in a score of years.

KB-- How interesting, thank you. The British Drama League, would you call that-- the one that helped you produce your first few plays in England, would you call that a theatre company or was it a dramatic organization?

MS-- The Drama League was set up by Harley Granville Barker as an institution to further the work and careers of playwrights and it was truly wonderful of them to give me the opportunity to work there. But it is an organization, I believe it's still in existence, that furthers works that they think have some merit, but doing productions of the works, by having libraries and facilities available to writers, directors, etc., etc.

KB-- After they produced Schrecks, the first three short plays, did

they also produce Ducks and Lovers?

MS-- No, that was done at the Arts Theatre.

KB-- So that they're what, a commercial venture?

MS-- Yes. The Arts Theatre is a membership theatre, but it is commercial.

KB-- So they just really got you started, the British Drama League?

MS-- Exactly.

KB-- And they're still in existence?

MS-- To my knowledge, I just read something interesting about them. I'm reading a book on Granville Barker, and they mentioned his involvement in that organization and it gave a slight, pleasant sensation to remember it all.

KB-- Yeah, very interesting. The Vernon Rice Award that you won, what is that?

MS-- It was an off-Broadway award for promising playwrights. I don't know if it's still in existence.

KB-- Who votes on that?

MS-- I have no idea.

KB-- But you did receive one, right?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Did Reese produce any other films besides Power, or was that just her first one?

MS-- No, but she had worked as a story editor for Warner Brothers and as a film development vice president for (Filmore) productions.

KB-- Is she going to do any more?

MS-- She is now a director on "Women in Film" and is very active in that. And I think she has pulled back pretty much from it, but she continues to have meetings and read and I think if she fell in love with the project, she might want to do it.

KB-- What is the "Women in Film"? Part of N.Y.U.?

MS-- "Women in Film" is an organization that serves the purposes of creating an atmosphere of women to work in film, have opportunities in film, to further their interests.

KB-- Is it an independent organization?

MS-- Yes, "Women in Film." It's a great organization. They do a lot

of good work.

KB-- Walter Kerr, in his review on Jimmy Shine, he made a reference to something that I wanted to know if this was correct because I didn't get this sense. He said that he thought that Jimmy Shine must have been an older play which you resurrected to fulfill certain needs. Now, did you write that play before The Typists and Luv?

MS-- No, but it was--I had written it right after uh, it was not a new play. It was, I don't know how many years old it was. What year was it done, '68, 69?

KB-- Yes, '68.

MS-- I must have written it at least five years before, or something like that.

KB-- Okay, but he felt there were certain elements in there that were-- he said that they were done before Murray Schisgal was Murray Schisgal.

MS-- Well, you know, I have great admiration for Walter Kerr and gratitude to him. But the truth of the matter is that the reasons why playwrights write plays aren't the reasons why critics criticize. In other words, he's looking for a pattern or a development and that kind of orderliness is something a critic would be enamored of, but which is absolutely not in the head of a playwright.

KB-- So, this play wasn't something from one of your, like from before the (nineteen-)sixties?

MS-- No, no.

KB-- Because that's the way he tried to make it sound.

MS-- They're looking for a pattern of development, they're looking for things to write about.

KB-- In the reviews that I have, I have some xeroxed clippings from your very early productions. After they did some of your very first shows in London, you had some done in Edinburgh. That's Scotland, right?

MS-- Yes sir.

KB-- How did that come about Murray?

MS-- Well, they have an Edinburgh Theatre Festival every year and it's an international, in fact Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson did Twice Around the Park there several--after they did it on Broadway. They went over

there to do that. And they invite companies, plays, directors to do things and one of the actors who had done The Typists and The Tiger at the British Drama League was asked if he'd come up there and do it and I said sure. And they went up and did it. I never saw it up there, I'd never been there myself.

KB-- Oh, okay.

MS-- As I say, they run a couple of performances which is something similar, I guess, to the Spoleto Festival which they have here.

KB-- Yes, I've heard of that, right. There's a reference that we have in the transcripts of the conversations. We once talked about agents, but I never heard from you actually what does a literary agent do for a playwright? Does your agent do anything for you to help get your plays produced?

