The American Century Theater presents

Little Murders
by Jules Feiffer

Audience Guide
Written and compiled by Jack Marshall

January 13–February 11, 2012
Theatre Two, Gunston Arts Center
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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The Playwright: The Amazing Jules Feiffer

Eighty-two years old and still going strong, cartoonist/author/illustrator/screenwriter/satirist/social commentator/novelist/playwright/wit Jules Feiffer was born January 26, 1929, in the Bronx. At the age of 16, he won an art contest with a crayon drawing of the silent movie Western hero Tom Mix. From an early age, he knew that he wanted to be a cartoonist. After his goal had been achieved, he wrote:

I came to the field with a more serious intent than my opiate-minded contemporaries. While they, in those pre-super days, were eating up “Cosmo, Master of Disguise,” “Speed Saunders,” and “Bart Regan Spy,” I was counting up how many panels there were to a page, how many pages there were to a story—learning how to form, for my own use, phrases like: @X#?/, marking for future reference which comic book hero was swiped from which radio hero: Buck Marshall from Tom Mix, the Crimson Avenger from The Green Hornet.

He perfected his craft at the Art Students League of New York and Pratt Institute in New York City. At age 16, Feiffer became an assistant to artist Will Eisner, whose comic strip “The Spirit” appeared in Sunday newspaper comics sections and was one of Feiffer’s favorites. As Eisner recalled it:

. . . Feiffer walked in and asked me for a job and said he’d work at any price, which immediately attracted me. He began working as just a studio man—he would do erasing, cleanup . . . . . . Gradually it became very clear that he could write better than he could draw and preferred it, indeed—so he wound up doing balloons [i.e., dialog]. First he was doing balloons based on stories that I’d create. I would start a story off and say, “Now here I want the Spirit to do the following things—you do the balloons, Jules.” Gradually, he would take over and do stories entirely on his own, generally based on ideas we’d talked about. I’d come in generally with the first page, then he would pick it up and carry it from there.

When Feiffer asked for a raise, Eisner had a better idea: he offered him his own page in “The Spirit” section of the comics instead. There the 18-year-old Feiffer had the opportunity to create his first published comic strip,
“Clifford.” It was published in six newspapers until 1951, when Feiffer entered the Army.

In 1956, Feiffer submitted his portfolio to *The Village Voice*, a weekly “underground” newspaper published in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village. It was accepted, and he became a fixture with the paper, which became, along with its best cartoonist, a major cultural influence in the Sixties. Feiffer’s strips ran in *The Village Voice* for forty-two years, first under the title “Sick Sick Sick,” then as “Feiffer’s Fables” and finally as simply “Feiffer.” His favored style, later to be much imitated, was free and loose: sketchy drawings unmoored against a white background. Characters revealed themselves in fitful inner monologues, revealing the full range of their insecurities, hypocrisies, fears, fantasies, and dark recesses. Among his favorite targets have been the smug wealthy, the young true believers, and self-satisfied white liberals, who Feiffer once dubbed “the radical middle.” A collection of his strips in 1958 gave Feiffer a bestselling book: *Sick Sick Sick: A Guide to Non-Confident Living*.

Beginning in April 1959, Feiffer was distributed nationally by the Hall Syndicate, taking him beyond the coffee house crowd and placing his views on life in the more mainstream hands of the readers of *The Boston Globe*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *Newark Star-Ledger* and *Long Island Press*. They loved him too. “Sick, Sick, Sick” was followed by “Passionella, and Other Stories” in 1959. One of the characters in “Passionella,” Munro, a four-year-old boy who was drafted into the Army by mistake, became the hero of an animated cartoon that won Feiffer an Academy Award in 1961. The main character, Passionella, a parody of Cinderella in a Hollywood setting, later became one-third of the hit Broadway musical *The Apple Tree*, starring Barbara Harris.

