Theater you can afford to see —
plays you can’t afford to miss!

About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, but overlooked American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten.

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An Open Letter to The American Century Theater Audiences
from Jack Marshall, Artistic Director. ................................. Back cover
The Playwright: Christopher Durang (1949–

—Jack Marshall

One of the most successful comic and satiric playwrights in American theater history, Christopher Durang was born in Montclair, New Jersey, in 1946. As a child, he attended parochial school, an experience which had a profound effect on him, as The American Century Theater’s current production demonstrates. Durang graduated from Harvard with an English degree, and went on to get his M.F.A. in playwriting from the Yale School of Drama. (One of his classmates, and a frequent collaborator on various productions, was Sigourney Weaver; another, who also appeared in his plays, was Meryl Streep.)

His first Off-Off-Broadway play to escape the college campus was The Nature and Purpose of the Universe, presented at the Direct Theatre in 1975. Durang’s career took off, however, a year later, when his A History of The American Film was accepted as one of twelve plays done by the prestigious Eugene O’Neill National Playwriting Conference. Durang’s work then received a triple premiere in 1977, with three back-to-back-to-back prestigious productions at the Hartford Stage Company in Hartford, Connecticut, the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, and the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. In 1978, A History of the American Film landed on Broadway, earning Durang a Tony nomination for Best Book of a Musical at the tender age of thirty-two.

Then came Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You. The one-act play was presented for three weeks at the Ensemble Studio Theatre off-off-Off-Broadway, but although it received rave reviews and several awards, it failed to reach the commercial stages of Off-Broadway despite the acclaim. In 1981, it reached the Village on a double bill with The Actor’s Nightmare, an antic curtain-raiser about an accountant who suddenly finds himself on stage as the star of a play he has never rehearsed, in a role he doesn’t understand, with lines he has never read before.
The duo ran for over two and a half years. In the meantime, Durang wrote *Beyond Therapy*, which ran Off-Broadway starring Sigourney Weaver. With some rewriting, it was the vehicle that returned Durang to Broadway in 1982.

Durang’s next hit was 1985’s *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*. In the three years in between, he occupied himself writing screenplays and teleplays. One screenplay was titled *The Nun Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

Not surprisingly, given his brand of humor, Durang soon teamed with Carol Burnett. He was part of her writing team for the ABC special *Carol and Robin and Whoopi and Carl*, which won Robin Williams an Emmy. Durang also dabbled in acting, playing a small role in *The Secret of My Success*, starring Michael J. Fox. The acting break was just a prelude to perhaps his funniest play, *Laughing Wild*, which premiered at Playwrights Horizons in 1987. Durang played one of the two roles in the show.

By this point, it was clear that this most unconventional of playwrights was not interested in being anything but. His projects became whatever interested him at the time. One-acts were his favorite medium, a perverse choice, since one-act plays have been neither popular nor profitable since the mid-Sixties. Durang’s one-acts, however, have consistently been exceptions to the rule.

In 1989, Durang returned to cabaret with a mock nightclub act called *Chris Durang and Dawne*, which became a late-night cult hit. Durang obviously enjoyed this left turn, and his cabaret partners performed the act and various perversions of it for the next seven years. Broadway waited, and Durang couldn’t have cared less. He wanted to act; he wanted to have fun. In 1990, he played opposite Jean Smart in *Laughing Wild* in Los Angeles and received an award for his acting. Warner Brothers hired him to write a sitcom; he did some more screen acting, in films like *The Butcher’s Wife*, *Housesitter*, and *Mr. North*. Drifting? Some would call this haphazard sequence drifting. Not Durang, it seems.

In 1993, he appeared in the cast of *Putting It Together*, a compilation of Stephen Sondheim songs that let him sing and dance with Julie Andrews, among others. There was another one act—*For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls*—and then the unmistakable sign that Durang was entering his
downward grassy slope, a collection of his works for the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1994, called *Durang/Durang*.