MS-- Yes. Of course for many years I had Audrey Woods as my agent and she was the best. She would call up about once a month and say, "How are you doing? What's happening?" which is unheard of from agents. She took an interest in her clients and she truly loved the theatre. I have an agent now named Brigitte Ashenberg who's very knowledgeable about foreign rights and foreign theatres. etc., etc. So she's very helpful in placing my plays in London or in Paris, or in Berlin, wherever. She also will carry on in certain instances with Samuel French and Dramatists Play Service, forward material to them. She may hear of a theatre, a repertory theatre looking for material and send something of mine. So yes. Also, to get your stuff read in many repertory theatres and even commercial producers, you can't do it if you just send in. Fortunately, I have a reputation so I usually do get my stuff read, but frequently the purpose of an agent is they have access to theatres and producers that are denied to the playwright. And I have places who write "Submission of agents only!"

KB-- I see.

MS-- So they do serve all those functions. It's a sign of professionalism. It doesn't mean much and yet it means something, and it's better to have one than not. It's even better to have someone who's on your side than not. Very frequently, agents will sign you up and forget you're alive.

KB-- I think I know the feeling. Okay, but basically, if you were sitting and just waiting for her to get your stuff produced, it would never happen, right?

MS-- No, I don't do it anymore. I'm past that. In other words, I try to keep abreast of the theatres in the country, repertory theatres, the producers, and if I am so taken with some outfit, I will send it myself. But she's good, she's on my side. I'm just impatient and I have access to a degree, so I use it.

KB-- Are there any particular--of some of the younger guys that are writing now, Mamet or Sheperd or Guare, are any of those playwrights that you're particularly fond of their plays?

MS-- There's only one person in the theatre that I know of whose work I genuinely love and who I think is dynamite, and that's Tadeusz Kantor. He's coming to La Mama in June and I will be at his door then.

KB-- He's a playwright or a director?

MS-- He's a director and he creates his own plays. They're plays created with a company. I'm sure, I'm sure most of them are--I've seen three of them--most of them, I'm sure, are put together by himself with their cooperation and assistance and they're just wonderful theatre pieces.

KB-- Really!

MS-- They're absolutely the best things I've ever seen.

KB-- You mentioned him to me when I saw you last year. Are any of them in print?

MS-- No, not yet. Polish, they're done in Polish. But as for the other playwrights, I have a degree of respect for the names you mentioned, but no one that turns me on to the extent whereby I feel I share any deep commitment to their work.

KB-- Okay. Alright, that's fine.

APPENDIX G

Transcripts of Tape Recordings

Conversations With Playwright Murray Schisgal

Followup Interview Four-- December 15, 1990

KB-- What I wanted to ask you about was the original manuscripts on some of your plays. I'm concentrating in one area of the paper, I just picked three plays that had very good runs. The Typists was one of these. I was wondering what you do with the original manuscripts?

MS-- I think those I donated to the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At one point in our national history, if you donated material of creative work, you got a tax donation. And I donated it—I believe it was to the University of Wisconsin.

KB-- Really? How come that particular school?

MS-- I don't know how I got in touch with them, but somebody told me about them and the price was right in terms of the deductions and so I gave it to them. I've lost track with them and that's why I'm vague about it. The early plays I wrote I did send to some university and I believe that those are the people.

KB-- How about Luv and Jimmy Shine? Same thing?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Really? All of them? I see. So they get the originals?

MS-- Yes. I send them whatever original material I had on it.

KB-- So basically you just have your published versions?

MS-- Yeah, for those plays that's pretty much it, I believe, although if I looked about maybe something would turn up, but I'm pretty sure I sent them the original stuff.

KB-- How many rewrites would you say you did on The Typists from the time you first wrote it to the time you had it published?

MS-- I do a lot of rewrites before I submit it. In other words, I believe that writing is rewriting and that the good part of the work comes from rewriting it and to me, retyping something over a number of

times so that I get a sense of the rhythm of the piece and that I get a sense that the whole thing is holding together. So, I rewrite a great many times before I send it in and usually, unless the thing's in trouble, and those plays weren't in trouble, they remain pretty much the same once they went into rehearsal. In other words, the production of The Typists that was done in London in terms of the play, the written play, hadn't changed at all, very minor. The same is true of Jimmy Shine and Luv. Luv, the New York production, the ending was changed and there were some additional lines, but nothing of any dramatic nature.

KB-- I see. When you rewrite Murray, do you physically sit there with the most recent script and just start retyping?

MS-- Exactly.

KB-- Or do you take pen to paper?

MS-- No. I do both. I may make notes with the pen and then--but the act of typing a script is very important to me because the physical act of typing and rehearsing the lines and revisualizing the people on the set in my mind are important to me because that's the strongest evidence I have whether the thing will work or not, at least in my opinion.