Feiffer also wrote satirical revues for the stage, such as *The Explainers* (1961) and *Hold Me!* (1962), a one-act play, *Crawling Arnold* (1961), and three full-length plays—*Little Murders* (1967), *The White House Murder Case* (1970), and *Grown Ups* (1981). All are satires; all are immediately recognizable as unmistakably Feiffer. There have been novels, too: *Harry, the Rat with Women* (1963), *Ackroyd* (1977); and *The Great Comic Book Heroes* (1965). Among his several screenplays, the best known is *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), starring Jack Nicholson, Art Garfunkel, Candice Bergen and Ann-Margret, who won an Academy Award for her performance and revived her career. The director was longtime Feiffer admirer and
collaborator Mike Nichols, whose early comedy work with Elaine May hatched from a cultural egg adjacent to Feiffer’s. Perhaps to balance the depressingly dark view of humanity Carnal Knowledge conveyed, Feiffer began creating children’s books, both as the illustrator of the 1961 classic, The Phantom Tollbooth, and of kids’ books he wrote himself: I Lost My Bear (1998), Bark, George (1999), The House across the Street (2002), and A Room with a Zoo (2005).

The honors keep piling up. Little Murders won an Obie. Feiffer received a Pulitzer Prize in 1986. In 1995, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2004, he was inducted into the Comic Book Hall of Fame and also received the National Cartoonists Society’s Milton Caniff Lifetime Achievement Award. He received the Creativity Foundation’s Laureate in 2006 and was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Writers Guild of America.

Of late, Jules Feiffer serves as an adjunct professor at Stony Brook in Southampton. He had taught at the Yale School of Drama and at Northwestern University and was a Senior Fellow at the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program.

There is no evidence that Jules Feiffer’s deep creative well is in any danger of running dry.

The World of Little Murders
—Jack Marshall

The violent crime rate in New York City was slightly higher in 1967 than it is now. The difference, and it is a key one, is that in 1967 the crime rate was going up rapidly, and in 2010, it was falling. In 1965, New York, with a population of about 18 million, had 58,802 violent crimes and just 838 murders. By 1968, those numbers were 98,515 and 1,185; three years later, they hit 145,000 violent crimes with 1,230 murders. New York was becoming more violent. America was becoming more violent.
The assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 seemed to have wrenched America out of the comfy, if tense, Fifties and into a not-so-brave new world of guns, drugs, sex, Black Panthers, street gangs, and deteriorating respect for the law. There was a pervasive sense of dread: when assassins took away both Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy in 1968, the public was horrified, but perhaps not surprised. It was dangerous out there . . . a lot of hate, a lot of anger, and not a lot of solutions.

The popular culture reflected it. Violent movies were the rage: *Bonnie and Clyde, The Wild Bunch*, and others crossed lines of decorum that had previously only been violated in underground films. This was countered, predictably and ironically, by some of the most heartwarming and optimistic family classics ever made, like *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*. There was a sense that Americans knew how life was supposed to be, but no longer knew how to get there. Something was going to blow. You could feel it.

Insecurity and dread drives people crazy, and there was a lot of craziness in the culture too. Stanley Kubrick’s *Doctor Strangelove* was perhaps the prime example, a film that portrayed the U.S. government, the military, the scientific establishment, and foreign powers as deranged, incompetent, stupid, and frighteningly unconcerned about the human lives their foolishness placed at risk. The pervasive message was that Americans had no control over their own fates. A madman could pick off a savior. A drug-addled kid could shoot you as you walked to work, just for fun. Nobody had an answer, except to fight back . . . or to become part of the chaos before it destroyed you. We were all Slim Pickens, riding an atom bomb to Ground Zero. Slim made the best of it and went to his death with a loud “Wahoo!” Maybe that was the way to go. Crazy, but fun.

Into this mess was hurled New York’s Kennedy-clone mayor, John Lindsay. On his first day in office, January 1, 1966, the Transport Workers Union of America shut down the city with a complete halt of subway and bus service. The strike lasted twelve days and paralyzed New York. It was just the beginning. The schools were rotting, crime was increasing, the city was losing population and businesses . . . and was also broke. On the horizon were a sanitation strike that turned the city into a stinking hell hole, and even a Broadway strike. New York, always the symbol of American brashness, enterprise, guts, and achievement, was now the symbol of the American
dream curdling before our eyes. Outside the Big Apple were protests, riots, and the Vietnam War.

And that was the world of Jules Feiffer’s *Little Murders*.