That same year, Durang and playwright Marsha Norman began running the Playwriting Program at the Juilliard School in Manhattan, which they still operate today.

When he wasn’t teaching, he was writing more sitcom pilots and acting in more films: *Life with Mikey*, *The Cowboy Way*, *Simply Irresistible*, and the Steve Martin-Goldie Hawn remake of *The Out-of-Towners*.

In 1999, Durang’s satire *Betty’s Summer Vacation*, a comedy lampooning the public’s thirst for tabloid gore, won Durang his third Obie playwriting award. Finally, his acting adventures got him a continuing role on the NBC TV series, *Kristin*, starring Kristin Chenoweth. He played the Reverend Thornhill, Kristin’s spiritual adviser, for six episodes in 2001.

He has continued to move from project to project. He wrote the book and lyrics for a ninety-minute musical, *Adrift in Macao*, with music by Peter Melnick. In 2002, he wrote a satirical Christmas play called *Mrs. Bob Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge*. This, like most of Durang’s works, received much applause and critical praise. Durang is funny. He can’t *not* be funny. Even though he is at the point in his career where he is collecting honors and awards, his talent remains sharp. Wherever there are one acts, you will find Christopher Durang, and people will be laughing.

Christopher Durang on the Problem with Updating Plays . . . Especially *This* One

Christopher Durang maintains a superb website about his works to help students and audience members understand and appreciate them. He is after all, a teacher of playwriting. His website, www.christopherdurang.com, is a
superb reference, and should be visited by all. In an essay entitled “Regarding Issues of Updating Some of My Plays . . .”, Durang discusses an issue core to The American Century Theater, which, by its charter, is always presenting plays long after the period in which they were written and faces the issue of updating regularly. Our philosophy: We’re against it, and we virtually never do it. Durang is a bit more analytical, but he explains powerfully, logically and passionately the very reasons why we don’t update plays . . . his, or any other playwright’s, writing in part . . .

Many of my plays have references to popular culture and personalities from the period in which they are written. And as time has gone by, some of these references seem dated or aren’t recognized by current audiences. And I’ve been asked from time to time to “update” these references so the plays seem more current. And in several instances I’ve tried to do that, but have found that the attempts have not been satisfactory. Either the “updates” have frankly not been as funny as the original references; or sometimes they’ve been too tied to our current time, and you wonder why the characters don’t talk about other events and personalities from the current time . . .

I think these plays are best done set in their original periods.

. . . And within those plays, if there are references that the audience doesn’t get, I think back on myself as a child watching the movies of the ’30s and ’40s on television. There were lots of references I didn’t get in those films, and yet I could glean their meaning by the context and by the way the characters spoke of them.

From Gentlemen’s Agreement (1947) and Auntie Mame (1958), I learned that “restricted” was the code word used to indicate that Jews were not welcome or allowed in certain hotels and clubs. From Mrs. Miniver (1942), I learned that “the Blitz” was the terrible bombing that the British endured on their homeland during World War II. From A Man’s Castle (1933), Golddiggers of 1933, and My Man Godfrey (1936), I learned of “shanty towns,” where penniless Americans lived in dilapidated shacks (or “shanties”) during the Depression (a slightly more complex version of the homeless people
who live in cardboard boxes in our day). From My Man Godfrey, I learned of “scavenger hunts,” a game where people had to race to see who would be first to find everything on a list of weird items (things like a waffle iron, a gorilla suit, a sword—all odd non-sequiturs). In My Man Godfrey, the flighty heiress (Carole Lombard) had to find a “Forgotten Man”—who ended up being Godfrey (William Powell), an educated man now a hobo living in a shanty town.

. . . I contend that it was part of those films’ value that I learned about the times in which they were made. And it is my contention that the plays I list above have information about the times in which they were written that is of value and should not be thrown away by attempts to update somehow to the present.

Exactly.

Durang also goes into detail about why Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You is an especially bad play to try to update, and, in doing so, illuminates much about the background of the play as well as the recent history of Catholicism. He writes . . .

