



## The Final Straw

Producing James Purdy at the Trinity Square Rep

—VALLERI J. HOHMAN

In an address at the National Educational Theatre Conference in 1986, Oscar Brockett stated, “Few artistic directors have shown the nerve that Adrian Hall did in 1976 at the Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence when, following an extremely controversial season, his board sought to fire him. Responding that it wits [was] him who had founded and built the company, Hall dismissed the board and replaced it with one more sympathetic to his work.”<sup>1</sup> That same year, an article about Hall’s career featured in *Time* magazine also commented on his “showdown with the Trinity board, which had grown impatient with his explicitly erotic work, especially an adaptation of the James Purdy novel *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*.”<sup>2</sup> The author also noted that Hall was able to replace the board with “backers of his vision.”<sup>3</sup> The event solidified Hall’s status as a renegade theatre director and served for some theatre artists and historians as a great example of art, especially revolutionary and controversial art, in triumph over the establishment. Although the event has been mentioned sporadically, its role in strengthening Hall’s position at the Trinity Rep and solidifying the theatre as part of the Providence community has not been fully explored.

While claim of triumph was true, it was a complicated success that required Hall’s own form of adaptation and collaboration with members of the so-called establishment. Through this event, Hall’s project of staging unique American voices and his devotion to this theatre company become clear, although, in the aftermath, the notion that Hall found “backers for his vision” is less clear. The event was necessary for the theatre to become a vital aspect of the community, as it enabled Hall to part with a board of directors with which he was in constant conflict, and to stabilize his company.

It certainly was not the best time to produce *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, but Hall did it anyway. The financial situation was bleak. The board of directors had grown nervous and was frustrated with the artistic director, both for his lack of financial skill and for his unconventional approaches to production and sometimes shocking choice of material. The board had already tried to remove him in 1970 after his controversial production about Charles Manson.<sup>4</sup> Hall knew the board viewed him as uncompromising and reckless;<sup>5</sup> nevertheless, he staged the adaptation of Purdy's novel to end the 1975-76 season.

Hall knew that controversy had always surrounded the work of James Purdy, whose earliest attempts at publication in the 1950s were met with acerbic rejection. Although his works have been praised by Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Dorothy Parker, and others, Purdy's subjects as well as his portrayals of them have often been the targets of hostility. His surreal, allegorical novels depict fratricide, crucifixions, and the most repellent kinds of violence with vivid detail. To be sure, Purdy wants to horrify and repel people, to upset and disturb our anesthetized lives, but never for simple shock value, for the most extreme disturbances serve multiple narrative and symbolic purposes, often meant to critique the fact of violence in American life and history. The violence arises inevitably from the desperate actions of characters near the brink of total destruction in a land of bloody beginnings, fierce interracial tensions, and expansionist longings.

The strong reactions to the adaptation centered on the display of male nudity and homosexuality, the graphic depiction of an abortion, and the violent acts of a sadistic army captain. As one radio reporter stated, "The ingredients that go into this . . . if just stated here . . . would probably convince many of you [that] the people at Trinity have finally flipped."<sup>6</sup> In spite of this introduction, the reporter concluded, "*Eustace Chisholm and the Works* is, in many ways, one of the best things Trinity has done."<sup>7</sup> Another reviewer called it Hall's masterpiece.<sup>8</sup>

*Eustace Chisholm and the Works* centers on a group of transients whose lives intersect with that of the struggling poet Eustace Chisholm.<sup>9</sup> Set in Depression-era Chicago, the novel focuses on the impossible love of Amos Ratcliffe, a young intellectual transplanted from a small town in southern Illinois, and his rough landlord, Daniel Haws, a former West Virginia coal miner of Native American and Anglo-American ancestry.<sup>10</sup> Daniel, who has up to this time only been involved in heterosexual relationships, including one with the artist-prostitute Maureen O'Dell, cannot accept his love for Amos. Daniel sleepwalks naked to Amos in the night, but in the daylight he "scrubs himself clean as only a man

who hates himself can” and communicates his self-hatred and disgust through violent gestures and speech.<sup>11</sup>