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**Getting To Know Jules Feiffer**

*Excerpts from Gary Groth’s Interview with Jules Feiffer, originally published in The Comics Journal 124, 1988, and excerpted with its permission. Interviewer Gary Groth interviewed Jules Feiffer in an epic session for The Comics Journal. You can read Groth’s entire session with Feiffer, which touched on every aspect of his career as well as his political views, at [http://www.tcj.com/author/gary-groth/](http://www.tcj.com/author/gary-groth/) Here are some highlights of their exchanges, encompassing the evolution of his political views, his work in films, playwriting, and more.*

GROTH: Were your parents New Deal or were they socialist?

FEIFFER: They were New Deal. My father might have been a closet socialist, but it never came out. From the beginning, my older sister and I were always further to the left than my family.

GROTH: Well, can you trace how you think you came to your rather acidic perceptions of American life? Was it your upbringing? School?

FEIFFER: No, I can’t think of anything I ever got out of school, except—well, maybe—

GROTH: Rejection?

FEIFFER: Yeah. As I said, my family, one could describe them as New Deal liberals. But they weren’t very political. I mean, they had an automatic politics, an automatic bent. But I grew up in a generally left-wing neighborhood in the Bronx. My sister, in high school, was a member of all sorts of left-wing groups and eventually joined the Communist Party when she was older. And since I was closest to her, a lot of my political formation came in arguing with her, because I was not a communist, I wasn’t a socialist. So we fought a lot. I always lost. Never, ever in those years could you argue with a communist and win . . . .
GROTH: Well, it’s obvious to me at least that you’re not doctrinaire, and have never been, politically or ideologically or any other way. Now, was this a conscious decision?

FEIFFER: No . . . . I guess I’m not sure I even believe in conscious decisions. I think conscious decisions are the decisions you make after you’ve made up your mind. Viscerally . . .

GROTH: And how passionate was your commitment at that time to being a cartoonist?

FEIFFER: It’s never been anything but passionate. It started passionate at four or five, and it remained passionate all those years.

FEIFFER: I was never that big a fan of *Mad Magazine*. Because I was very political, *Mad* wasn’t. *Mad* was anarchic, I was on at least 1 1/2 sides. And I thought it was chickenshit not to take sides. So, being apolitical and saying plague on all your houses was to me saying that no one was to blame. When I thought that there were certain parties that you could blame. That Joe McCarthy was certainly to blame, that the blacklist was certainly to blame, that Eisenhower’s America was certainly to blame, that the Cold War was certainly to blame. And that the perniciousness of suburban living or advertising was secondary to the perniciousness of Cold War America, which was what my primary interest was in those years.

GROTH: It’s interesting that you should make that point, because in the ’50s you weren’t as overtly political as you are now. You were more of a broader, social-cultural critic.

FEIFFER: Well, yes and no. You’ll see as you go through the strips there’s a lot more politics than you may think . . . . as I said in *Feiffer’s America*, you couldn’t be around Eisenhower’s world without those people getting dragged into politics, because it was every part of that sense of muted isolation. It was a very significant part of one’s life. And that there was no political criticism going on. There was no real social criticism going on. It began with people like Mort Sahl and nightclubs. You couldn’t find it in pages of the *New Yorker* or anywhere else. And the *[Village] Voice* was the first publication to start letting people air their views even though they were uncommercial at the time . . . .
GROTH: Now, what about “Boom” and “Passionella?” What were the circumstances around those?

FEIFFER: Well, by that time I was working for schlock art houses of one kind or another, making a living, and experimenting with this work . . . . Yes, “Passionella” I wrote because I was already in the [Village] Voice. This was early days, and Pageant magazine approached me . . . . said they would give me 28 pages, and I could design a story for them. So, I decided that I would use that space to make a commercial reputation for myself, as opposed to the reputation I was getting in the Voice, doing this non-commercial work that was very nice, but publishers didn’t know how to market it. I thought I would write a very marketable story, which meant that it had to be about sex, which meant it had to be about someone with big tits, because Marilyn Monroe and Playboy and all that was very much part of the social context at the time. So I came up with the story of “Passionella” with total cynicism, thinking that I would do a fake satire that publishing people would confuse with a real satire. I would try to make it fake enough and slick enough so that I would get some work out of it. I didn’t, it worked perfectly. But because of my crass motivation going into it, for years I had very little regard for “Passionella” until sometime later I looked at it and realized that I liked it a lot, it was a lot better than I thought.