. . . The play was written and performed in 1980–81. It was written out of my experiences as a Catholic school boy taught in parochial schools from 1956 through 1967 (grammar school through high school). Judging from audience members who spoke to me, the kind of doctrine I was taught, and the manner of that teaching, remained similar at least up until the late ’70s.

After that, there were many fewer young people becoming nuns and priests, so Catholic schools were no longer primarily taught by nuns. And the religious teaching was no longer related to memorizing catechism questions (which was central to my teaching and central to sections of Sister Mary Ignatius . . .).

I will say that the doctrine I was taught is still primarily the doctrine that the Church still teaches, particularly as regards sexuality. In terms of Catholic teaching, any sex is forbidden except within
marriage. Sex between unmarried people, sex between gay people, masturbation, use of birth control—all this is still taught to be forbidden. For gay people it is taught that they should be celibate for their entire lives, period.

And people like Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania still believe all these things. (Can Pennsylvania please vote him out? Please!)

[NOTE: Rick Santorum, as those who followed the GOP Presidential primaries this year knows, was indeed defeated in his reelection bid for Senator, but his strict Catholic beliefs remain unchanged.]

Back when I was taught these things, you were constantly told you would go to hell if you committed any sins of indecency, ‘whether alone or with others.’ Nowadays, I think hell is threatened less; but these acts are still taught as sin. And it is a rare priest or nun who could publicly say they thought otherwise, even if they did.

But even if much of this dogma remains the same, there are some significant reasons why a character like Sister Mary Ignatius would exist in the late ’70s and early ’80s, and not exist in the same way or with the same style of certainty in the ’90s or the present.

To explain that I am going to quote from a letter I wrote to a British director who recently did [the play]... Excerpts from letter:

. . . you wonder if there’s a way I can “universalize” some of the references in Sister Mary so it will seem less tied to the early ’80s and thus be theoretically more relevant to the present. Can I find a way to change the references so we’re less certain what time frame they make reference to?

. . . Sister Mary, unlike Beyond Therapy, does not have many pop culture references.

But it has a real church and cultural history and time line that it fits into; and changing that time line plays serious havoc with the believability and logic of the play. Plus I wonder if one should just go ahead and set the play in America, where it was written, and not try to set it in London. I mean, it’s in America that Catholic school children,
in the '50s, '60s and most of the '70s, were taught by making them recite answers to catechism questions like performing, talking dogs.

If that didn’t happen in England—and I don’t think it did; not even sure it was taught that way in Ireland, was it?—if that didn’t happen in England, it’s better to set it in the country where it did happen.

Which then brings me to—WHEN did it happen? Did they teach that way in America in 1985, say? No, they didn’t. By 1985—thanks to the sexual revolution and the church’s attempts at modernization—many priests and nuns had left their orders and entered regular life, and fewer young people were joining the ranks to replace them. And so Catholic schools were more often taught by non-clergy, there was no longer enough clergy to staff the schools.

And society had changed too.

In the '50s and most of the '60s, the Catholic Church and the “conformity happy” American society were IN SYNCH on many issues, notably sexual morality including homosexuality, which obviously affects the character of Gary in the play. To grow up in the 50s and 60s and be told by both the church and society that homosexuality was immoral, abnormal, “no homosexual could ever be happy” etc.—this was a big burden to grow up with for a gay person.

In the late '60s and through the '70s and early '80s, more and more movies and talk shows began to present differing, accepting viewpoints of homosexuality . . . but it still took a long time to filter through.

When the play was written in 1980 (81), certainly society at large had grown somewhat more accepting and a lot more aware that homosexuals existed. But it was still pretty recent. When I was at college in 1971 (at Harvard), most gay people were not open about it. By about 1980 they were starting to be.