KB-- And then after you finish let's say a revised edition, a version of it, then what do you do? Read it to yourself or is there anyone--do you use Reese as a sounding board or is there anybody that you--

MS-- No.

KB-- You just kind of sit and let it gel in your mind for a while?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- And then go back to it?

MS-- I will--see, it has changed greatly. In the old days, I would send it to people and get a fairly quick response. And as a rule, as a rule, I did not do any work on it until I met with a director and was involved in a production. So that I would only be working with the director who directed it since everybody has an opinion about everything.

KB-- Right.

MS-- Many comments I find destructive, so what I try to do generally is not work--once I feel good about it, not to do anything until I actually can get a production going and have a director, and then I

would certainly lock horns with him and do whatever we mutually agreed upon.

KB-- So this preproduction work, I mean, before the thing--once you know you're going to go into a theatre and do it, but before you would even worry about casting, doesn't this have to take place very far in advance?

MS-- How do you mean? Before casting?

KB-- Well, I would just think--you say--so what you're saying is, you write the script and basically you leave it the way it is until you have a director to work with?

MS-- That's right.

KB-- How far in advance of this play opening would you start to change it?

MS-- With the director?

KB-- Yes, because it sounds like a very time consuming process.

MS-- No. As a rule, not, because I usually wouldn't get a director if he wasn't in accord with a good part of the script to begin with. In other words, I would say it would be ridiculous for any director to undertake working on a play unless he felt the script was seventy to eighty per cent there.

KB-- I see.

MS-- He's not going to take on a script that he doesn't hopefully, and, I'll use a euphemism, is in love with.

KB-- Yeah.

MS-- It doesn't take that long as a rule. It's not massive rewriting because a director won't undertake it if he didn't truly respond emotionally to the bulk of it. So as a rule, if there are going to be rewrites, the majority of them will not come working with the director in a vacuum, but will come when the play is on stage and you see it and the problems start presenting themselves and then further exacerbated when you're in front of an audience. And you realize that there are things that have to be done with. So the majority of rewrites usually happen during previews and rehearsals rather than prior to going into rehearsals.

KB-- I see. Now, The Typists was one of the first ones you wrote, and

that's when you were still teaching, right?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- So I imagine that one, you wrote it and that was one of the one's you submitted when you went to London, so you probably didn't, that one didn't have major rewriting, did it?

MS-- No, it did not.

KB-- Now Luv, you wrote, if I get this right, every-- because every article I have of you tells a slightly different version. You went to England the first time and you were going to head off to Spain to write. Right?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- But then, they optioned the plays, you went into production and you didn't go to Spain.

MS-- At that time, no.

KB-- And you made several trips back and forth to England as various projects came up, right?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- And then you finally went to Spain in '63 just for two months?

MS-- A couple of months, two, three months, yes.

KB-- And that's when you wrote Luv.

MS-- Yes. I mean, I may have started it earlier, I don't know, but when I left Ibiza, I had the play pretty much written.

KB-- So you were only in Spain for that short period of time.

MS-- Yes, for about three months.

KB-- And that was your intention, or was it to be there for a year originally?

MS-- No. At that point our money was rather skimpy and also I was in communication with--I had an agent in London and there was interest in other plays of mine. I don't remember the specifics for leaving Ibiza when we did because when I was in Ibiza, I remember getting a telegram saying that my agent had sold the film rights to Ducks and Lovers for \$3000.00. So we had money, but I may have wanted to go there to work on the screenplay for Ducks and Lovers, which I did, or for some other meetings, I don't remember.

KB-- Okay. Now, in the case of Jimmy Shine, you said that it was a play

you had written a little earlier, like '65.

MS-- Yes.

KB-- And then, now did that involve major changes?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Maybe in view of the fact, because of Dustin Hoffman being in it?

MS-- Well, not only that. It did require major rewrites and they were done out of town during previews, out of town. We played Philadelphia and we played Washington, D.C. and they were major rewrites. Not because Dusty was doing, but because the play didn't stand up in front of an audience and we tried to make it better by rewriting it.

KB-- I see.

MS-- I don't know if it ultimately was better or not. I mean, once you're in the heat of battle, you just do the best you can and try to keep some perspective, but I must say, that was a rather hard spot.

KB-- How would the rewrites be instigated. I mean, would you be sitting in the audience listening and say, "Gee, that doesn't sound right?"