GROTH: How did you feel about working for Playboy, since you came more and more to dislike its philosophy?

FEIFFER: Well, the magazine had the best cartoonists on it, outside of the New Yorker, and often including the New Yorker. And in those years had livelier work, and I thought more interesting work than one could generally find in the New Yorker. Not more talented, but some of the same New Yorker talent would come and do better work for Playboy because of the editorial policies of the New Yorker. And, as far as my agreement or disagreement with the point of view of the magazine, I was operating as a dissident cartoonist. There wasn’t, outside of the Voice, a single newspaper in the country running me who I agreed with. If I was going to be proud to the point of suicide, I was not going to be ever known, or have a career, or do this work. So I felt it important to get in print wherever I was in print, and Playboy was by no means as objectionable to me as 90 percent of the newspapers who I was being syndicated in, who were considered mainstream. I mean, the mainstream I considered the foul stream, as Jesse Jackson might say.
GROTH: Can you distill what your main objections were to the *Playboy* philosophy?

FEIFFER: Well, yes, the girl on every arm. I don’t want to sound feminist before feminism, but that was truly dehumanizing, and I didn’t think of it as a feminist point, I thought of it as dehumanizing in terms of relationships. I’ve never understood the humanizing aspect of the gang bang. Or the positive aspects of the orgy. My own sexual orientation, compared to that of the magazine, is pure Victorian, and awfully prudish. So, that’s basically it. But that didn’t mean that I thought the magazine should go. It was a lively and entertaining publication, and I enjoyed looking at it. And I liked those tits.

GROTH: But Hefner was an astute critic?

FEIFFER: Absolutely. The most. He was the only astute cartoon editor I’ve ever had anything to do with. The only one.

GROTH: You mentioned something in *Feiffer’s America* that I wanted to ask you about, and that is, you say you were in psychotherapy, and you said “I scared myself by my anger and my politics.” You went on to say that you took full advantage of your sessions in psychotherapy. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that.

FEIFFER: None of this was particularly conscious, but what would come out of therapy in this kind of freewheeling association of conversation would sooner or later be introduced into the weekly strip. Not in the political cartoons, but in the personal, sexual, social ones. I would find my way to having views, opinions. For example, I never knew how much anger I had in me until I went into therapy . . . .

GROTH: I’m curious about your anger and how you channel it. Do you have a temper?

FEIFFER: No. I mean, not much of a temper. It comes out mostly in the work . . . .

GROTH: Could you describe how your political beliefs evolved over the period?

FEIFFER: Well, I don’t think they did that much. I think they were pretty much in shape by the time I was in my early 20s, and certainly by the time I was in the Army. They didn’t so much evolve as refine themselves.
GROTH: Right. You simply applied them to the changing times.

FEIFFER: No, I started writing plays which meant that I could stop writing articles. I was never comfortable. . . . So in fact, I think I stopped writing entirely for publication. . . . When I began writing for the theater, and discovered that this was what I really wanted to do, and loved it every bit as much, and often a lot more, than cartooning. When I wasn’t cartooning, I was writing plays, and there was no reason to do anything else. It takes me harder and longer, generally, to write a 2500-word article than it does to write the first act of a play.

GROTH: I recently watched *Carnal Knowledge* and *Grown-Ups*, in preparing for this, and if you don’t see *Carnal Knowledge* for a while, you forget how brutal, how emotionally draining it is, and the same is true *Grown-Ups*. It’s more brutal than *Platoon* in its way . . . . I laughed pretty often, but it was an uneasy kind of laugh.

FEIFFER: Oh, in the play too. Always. Of course that’s the kind of laugh it should be. That’s my kind of laugh. . . .

GROTH: Well, one imagines that after *Grown-Ups* or *Carnal Knowledge* that you must be one miserable son of a bitch at the end of the play . . . . To be able to sustain that kind of vitriol.

FEIFFER: Well, it’s just the opposite.

GROTH: It’s a purging?

FEIFFER: It is some kind of purging. It makes me very happy to do this work.

GROTH: Have you had to compromise substantially in your film career?