Gary’s somewhat shy, mixed up feelings about his sexuality fit the time frame I wrote them in—he was a student of Sister’s in 1959 (with homosexuality barely spoken of, and when it was, it was extraordinarily forbidden and awful; and certainly sent you to hell); then he would’ve been in college in 1970 or so—society was starting to entertain more liberal ideas, but only entertain them. And popular culture was easing
into looking into it—like the movie Cabaret in 1972—but it was still unusual, it still stood out as a topic. So for Gary to have gone through initial shame, then sleeping with 500 people, then initial self-acceptance and “normal” relationship with another guy—but to still be fuzzy enough in his feelings that he, sometimes, goes to confession to confess it . . . . All of this makes sense in the time frame the play is set in.

If the audience isn’t sure when it’s set, and thinks indeed maybe it’s set in the late ’80s, or early ’90s, or God knows when—well, it makes it all less believable. What’s the matter with Gary, in those later times, that he’s not more immediately self-accepting, when there’s so much more out there saying he could and should be. Hasn’t he seen Will and Grace? Why is he listening to some old biddy with such old ideas?

Which bring me to the biggest reason for being careful about time frame.

To make psychological sense of Sister Mary, she needs to have been in the church for a substantial time BEFORE the Ecumenical Council and Pope John the 23rd (often referred to in the play). The Ecumenical Council started on Oct. 11, 1962 . . . . Pope John 23rd died in 1963 before it was finished.

The purpose of the Ecumenical Council was to re-look at church teachings, and to make the church come into the present century. It was a very liberalizing event . . . and for Church development at least (and for Church liberals), it’s a real shame that particular Pope died so early.

Among the changes that happened were: the Mass in Latin was changed to in English (or vernacular of whatever country). The priest now looked out at the people, rather than having his back to the audience (which had been more mysterious). Teachings like St. Christopher were discarded as myth, since there was no historical background. I believe that it was the Council that stopped the teaching of Limbo for unbaptized babies and stopped teaching that eating meat on Friday was a sin.

The Council also genuinely taught respect of other religions. Up until then, it was common for Catholics to be taught that their religion was right, and others were wrong. And that the followers of other religions
might end up in hell. (Or as a funny book on Catholicism after the Ecumenical Council put it: people from other religions COULD get into heaven, they just might not know what was going on when they got there.)

Then there were the teachings on birth control, to be looked at in the Ecumenical Council. This next is more specialized knowledge (that I’ve gotten from Conscience, a pro-choice Catholic magazine), but Pope John also created a group to look into the church’s teachings on birth control.

It included cardinals, priests and nuns, but also included—imagine this!—two married couples, who could add their knowledge. These couples described to the clergy the extreme difficulty of using the so-called rhythm method (which was tied to figuring out the woman’s most fertile times and avoiding intercourse during that time); and described the pressures it put on their marriages to always be worried if intimacy would lead to pregnancy.

This panel was going to publish their recommendation that the church CHANGE its policy about forbidding birth control. However, Pope John 23rd died; and the next Pope, Pope Paul VI, was a conservative bureaucrat, and he stifled the committee’s report and recommendation. And conservatives within the church encouraged him to write an encyclical REAFFIRMING the church’s ban on birth control. (These conservatives in the Curia felt that it was “bad” to change church policy. If you admitted being wrong on one thing, it could open the doors to wondering what else you were wrong on. So better to just keep saying, no we’re still right, we’ve always been right. And shut up.)

And so in 1968, Pope Paul wrote the encyclical Humane Vitae (Human Life), in which he restated that the church’s view on birth control was the correct one.

So those in the church who were hoping for change and liberalization had those hopes dashed. And this encyclical caused a lot of the lack of belief and trust in the church that has grown and grown.

The birth control argument is so shoddy—it’s basically that God created sex for procreation, and anything that interferes with procreation is a sin. Now if you decide—and it seems logical—that God
created sex not only for procreation but to allow for special intimacy between people and (dare I say it?) to give pleasure—well, then the church’s position seems weird.

As well as the oddness of all those celibate creatures sitting up there telling us fornicating mortals what and how and when to use our genitals.

But look at the dates—1962 beginning liberalization; 1968, smack, the liberalization put down by the next Pope. And for the Catholics out in the real world, they fought and struggled with these conflicting aspects of church teaching very strongly from the mid-’60s certainly to the mid-’80s.

