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Playbill for A Raisin in the Sun with insert essay 'Sweet Lorraine'

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[[image]]

Tyne Daly in her last Broadway outing in Terrence McNally's Master Class; Daly returns to the stage this season in the Broadway debut of McNally's latest, Mothers and Sons
Photo by Joan Marcus

The McNally Actor
By Terrence McNally

Nothing is more dependent on its interpreters than a new play. We look at a painting, we listen to music, we read a novel but we experience a play through its performance in a theatre.

For a play, its first performance is everything. No one knows that better than the playwright. Unless the stars are in perfect alignment—the actors, director, designers, producers—a new play's chances of success, let alone a second production, are dim. The dustbins are full of once-new plays that, had they been better realized in their first incarnation might still be remembered, even performed. I probably have written one or two of them. I'm hoping Mothers and Sons won't be one of them.

Having an actor like Tyne Daly in the role of Katharine Gerard, a role I wrote for her, but with no guarantee that she would agree to play it, was my best bet that the play I heard in my head was the play that would be heard at the John Golden Theatre. It wasn't just Tyne's voice I was writing for: it was her sensibility and her soul, as well. I know what makes her laugh; I like to think I know what makes her deeply care, as well.

From the first rehearsal of the recent revival of Master Class I knew that I had found in Tyne an actor who understood my rhythms and embodied the passions and conflicts that fueled those rhythms. I call them "McNally Actors" and when I find one, I never let them go.

Mothers and Sons is cast top to bottom with them. I have long been in Frederick Weller's thrall, but never more so than after working with him on Some Men at Second Stage; it was just a matter of time before I would write for him again. He just had to come back from the West Coast to where he belongs, the theatre. Bobby Steggert is on everyone's short list of Best of His Generation; working with him on the revival of Ragtime was the beginning of writing the part of Will Ogden with everything that crossed [that] he would one day play it. And although he's too young to know what I mean by a "McNally

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Actor," Master Grayson Taylor already is. He is making his debut in exalted company, and the grown-ups are very proud he is.

My dialogue is words on a page until actors like these bring them to life in real time and space. Theatre is three-dimensional; literature is two.

I have long held that Shakespeare was writing for an extraordinary company of actors at the Globe. Great roles like Hamlet, Lear, or Othello are inconceivable without a great actor to at first inspire and then



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embody them. The plays belong to all of us now, but it was actor Richard Burbage who introduced the Danish prince, the foolish king, and the jealous Moor to the world. He made the footprint by which actors in these roles have been measured ever since. Kathy Bates did the same for Frankie and Johnny in the *Clair de Lune*; Nathan Lane has done it for every play of mine he has ever touched. True collaborators bring out the best in each other.

[[image]]
Terrence McNally

Over the more than half-century I have been writing plays—And Things That Go Bump in the Night, 1965, next door at the Royale, now the Jacobs [was the first on Broadway], don't ask how it went—great actors have inspired me. Of course they would if your first experiences in the theatre as a child were mine: Ethel Merman in *Annie Get Your Gun* and Gertrude Lawrence in *The King and I*. And then as a student at Columbia you saw Lawrence Olivier in *The Entertainer* and *The Lunts* in *The Visit*. Soon after there were Uta Hagen in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and George C. Scott and Colleen Dewhurst in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Great musicals, great plays, yes, but great actors giving expression to them and making them indelible for anyone fortunate enough to have been there.

The decisive performance of my college years took place on a rainy afternoon in Stratford-upon-Avon when a little-known play of Shakespeare's, *All's Well That Ends Well*, was enjoying a revelatory revival by great English director, Tyrone Guthrie. It starred the grandest dame of the London stage, Edith Evans. I can still see her. I can still feel her. I can still smell her—all lavender sachet—that's how palpable was her presence. Even today, 55 years later, I smell that scent and remember her as vividly as an actor I saw last week.

But there's another reason I remember that afternoon. Also in the cast was a young unknown Australian actress, making her British debut, Zoe Caldwell. Her performance went directly to my nervous system and stayed there. She became part of my theatrical DNA. The energy, the generations of theatrical history, and the ineffable poetry that flowed between this legend of the British stage and this new-comer from the furthest reaches of its Empire stopped my breath. I decided then and there I would be a playwright in search of actors like this to tell my stories.

I came back for my final year at Columbia and started writing plays. There was always a part for Zoe in them, great parts, I thought.

It would be 34 years and *A Perfect Ganesh* before that was to be. And it took the experience of *Ganesh* for me to write the part for Zoe I had always wanted to write, but didn't know how to yet: Maria Callas in *Master Class*. Subconsciously I began that play in 1959 in Stratford. It took me 36 years to finish it. I'm glad Ms. Daly and her fellow actors have not had to wait as long as Ms. Caldwell.

I write plays with parts for great actors—sometimes, I realize, at the expense of story. (Maybe that's why some of the plays aren't so great but I've always been more interested in people than story.)

In one of the first great plays, Oedipus Rex, plot and character are one and the same. It is the elusive, double bulls-eye every playwright strives for, every play. I've got the actress, I've got the cast, so maybe this time.

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