FEIFFER: We’re talking about something very different right here. My two essential art forms are the comic strip and the play. That’s where I write my organic material. In order to finance that, from time to time I will write screenplays. And I will write them almost never organically. I mean, all my cartoons are organic. All my plays are organic. Nobody comes and gives me
money to do this work. It just starts out and I do it, and I do it because I feel the need to do it. It’s my work of choice. I don’t do movies on speculation. Someone will come to me and say, “Would you be interested in this or that or the other?” And if I think, yes, I can write this, it might be fun for me, it would be engaging, and I can make several hundred thousand dollars, which would get me through the next year, then I will do it. But if it’s engaging, and I wouldn’t mind doing it, and it doesn’t involve the several hundred thousand dollars, I won’t do it. With the play, the several hundred thousand dollars never comes into question, because it doesn’t exist. Theater, for me, has been like the first eight years of the Village Voice. That I lose more than I make. But it’s an addiction, and I love it. And movies I love too, but not screenwriting, which is hardly an art form, or any form at all. The script is there at the discretion of the director. It’s not a collaborative medium. You have to please the director and that may or may not please you as a writer.

GROTH: Yeah. It would seem quite improbable to me that you could have compromised in Carnal Knowledge.

FEIFFER: No. But with [director Alan] Arkin on [the film of] Little Murders, there were all sorts of problems, although we had worked together very happily on the play. And it was by no means collaborative. He really wanted nothing to do with me. I had very little input into how that movie came out, and some of it is good and some of it isn’t.

GROTH: Were you generally pleased with the way it came out?

FEIFFER: No. I think that’s not his fault, entirely, it’s also mine. I made compromises on the screenplay that were not his idea, they were my own. I was inexperienced, and they were dumb ideas. But then there were things that were his fault. Some of his casting. The style of the film, which worked very well on stage, but wasn’t appropriate for film, I don’t think.

GROTH: Why should the writer be substantially more compromised by a film director than he is by a theatrical director?

FEIFFER: It’s the nature of the medium. The two mediums are very, very different. The theater is basically a writer’s medium. Or at least my theater is. There’s director’s theater and the theater that involves a written script by a member of the dramatists’ guild, and it’s not a pageant, and it’s not a dance. Theater as we know it. And it’s not avant-garde form, and it’s not open theater or living theater. It requires a playwright. And the playwright is first among equals in the collaborative process. In movies the screenwriter is third among equals, if that. First comes the director, then come the actors,
maybe next is the producer, although maybe the producer comes higher up. First comes the producer, then the director, then the actors. The writer is the guy who the director tells, “I need 20 seconds of dialogue to get them from the hotel lobby into the speeding car. And I don’t want them saying much, but it should be about when he’s going to get her into bed.” That’s about the size of it, and that’s about the dignity of it, as a screenwriter. The screenplays I’ve done aren’t like that, and they aren’t very often made. They’re paid for, and well paid for, and then they’re put on the shelf.

GROTH: What would you like to see? Would you prefer that the director should be subordinate to the writer?

FEIFFER: No. I love collaboration. It was great fun for me. I was a cartoonist, and only a cartoonist for thirty-seven years of my life before I wrote my first play, working in complete isolation. So much so that no one told me what to do. I didn’t have the comic book experience where there was an editor. Nobody ever told me to change this, nobody ever told me to change a line. Nobody would dare. You either took it or you didn’t. So to go into a field where other people had opinions and you had to listen to them, was a real challenge for me, and it turned out to be very exciting. And I loved it. I loved it when I was dealing with first-rate people who would affect my judgment and who would make me think differently, and whose arguments would make me revise my estimate of how things should be done. That was all new to me. One, that I didn’t mind it, and two, that I welcomed it, and three, that I could argue back when they were wrong. All of these things were new to me, I didn’t know that I could do any of that stuff.

GROTH: Cartooning is such a solitary activity.