And Sister and her position is in the MIDST of that.

So, if you will, to not acknowledge that time frame is almost like writing a play about Patton but trying to make it not take place during World War II.

Sister BELIEVED all those things she was taught in the ’30s and ’40s, and that she in turn taught her students in the ’50s and ’60s—all sex outside of marriage was wrong (and sent you to hell); babies had to be baptized into the church or they couldn’t go to heaven, and so that’s why there’s Limbo (for good, but unbaptized, people who couldn’t be allowed to go to heaven); eating meat on Friday showed disrespect to Christ who died on Good Friday (you should “sacrifice” by giving up meat that you like)—and so those who disobey go to hell.

She believed all that. And when Pope John 23rd came and said, some of that is nonsense; and it’s not really what Christianity is about—she felt betrayed. In her gut she felt what she was taught was right. Then when conservative Pope Paul came in, she felt vindicated . . . but the liberal breeze had started, and so Sister and the conservatives have been fighting it ever since.

(And truthfully, I think many of the more liberal voices just left the church—as I did. And so I don’t know who’s fighting for what in the church anymore—except for the non-clergy groups who recently were triggered by the priest sex scandals to want to make the Bishops more responsible to lay people.)
So . . . in a way I think I made my strongest point when I compared Sister’s ties to the Ecumenical Council to be as strong as Patton’s ties to WWII. And the Council was 1962–63.

“Does that make sense?” Durang finally asks the director, as he closes the letter.

It sure does.

Christopher Durang on
Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You

Excerpted from a 2008 interview with Erik Piepenburg of The New York Times

I sort of said no to a revival of Sister Mary during the height of Bush’s popularity because I just thought the religious right was so strong that I thought I actually don’t want to have this fight. I still think that play has value. The church, although they’ve changed a lot, their dogma is very similar . . . .

The first year of it I wasn’t aware that there were people really upset about it. When it started to go out around the country, to St. Louis and Boston, there started to be pickets and protest. This group that’s still around, called the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, they see so-called anti-Catholicism everywhere.

In my view they mistake in my play criticism with bigotry. For God’s sake, it’s my own background I’m writing about. It’s stuff they taught me, the nuns taught me and the church still teaches. I think the church’s teaching on sexuality is still pathological. It’s actually unhealthy . . . .”
An American nun’s book on sex has put Catholics at risk of “grave harm,” the Catholic Church announced Monday. Why? She thought masturbating was OK, that being gay was OK and divorce was sometimes OK.

This round of controversy actually started in 2006, when Sister Margaret Farley released “Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics.”

Farley, a longtime theologian, has long kept company with controversy within the church; she was once threatened with expulsion for signing an ad in the New York Times in 1984 that argued Catholics could hold a variety of views about abortion, according to the Catholic News Service.

So perhaps it’s not a shocker that “Just Love,” although released to plaudits among non-church reviewers, didn’t get the same love from the church itself, which has recently cracked down on American nuns for questioning the Vatican.

“Among the many errors and ambiguities of this book are its positions on masturbation, homosexual acts, homosexual unions, the indissolubility of marriage and the problem of divorce and remarriage,” read the critique signed by Cardinal William Levada of the church’s doctrinal office, which said the dissemination of Farley's positions “risks grave harm to the faithful.”

In her book, Farley wrote that masturbation “usually does not raise any moral questions at all,” to which the church raised moral questions.
“This statement does not conform to Catholic teaching,” the decision read, citing church catechism that says “masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action.”

Farley also wrote that “same-sex oriented persons as well as their activities can and should be respected whether or not they have a choice to be otherwise.”

“This opinion is not acceptable,” the reviewers responded, reaffirming church doctrine that holds gay sex to be “grave depravity.”

The Vatican’s review began a couple years ago. Farley told the Associated Press on Monday that she hadn’t intended the book to reflect official Catholic teachings.