MS-- The director will be taking notes and you'll be taking notes. Certainly, Dusty always makes creative contributions, he has ideas. And then you meet and you say, "This isn't working. We lose the audience. We're just laying there like an egg," or whatever the comments are. So then you address them or you know, a character comes on and doesn't establish a persona in the way that you thought or the thing is not being staged right, or the costumes are wrong and the lights are wrong or there should be more music.

KB-- It could be a million things.

MS-- Yes. And of course, there is an attempt to be professional about it, but underlying it all is a good dose of hysteria.

KB-- I can imagine. Were you running back at night in between rehearsals to rewrite a script and so forth?

MS-- Yes, yes.

KB-- Okay, sort of like Act One with Moss Hart, that kind of thing?

MS-- Yeah.

KB-- He goes into that quite a bit.

MS-- There are a-- the important ones are structural problems, those are the ones that are most painful. It's not a question of lines.

Usually, it's a question of clarity, it's a question of intention, a question of design.

KB-- So these would be things that perhaps would never become apparent unless you see that thing up on its feet, right?

MS-- Yes, absolutely, because if it did, you would have caught it. So that's it exactly really. You don't know until it's there and then, my God, you see what's wrong.

KB-- So earlier on though, when you're just sitting by yourself writing these plays you--sounds like from the first time you type it, work on it till, again before anybody else gets to look at it, thinking in terms of putting it on in production, it doesn't sound like you have major revisions going on. I got the impression from when we spoke last year that you follow through on a very extensive rewriting process of your own. that's what I thought.

MS-- Yes, but I do. As a general rule with me, it has been just that. In other words, I have tried to see it clearly and do it clearly when writing it and when I've tripped up, it's because when it's been put on its feet, certain things become apparent. But I, you know, oddly enough, you can pick from every conceivable angle whether, you know, there are problems that are created once you start casting. There are problems with the director, there are problems with actors, problems with the people you work with once you start a thing that can be as destructive as the play itself. You have the wrong lead actor, no amount of good writing or good directing is going to be--

KB-- You've been very fortunate. You've had wonderful collaborators.

MS-- Oh no, I've had the misfortune of having to change actors in midstream and in rehearsal, change directors in mid rehearsal, change directors during previews. I can't think of--I know it will happen the next time I do something--but I can't think of something not happening.

KB-- Oh, really?

MS-- It's a cliché to say, you don't know where you're going to get hit, but you're going to get hit.

KB-- When you start out with the first script, let's say, let's go back to The Typists, let's say, or Luv. You write it the first time and you

start to work on it again. In that particular case, that's such a short, very short play. Do you find that you tend to overwrite and then you have to cut back or do you underwrite and you have to add material. Did you write yourself into any corners on that play?

MS-- No. First of all, I write very economically as a rule. I don't enjoy words in the theatre. I don't enjoy dialogue. I don't enjoy conversation. I have certain prejudices which no doubt are harmful as well as helpful. I usually don't overwrite. I underwrite. There's very little I could do about that although, say with Luv, Mike Nichols had a suggestion of starting the second act whereby they both don't merely come together and admit their faults initially, but they have a pretense of having happy remarriages, whatever. Now that came out of Mike's suggestions. So I added something, but it comes to a page and a half, two pages the whole thing so, that's the only rewrite I could think of in Luv, except for the end. Re-introducing the dog at the end was a new beat. I don't know who came up with that idea. Those two are the only two that I would say were rewrites.

KB-- The London version of that play and the New York version, in terms of just the script, were basically the same?

MS-- Except for the two things that I've told you. That's all I can remember. That was the big difference.

KB-- But then, the reason that I guess the Luv production was so much more successful in New York had to do then with your actors, your director and all that.

MS-- Absolutely. One can't appreciate the difference that makes. In other words, New York you got not only more of these very talented people doing it, but it was treated by the producer as a Broadway production and therefore money was invested, time was invested and we did it in a membership club theatre in London, the Arts Theatre, which is a very small off-Broadway house. It's not even open, it is open to the public, but it's primarily a subscription theatre. No time was expended and I certainly wouldn't put down any of the people who worked on it. They were very talented too, but the whole milieu was quite radically different.

KB-- So basically when you write a play and when you decide it's

finished after, whatever it is, two, three rewrites, whatever. That's it, you don't sit down and read it.

MS-- Not two, three. I would say ten, fifteen.

KB-- Oh, okay. So that's quite--

MS-- I would say every play I do is at least ten rewrites and sometimes it gets sick. I do it so many times. And I do it from the top because I have certain prejudices and one of them is I cannot do rewrites piecemeal. If I'm working on a play, I will do it afterwards piecemeal, but when I'm working on it alone, before anyone sees it, I have to start at the top and run through the whole thing. But since plays aren't very long, I mean, I've never written a play more than one hundred pages long, it's no big threat.