FEIFFER: Yes, I think I was terrified of collaborating. I was terrified of competition in the first place. As I say, starting out as a failure as a boy, what you’re really talking about when you can’t play ball is that you can’t compete. That you don’t want to look bad. I’m sure I could have learned clumsily as well as others, how to do some of those things that I never bothered to learn because I had early failure and I wasn’t going to work at it until I got better at it. I just rejected it and that was pretty much my attitude through childhood on other things, including drawing and cartooning. I only wanted to do what I could right away. I didn’t want to have to do things that were hard. Hard was too hard. Hard was full of defeat. Hard was full of rejection. Hard was full of self-reproach and self-hate. There was enough self-hate operating within me under ordinary circumstances not to provoke even more by repeated failures at something I felt was beyond my ken, but
which might not have been, had I been able to apply a little more effort. So, I think that at least unconsciously, becoming the son of cartoonist I became, instead of the more traditional cartoonist, was because I felt I couldn’t compete as a more traditional cartoonist. I couldn’t do the slick thick and thin line. I couldn’t draw super-characters with ease and facility. I couldn’t do the work I thought I wanted to do. So, I believe, outside of the Army provoking me, I think that quality was my second choice. Not being able to really be as good as I wanted to at my first love, which would have been a daily strip, I had to invent another form for myself, within cartooning. That no one else could do, that I was the only one doing, so that, I couldn’t have any competitors. So nobody could be any better at it than I was. If I invented it, who was my competition? I mean, all competition had to be measured against me. I was making the mark. I’m not saying this was by any means a conscious choice. I think by a process of elimination, I just slipped into it….

GROTH: What prompted the transition? I mean, you were doing cartoons for x number of years, and then you obviously wrote the first play. What prompted you to enter the play form?

FEIFFER: Well, one, I was getting bored by the cartoon, and certainly bored by the drawing of it, the tracing. I mean, if you’d seen the drawings in those years, before I wrote *Little Murders*, the pizzazz was simply going out of the work, and the dialogue was getting wordier and wordier and I was beginning to look around for ways to expand. At the same time, I tried writing a novel called *Harry, the Rat with Women*.

GROTH: You succeeded.

FEIFFER: Yes, but by trying I mean that I tried being a novelist . . . . It took two years to write a very short book, and in those two years it was simply a struggle, although I felt I was on the trail of something and was determined to finish it, and did finish it. But once I finished, I thought this would be the end of it. I could never write another one, because I didn’t like it and I like having fun, I like having a good time. And then Second City in Chicago put on an evening of my cartoons, and Paul Sills, who was the director of the company, said these are all too short, it gets a little monotonous, maybe you can write something longer. And so I wrote overnight, when I was still living in Brooklyn Heights, a 25-minute sketch called *Crawling Arnold*. And it was easy. I wrote these characters and they were moving around and it was actable. It was great fun. And I didn’t think much more about it, until a few years later when I was trying to write *Little Murders* as a novel. Because I was trying to say things about post–Kennedy assassination America that it
seemed to me that nobody was talking about. And the decomposition of the structure of American society, and particularly of systems of authority, and that we were on the verge of a national nervous breakdown—that’s what my point was. I instead wrote 300 pages of bullshit that wasn’t going anywhere, and in order to salvage the material, I took it up to this writers’ and artists’ community in Saratoga Springs, and decided I’d try to dramatize it. Because that was the alternative to throwing it out. And after going over my original notes, I thought they were as good as the novel itself was bad, and that it would be wrong to give up on this. So I started the first act, and discovered that I was in love. From the first minute on, I was in love. That this was fun. And that I was having a great time. I was having a ball. I had not had such a ball since I began cartooning. So I knew that I wouldn’t stop whatever happened to the play. Another thing that kept me from wanting to write plays was that being a lifelong theatergoer, I knew that the plays I liked closed real fast, and the plays I didn’t like were hits. And so I knew that if I wrote a play I really liked it would probably close in a week, and I was not anxious to go into yet one more masochistic enterprise. But after the first day’s work, that was beside the point. When *Little Murders* opened—I’m never wrong about these things—it closed in a week.

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GROTH: How involved are you with your plays once the ball starts rolling?

FEIFFER: Oh, very closely in the beginning. I mean, in the casting, in the pre-casting, in the discussions of it. Madden was particularly important in *Grown-Ups*, in terms of re-writes. He’s as sharp as Nichols is in gauging a script and knowing what should and shouldn’t be done. And where rewrites are demanded. And he’s wonderful at explaining it to the writer. It’s interesting in these things, because so often, depending on how things are said, egos can be involved, his nose can be put out of joint. And I’ve been fortunate enough to work with at least two brilliant directors, Mike and John, who deal with the work as work . . . .