But whether the church approves of “Just Love” or not — well, it doesn’t — readers have found a lot of company in its pages.

“What distinguishes a contribution and a classic in a field of study is the difference between works that further a conversation and works that reconstruct the conversation,” read a review in the Anglican Theological Review, which then added, “Farley's Just Love is (at the least) a contemporary classic in Christian sexual ethics.”

**Catholic teachers support Ontario’s gay–straight alliance initiative**
by Karen Howlett

From *The Globe and Mail*, June 5, 2012

Catholic teachers in Ontario are calling on school administrators to embrace the province’s new anti-bullying legislation allowing students to form gay-straight alliances, even as pro-life activists push for a constitutional challenge. Kevin O’Dwyer, president of the Ontario English Catholic
Teachers’ Association, said his 43,000 members welcome the legislation, which passed third and final reading on Tuesday, because it allows schools to protect students from homophobia and other forms of discrimination.

“I think it’s going to be a positive experience for students to engage those clubs, whatever name they choose,” Mr. O’Dwyer said in an interview. He is hoping that Catholic school trustees can overcome their objections to legislation that they argue contradicts church doctrine condemning homosexual activity. John Del Grande, a trustee with the Toronto Catholic District School Board, said how administrators respond now that the legislation is set to become law depends on how it gets implemented in schools. He raised a number of objections during committee hearings on the legislation, including the use of the word “gay” in the name of clubs.

Trustees won’t have an issue if students name their support groups whatever they want as long as they conduct themselves in a Catholic manner, Mr. Del Grande said. But the fear is that these groups could turn into larger advocacy or political organizations and “force Catholics to think differently,” he said. “Then we have a constitutional problem.” Campaign Life Coalition, a national pro-life group, is calling on church leaders and Catholic school boards to invoke Section 93 of the Constitution Act and reject the legislation on the grounds that it adversely impacts their faith and morals.

“This legislation now puts a radical homosexual agenda in every publicly funded, Catholic and public school across Ontario, under the guise of ‘bullying prevention,’ ” Campaign Life says in a statement.

Frank Peters, a professor at the University of Alberta and an expert in education policy, said the Catholic educational community has not been well served by this kind of forceful opposition. “I think there’s a fairly strong segment within the Catholic church who wonder just exactly how this is in contravention of Catholic teaching.” The Catholic archbishop of Toronto, Cardinal Thomas Collins, last week accused Premier Dalton McGuinty of making religious freedom a “second-class right” after his government
introduced an amendment pushed by the New Democrats, removing a school’s veto over GSA clubs.

It is not clear whether church leaders will continue fighting. The Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario issued a tersely worded statement on Tuesday, saying that it has “serious concerns” regarding certain aspects of the legislation. Bullying in any form is “unacceptable,” the statement says, and Catholic partners will seek to foster safe and welcoming school communities “in a way that is in accord with our faith.” The Safe Schools Act, known as Bill 13, has not only created a rift between Catholic church leaders and the government. It has also left politicians bitterly divided.

The New Democratic Party supported the governing Liberals’ bill and the Progressive Conservatives voted against it. Mr. McGuinty suggested that the Tories were homophobic. His government, he said, is making a statement that discriminating against people based on their sexual orientation is not “honoured” in Ontario. “That’s where [the Tories] have a problem,” he said. Mr. Hudak told reporters that principals run the province’s schools and they should have a veto over students naming clubs.

**Catholic University’s lawsuit against the federal government is a matter of religious liberty**
by Lawrence Morris

*(The author is a contributor to The Washington Post’s faith leader network.)*

The Catholic University of America has joined dozens of Catholic institutions across the country in filing suit against the U.S. government because the administration has refused to take seriously our profoundly held conviction that the mandate from the Department of Health and Human Services intrudes on our constitutionally protected religious liberty by attempting to compel us to provide surgical sterilization and contraceptives to those whom we insure.
The HHS mandate means that, except for houses of worship that qualify for an extremely narrow exemption, all employers and institutions in this country—including every Catholic college and university (there are more than 200)—must provide contraceptives, some of which bring about abortions, to all to whom they offer insurance.