KB-- Then you're the sole judge of the rewrite.

MS-- At that point, yes.

KB-- You just read it to yourself.

MS-- Yes.

KB-- Mull it over.

MS-- Yes, yes.

KB-- But nobody else gets to see it or listen to it.

MS-- Not until I send it out.

KB-- And you don't have a reading in your apartment at that point? That comes later? Like maybe after the third rewrite?

MS-- Lately I have done that only because it's so much more difficult to get something on. As a rule, I don't have, unless there's a specific purpose for it, I don't have it in order to hear the play. I may have it for someone else to hear it. I may have it because, like I had something at the Manhattan Theatre Club and they wanted to hear it read by actors so there has to be a specific--I don't do it for myself to hear it. But because I think at that point I've heard it more than enough and I've heard it the way I think it should be said and consequently having actors read it, for me personally, doesn't serve any real purpose. Lately, I've had more readings than ever because lately getting a play done becomes increasingly difficult and it's another way of enjoying your work. It becomes a social thing and more and more groups are asking for readings. I did my one act plays,

Man Dangling, I did at the Apple Corps Theatre and we invited a couple of hundred people for the reading. It was kind of fun but I couldn't say I learned anything from it. Oh yes, I did. I did make some cuts as a result of that in one play. The two I left alone, the third I made some cuts.

KB-- You must have a very good, you know, either ear or eye, or whatever. I mean, could that also have to do with the fact that by the time--you said that you--it struck me as an unusual statement--you said, once the play is finished, that's it. It's history as far as you're concerned. Is it because you're sick of it already, you've given it such intense scrutiny up until that point?

MS-- Yeah, I'm sick of it.

KB-- I can't imagine. God, if you rewrite something that many times.

MS-- Yeah, I'm sick of it. I can't stand it anymore. I mean, not that I dislike it, I'm just not interested and I don't want any part of it.

It's history. Rarely, rarely, would I see it after a few times on stage or reread it. I don't do that at all. I never reread stuff. Sometimes, I'll remember something I wanted to do with a play and it will stick in my mind. Like recently, I wrote a play called Memorial Day, which I wrote in the early (nineteen-) sixties, and only three years ago, I asked them to please change the ending of it, which they did, Dramatists Play Service, because I had remembered in the previous version I had a different ending which I much preferred and I had it changed like, twenty-five years or more after I wrote it. That's the one exception I could think of at the moment. Popkins I rewrote after seeing the French production, I made changes and Dramatists Play Service was kind enough to put out a revised copy of Popkins. But that's forever.

KB-- What was the name of the first play, the "Lawyer Play?"

MS-- Memorial Day.

KB-- Oh, Memorial Day. Oh, okay, I know that one. I thought that was one I never heard of.

MS-- --from the Dramatists Play Service ending to one I had written previously that was published by, I forget the publishing company, uh, Crown Publishing Company. But it's very, I am convinced pretty much

that there's too much of an effort to make plays into other plays that have had success. So that the people around you in a production are trying to, not so much make a play work, but make it work like other plays that have enjoyed hit status. It's a very complicated thing, but if one goes to the theatre a lot, one is taken with the thought that there's a similarity to contemporary plays, that's quite distressing. But that similarity is born from an erroneous belief that there's a formula for being a hit: get the jokes in, get the laughs in, have a little current sentiment in there, disease-of-the-week kind of thing and there are certain little hints. The real trouble with a lot that we see is that they're not outrageous enough, nor perverse enough, they're not different enough. Did you get that thing I sent you?

KB-- Yes I did. Thank you very much. It was interesting. I could see that in the intro of a book, in one of your next collections or something. You know the idea that you use in The Typists, of these people aging within this one hour, within this short period of time, or supposedly within one day of their working life. I've never seen anything like that in any other play I've ever read. Where did you get the inspiration for that?

MS-- My own fear, my own apprehensions. I had many jobs before, when I wrote that I was teaching, but before that, I had many jobs and I think it's a common apprehension that we all share that we're doing chores, mechanical chores, routine chores and we're growing old and we're not living our lives. So we take a condensation of that personal and I hope universal apprehension, fear of not wasting our lives, doing things that do not have any meaning for us.

KB-- As you wrote that play, and of course at that point your experience with plays was quite limited, right?

MS-- Non-existent.