GROTH: Are you usually on the set during rehearsals?

FEIFFER: I find in my case that I like to be there for the first read-through, and then disappear and let them do their work for a couple of weeks, because if I’m there watching, it’s as if they were there watching me write my first draft. They are going through a first draft of a performance, which they are not going to keep, and there I am sitting there, thinking “That’s wrong!” Well, they know it’s wrong. It gets in everyone’s way. If I come back for the first run-through, there’s plenty of time to say that’s wrong. There’s plenty
of time to put in changes, there’s plenty of time to rewrite. There’s plenty of
time to do everything necessary. It’s at a good stage, where they are willing
to take criticism, and they want it, and they want my input, and the director
wants it, and the actors want it. And I feel I have a role to play, rather than
sitting passively there while actors figure out what they’re going to do. So
that’s when I generally come in. Two or two-and-a-half weeks in.

GROTH: Did a new career writing plays affect your cartooning at all?

FEIFFER: Yes, it made me like the cartoons again. Normally, the
assumption is that when you move out of cartooning into a second
profession which is taken more seriously, then you’ll forget the cartooning. I
found it was just the reverse. Because the more I got into theater the more
important retaining the cartoon became, the more serious I got about the
cartoon. I mean, I stopped for a while, I was just, if not hacking away at it,
taking it for granted and not really infusing it with any kind of fresh thought.
It was just meeting deadlines. The theater made the cartoon fun again. It was
a real release for me.

There is something. I don’t know how this is with other people, but there is
something that’s exciting to me about going from one form to another . . .

GROTH: Do they sort of creatively cross-pollinate each other?

FEIFFER: I don’t know . . . No. Well. The answer to that is a definite
maybe. That the energy from one feeds off into the other, but I have no
trouble stopping on a dime and getting into the style of one work, as opposed
to the other. I don’t get mixed up and I don’t find myself writing one way. I
don’t find myself confusing forms.

GROTH: Would you say there’s a great similarity between writing a play
and writing a cartoon—the way you write cartoons?

FEIFFER: No, not at all.

GROTH: Do you think your work has a concrete impact on people?

FEIFFER: You know, it’s a question I’ve been asked for years, and I’ve
never known how to answer. Clearly the answer seems to be yes, but I get
that in bits and pieces, and I get that a little bit here and a little bit there. But
in terms of some kind of massive reaction, or a hundred letters every week,
or applause as I walk down the streets, believe me, none of this exists.

GROTH: You’d think you change minds?
FEIFFER: I don’t know if I change minds, I think I have, because of the role I played and how earlier on it was, made it easier for other people to say what they thought when they thought they weren’t allowed to. The first reaction that I used to get, back in the ’50s, into the ’60s, was not “How much I love your work!” but “How did you ever get away with saying that?” I mean, people would say, “You think the way I think. I didn’t know that was allowed in print.” And by getting it to print, that seemed to be a license for encouraging and for stabilizing and perhaps enlarging those weird eclectic left-lib principles, but also social and sexual observations that I’ve seemed to stand for over a period of years. So, yes, in that way I have an effect. A South African poet exiled from his country told me that a Capetown paper used to run the cartoons, and he and his black friends couldn’t figure out why the hell they were running them, because they clearly didn’t understand what they were running. It made them feel terrific. Well, if it made them feel terrific, it made me have a function. And that was a glorious piece of news to hear about my work, all the way over there. A friend told me once about a father who had a kid in trouble because of a death in the family, and the kid had a hard time recovering from the death, showed him a cartoon I had done, where a kid talks about having to watch his parents all the time, because he thinks they’re going to die. He’s afraid to go to school because he thinks his parents will run away. The kid was convinced that the cartoon was about him. And when he was told that, no, the parents didn’t know me, and it was that other kids also feel that way, it seemed to relieve the situation. I mean, hearing that stuff is very important to me.

Sondheim, Revivals, and Responsibility

—Jack Marshall

Revivals are what keep theater alive; reinterpretation is renewal.