At The Catholic University of America, we have the right, with very few limits, to operate our private university inspired by our faith and consistent with that faith—a freedom that is even stronger because it is rooted in the First Amendment, the first 16 words of which guard against government action that would restrict people and organizations in the free exercise of their religious beliefs. Free exercise, the founders’ term, is much broader than “freedom of worship,” which would lock the First Amendment inside the walls of a church or synagogue and leave religious institutions such as ours out in the cold.

The Obama Administration undoubtedly would agree that we have been exercising our religious beliefs in our long-standing practice of not offering contraceptives through our health plans. Their position seems to be, however, that the government’s interest in guaranteeing free contraceptives to every citizen trumps our free exercise. But the law requires a “compelling interest” for the government to override the First Amendment this way, and if the government does establish such a compelling interest, then the government must use the “least restrictive means” to accomplish it. It takes little imagination to come up with less restrictive ways of providing contraception than converting religious organizations into agents of the state (for example, it could directly fund and distribute contraceptives or provide tax credits to purchasers or providers). The government should not decide what a legitimate religious belief is and when a citizen may act on those beliefs.

We are forthright when we say this controversy is not about contraception. We believe use of artificial contraceptives is wrong. But that’s not why we have filed the lawsuit. At its core, this dispute is about liberty, because our
civic health depends on the way policy gets made and how governmental power is restrained. If the administration had proposed to provide contraception directly, rather than funneling it through religious organizations, then we would simply disagree with the policy, pay our taxes and engage in the public debate. That is not the case here. The mandate violates the Constitution because it converts religious employers to servants of the state in providing drugs and services that it knows those employers oppose on religious grounds.

We cannot yield to a false choice—failing to offer health care to those we employ (which would violate our social gospel now, and the law next year) or not opening our doors to people of all faiths (which is against Christ’s teaching but is the only way to qualify for the administration’s eye-of-the-needle “religious exemption”).

In response to our objections, the administration proposed an “accommodation,” which would compel insurance companies directly to provide the contraceptive coverage. But this is Potemkin economics, because policymakers in Washington know well that insurance companies don’t and can’t fund anything on their own – they use the funds provided by those they insure (our faculty, staff and students) and those who subsidize that insurance (Catholic University, in the case of our faculty and staff). Therefore, accounting gimmicks aside, under the “accommodation” the university would still end up subsidizing contraceptives, abortifacients and surgical sterilization, would still be violating its religious tenets, and would still be acting as a hypocrite in front of its students—teaching one thing in this institution committed to truth, yet practicing another, crimping if not extinguishing the dialogue between faith and reason.

A couple of weeks ago, President Obama exhorted new graduates: “Don’t accept somebody else’s construction of the way things ought to be. It’s up to you to right wrongs. It’s up to you to point out injustice. It’s up to you to hold the system accountable . . . .” Having exhausted all our other options, we intend to follow the president’s advice. We’ve identified the injustice, and having failed to persuade the administration to reexamine its faulty
assumptions and decisions, we will attempt to hold the system accountable through the courts. We’re confident that the laws and the Constitution are on our side.

The Distinguished, Versatile, Almost- Never-Produced, One-Act Play

—Jack Marshall

Like its literary counterpart, the short story, the one-act play has a distinguished history. Indeed, one-acts provided some of the high points in 20th century American theater. Yet as the 21st is well underway, the fate of one-act plays is in doubt. True, they are popular in high schools and colleges, and there are well-attended one-act play festivals and competitions. And they will always be written, because you have to be able to write one act before you can write two. Nevertheless, in professional commercial theater, one-acts are considered box office poison—odd, because as full-length plays become ever shorter in response to the theater audience’s TV-conditioned mayfly level of concentration and patience, one would think that one-acts would be in the midst of a revival.