KB-- Okay, non-existent. Did it ever occur to you that this device that I'm using, of these two actors changing from their twenties to sixties within less than an hour, can this be dramatically effective? Can it work? Will an audience buy into it?

MS-- No.

KB-- You didn't even think about it?

MS-- You know what the most interesting thing about that play was to me when I was writing it was listening to the sound of typewriters, of these two people typing, was almost like orchestrating it. That, the aging thing came, it was just what I wanted to do, but that wasn't what was my main interest. My main interest oddly enough in that play was the sound of the typewriters and orchestrating that sound. And that was what most fascinated me. Having worked as a typist previously and imagining how that would sound on a stage, I was taken with that more than any other aspect of the play. I knew where I was going with it with the aging, but I repeat, I had no practical experience in the theatre whatever at that point.

KB-- You weren't concerned with the fact of whether this device, this thing which is really an integral part of the structure of the play, you know, each time they'd make an exit, they come back in a different age range, you never worried about that?

MS-- No, I didn't.

KB-- Okay, that's interesting. You made a statement, just a little bit earlier, just now, you said something about when you select your directors and everything for these plays, again, these three we're talking about: Typists, Luv, Jimmy Shine. Is it the producer who puts the package together?

MS-- No.

KB-- How does that work?

MS-- Under the Dramatists Guild which every playwright belongs to as a matter of course, although some do drop out and some don't join, but that's a small minority, every Dramatists Guild contract, the playwright has absolute approval over actors, over director and over the script. In other words, nothing can be changed without his approval, no actor can be hired without his approval and the producer cannot hire a director without his approval. That is always therefore, a decision made between the producer and playwright.

KB-- I see. So you have conferences with them and you decide?

MS-- Yes.

KB-- I see. Was there a reason that you didn't write the screenplay for Luv?

MS-- Yes. I thought it would not make a movie, that material would not lend itself to a movie. I was very happy to take the money they gave me for buying it for a screenplay, but I didn't know how to make it into a movie. I didn't even know, I didn't see it as a movie. It's such a theatrical piece. That's the real problem, that's why that picture was a stinker.

KB-- Would you feel differently today?

MS-- Today I would definitely write it. I wouldn't let somebody else mess with--

KB-- Mess with your stuff.

MS-- If it's going to be a bomb, I could do it myself. Yeah, that was a mistake.

KB-- I was looking through your resume and I didn't see the screenplay of Luv on there and I thought maybe you just left it off. Then I went to the library and I looked through, you know, we have these books of films and I looked through and I saw your name wasn't on the screenplay and I was surprised.

MS-- That was a mistake. Of course you know--

KB-- I couldn't imagine that knowing you, as I think I do now, I couldn't imagine you relinquishing your "baby" into somebody else's hands.

MS-- I should never have done that and besides which I could have made more money, which is nothing to sneeze at, but I just didn't have experience.

KB-- You're very familiar now with the film medium, which you weren't then, right?

MS-- Absolutely.

KB-- So that's a factor too.

MS-- Yes. One doesn't realize the amount of time you have to spend in either theatre or film before you know what the hell's happening. You got--it's not--you can't go in there and wing it. You gotta know something.

KB-- Yeah, it's a time factor, it's a function of time.

MS-- And you've got to pay your dues and you're stupid until you do. And you're stupid afterwards, but you're stupid in the right way. In

other words, I should have done Luv as a screenplay, because if anybody loused it up, I should. But the truth is, I still believe it would never make a good movie.

KB-- Okay, that's very interesting. One more question. Short one. When did you get your bachelor's degree at the New School of Social Research? Do you remember? You got a bachelor's degree in English, right?

MS-- Yes, I have it. I graduated from law school in '56, so I must have gotten, and I taught in the late sixties, early sixties. It was before I went to Europe, which was '60. I believe it was-- I have it written somewhere. I'd have to look it up. I would put down--

KB-- You finished law school and then you practiced as a lawyer for two years, right?

MS-- '53. I practiced law to '56. I would put '59, I got my bachelor's at the New School.

KB-- '59. Now, that was your second bachelor's, right? You already had graduated college.

MS-- I had a law degree before.

KB-- Did you not need a bachelor's for that?

MS-- No, you only needed two years of college.

KB-- I see. So really, you only had to go back to school like for two years?

MS-- That's right.

KB-- I see.

MS-- I went to night school. I mean, I didn't go during the day.

KB-- So after that, that's when you got the job teaching?

MS-- Right.

KB-- At James Fenimore Cooper and all that.

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