With that, musical theater icon Stephen Sondheim begins his reflections on what is an increasingly important issue to him as an artist—for revivals of Sondheim shows now define his legacy—and the core reason for this company’s existence.
Sondheim’s opinions on new productions of old works come in the middle of volume two of his memoirs, *Look, I Made a Hat*, which he argues are not memoirs, but never mind. They are a wonderful record of quality thinking—open, critical, fair, illuminating—about the art of making theater by one of its most exacting and successful craftsmen. His comments on bringing older works back to the stage were especially welcome here, not just because Sondheim is for it, but because he reaffirmed many of The American Century Theater’s operating artistic assumptions.

One, perhaps the most important, is that reviving a show is a great responsibility for a company, a director, and a cast. A misbegotten revival can kill a show, Sondheim cautions, and not just that production, but for all time. We feel that responsibility whenever we choose a show to produce that has been absent from the stage for many years, and often decades. It is terrifying, to tell you the truth. Every time the American Century Theater shows an audience a play like *Little Murders*, a play that has largely been discarded by the theater and critical community as “dated” or no longer worth watching, we are making the argument that everyone else is wrong—that the playwright’s work had and has lasting value, and that our culture and the nation’s collected intellectual and entertainment resources will be significantly diminished by that work fading to permanent obscurity. As Sondheim points out more than once, a play isn’t like a movie, a book, or a painting, which continues to exist in completed form and can be experienced at any time. A play doesn’t exist until it is produced with live actors in front of an audience: scripts aren’t plays. There are terrific scripts that make lousy plays and scripts that read horribly but create great theater. You have to put it on stage to see what the play really is.

And when a script that has been neglected or unproduced for generations suddenly is reconstituted as a full stage production? That is a second chance at life, and often a last chance. It is almost unfair: the playwright, usually long-dead (though Jules Feiffer is very much with us) has no control over the future of his work, which will rest on the ability of strangers to realize his or her play’s virtues and win the argument by proving that the play deserves to live on.

Sondheim writes that bad shows only get revived once, but that is a tautology: The American Century Theater believes, indeed *knows*, that there are shows looked upon by the theater community as “bad shows” that are not
only not bad, but may in fact be great shows that people have never seen at their best. When The American Century Theater produced *Moby Dick Rehearsed* in its second season, Orson Welles’ failed experiment had been unproduced professionally for decades and had the near unanimous reputation of being a botched oddity. Our production made some key tweaks to allow Orson’s idea to bloom, and it became the company’s most successful drama yet. But more importantly, other companies read about the show’s success, consulted with TACT, and performed it successfully themselves. It is no longer hard to find professional productions of *Moby Dick Rehearsed* around the country, and it didn’t take a Broadway revival to make the case that it was not a bad show, but a great one. It just took a respectful and effective one, by a small regional theater performing in a converted library in Arlington, Virginia.

Sometimes, we lose the argument. Because the lasting value of a play can only truly be assessed after it has been placed on stage before an audience, there are times when it is obvious that play or musical no longer has the entertainment or enlightenment value that it once did. Art does age, and time is the ultimate test of great art. *King Lear* is still devastating; *The Pirates of Penzance* is still a romp; *Treasure Island* is still thrilling and *Alice in Wonderland* is as weird and wonderful as ever. But who can read James Fennimore Cooper anymore? Or laugh at the moldy jokes on the classic radio show, *Fibber McGee and Molly*?

“Sometimes seeing a play afresh is seeing how much staler it is than was previously thought,” Sondheim writes. True enough, but it is often difficult to tell whether it was the play that failed, or the director and production that failed to discover the heart of brilliance so many forgotten works have within them still.

These older American works, like *Little Murders*, are precious. In a sense they are time capsules, allowing us to witness and understand the social, cultural, and political themes and controversies that shaped past generations and, though them, ours. They are also raw material that can become either memorable theatrical experiences that add prestige and glory to the memories of the artists who created them, or sad markers of changing tastes and sensibilities. The frightening truth is that often those polar outcomes will rest less on a stage work itself than on our ability to do it justice.

Reinterpretation is renewal, as Mr. Sondheim says. It is also responsibility.
We’re glad you could join us for *Little Murders.*
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