But no. Where once Broadway double-bills of one-acts like Stoppard’s After Magritte and The Real Inspector Hound, Peter Shaffer’s Black Comedy and White Lies, and, of course, Christopher Durang’s The Actor’s Nightmare and Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You were box office successes, now the form is virtually extinct on “The Boulevard of Broken Dreams.” Do you know how many one-act plays have been produced on Broadway since the 20th century breathed its last?

None. Not a single one.

T’was not always thus.
Many of the great dramatists wrote brilliant one-act plays in addition to their full-length plays. Anton Chekhov created hugely popular one-act farces like *The Wedding Proposal*, *The Anniversary*, and *The Bear*. George Bernard Shaw wrote several one-acts; even Gilbert and Sullivan have a popular one-act to their credit, *Trial by Jury*. Brit Harold Pinter became famous with his one-act, *The Dumb Waiter*; he also wrote *The Room, A Night Out, The Lover*, and many more. Sticking to the great playwrights across the pond, Samuel Beckett contributed *Endgame*, a one-act that is considered one of his most important works. Absurdist Eugene Ionesco usually worked in one act only, as in his most famous comedy, *The Bald Soprano*.

Here in the colonies, Eugene O’Neill wrote a series of seafaring one-acts in addition to the grim *Before Breakfast*, which ends in a suicide, and *Thirst*, which The American Century Theater produced, which ends with entire cast being eaten by sharks.

The other members of the U.S. Greatest Playwrights Ever Club also distinguished themselves with one-act successes. Tennessee Williams loved one-acts, and wrote an astonishing number of them. *Suddenly, Last Summer* is the most famous, because it was made into a film in 1959. Tennessee’s personal favorite was *The Frosted Glass Coffin*. Edward Albee burst on the theatrical scene with *The American Dream, Zoo Story*, and *The Sandbox*. Even Arthur Miller, who had a hard time saying anything in less than two acts, wrote *A Memory of Two Mondays*, and his successful hit, *A View From The Bridge*, began life as a one-act play.

Christopher Durang is a true throwback, a master of a form that has gone out of style with audiences, critics, and his contemporaries. Yet when one sees one of his one-act masterpieces, it seems like a one-act revival should be right around the corner.
An Open Letter to TACT Audiences

Dear Theater Lovers,

While you are enjoying *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, I will be working with TACT musical director Tom Fuller to prepare the most ambitious and, I think, important production The American Century Theater has undertaken since *The Andersonville Trial*. The show is *Marathon ’33*, and it combines all the elements of great American theater—drama, comedy, song, dance, perspective, discovery, and history—in a production unlike any we have ever attempted.

It is the fictionalized but authentic story of how movie star June Havoc (that’s right...“Baby June” from *Gypsy*) survived the Great Depression by competing in dance marathons, perhaps the most horrific and desperate form of entertainment ever permitted in the United States. Unemployed and hungry young competitors quite literally danced until they dropped, chasing the promise of a cash prize that went to the last couple left standing after a sadistic but musical endurance contests that could last many months. The dancers ate, washed, even had surgery while on their feet—with only one 15-minute break every hour—around the clock. Meanwhile, they were encouraged to sing and dance for pennies, thrown by spectators who bought tickets to watch them suffer.

This is an accurate recreation as much as a show. The audience will be immersed in the experience of the dance marathon spectators, and will be encouraged to cheer their favorite contestants, request songs, and enjoy the contest, if they can do so and keep their self-respect. The cast of over thirty features extraordinarily talented singers and dancers as well as TACT notables like Bruce Allan Rauscher (the space visitor from *Visit to a Small Planet*), Bill Karukas (Olsen in *Hellzapoppin’*) and—running the marathon—Craig Miller, last seen as the desperate father of *Little Murders*.)

*Marathon ’33*, by June Havoc, will open at Gunston Theater 2, re-christened The Silver Slipper Arlington Ballroom for the occasion, on July 27. If you see it, I guarantee you’ll never forget it, and it was a period of our nation’s past that we would all do well to remember.

*—Jack Marshall, Artistic Director*