Daniel’s was not the only nudity onstage, but it had a different character and purpose than subsequent moments. While others often appeared nude in relation to sexual acts (though there were no simulated sex scenes), Daniel’s nudity is viewed as more spiritual than sexual. Other instances of nudity involved sexual encounters meant to provide contrast with Daniel and Amos’s spiritual relationship. While most reviewers simply made note of the nudity, which was not unusual at the Providence theatre, others were indignant, most often because the nudity was related to the open discussion of non-heteronormative sexual practices. Reviewer Arline Aissis proclaimed, “With all the finesse of a backstreet porno house and the trite dramatics of an afternoon soap opera, Trinity took what seems to be a dime-store novel and attempted to turn it into theatre.”<sup>12</sup> She later refers to the piece as “an underground skin flick.”<sup>13</sup> Elliot Norton called one moment “more than slightly disgusting.”<sup>14</sup>

But the nudity was only a small part of the objection to the piece. Audiences, even those who celebrated the production, felt they had undergone a devastating experience. The most striking and horrific moment of the piece was presented in a scene in which Amos accompanies Maureen to get an abortion. It is a harrowing depiction of a back-alley abortion that serves to complicate the narrative and work symbolically on multiple levels.

In the production, Hall staged a grotesque nightmare exaggerating the horror of this unsafe, though necessary, operation through the comic actions of the abortionist and the oversized instruments for the procedure. The critics wrote more about this scene than any other moment of the play. Samuel Coale wrote, “Maureen . . . undergoes a vivid, screaming, shocking abortion, a scene that stuns the audience, staggers the senses.”<sup>15</sup> Elliot Norton noted that some audience members “fought off nausea and wondered what the good Trinity Square Repertory Company, which has done so many good things, is trying to prove.”<sup>16</sup> This scene, more than any other, generated the most passionate reactions. It occurred before the intermission, after which many did not return.

Reviewers wrote much less about the physical violence in the play, though the progressive abuse of Daniel by an army captain constitutes a major portion of the second act. One of the few reviewers to discuss it explicitly wrote: “The Indian landlord flees to the Army as protector and is savaged by the crazed, power-struck Captain who abuses him, violates what selfhood he has left, and murders him one thunder-rumbling, lightning flashing evening in the swamps of Mississippi in a ritualistic act of sacrificial murder and revenge. Love has

turned to hate, wit to violence, the dance to stunned sleepwalking staggering.”<sup>17</sup> What is clear is that the production attacked the sensibilities of the audience, stunned and horrified them. The same critic warned, “You may be repulsed but you will not remain unaffected.”<sup>18</sup>

The adaptation and production of the novel reveal a great deal about Hall’s project of creating “an American theatre dominated by American authors.”<sup>19</sup> Just as Chisholm was trying to learn what it meant to be a writer in America, Hall was, as he put it, “finding himself” and his distinctive voice as an artist, and he, too, was drawn to the lives of those living in the margins of American society.<sup>20</sup> Hall was especially drawn to intersections of violence, extreme attitudes about sex and sexuality, and powerlessness. In 1970 he created a work about Charles Manson and the Manson family, which led to community protests and attempts to censor the work. In 1973 he presented an adaptation of Robert Penn Warren’s poem *Brother to Dragons*, based on the brutal murder of a slave by the nephew of Thomas Jefferson. In 1983 Hall adapted and staged *In the Belly of the Beast*, based on the letters between the convicted murderer John Henry Abbott and Norman Mailer. The play was an indictment of the American prison system and the violent behavior it breeds. Clearly, part of his program of giving a voice to Americans was a depiction of violence and suffering as a continuous element of the American experience. His theatre could be a place where American nightmares, as well as American dreams, might be explored.

Unfortunately, the board of directors did not share Hall’s vision of the theatre, especially if it meant exploring the dark side of human behavior in explicit or shocking terms. For them the theatre was a civic institution meant to bring prosperity and recognition to the city. Providence was a city in transition. Mass suburban migration, the collapse of several major industries, and the failure of many businesses in the 1950s and 1960s had created a desolate downtown. According to the city’s Web site, “In the census of 1950 the city had a population of 248,674; by 1970 that figure had dwindled to 179,116—the largest proportionate out-migration (28 percent) of any major city in the United States.”<sup>21</sup> In the early 1970s the city had a predominantly lower-income population.

In the 1970s, city leaders had begun to implement plans to revive the city, and a rich, cultural life was part of that revitalization plan. Between 1975 and 1982, \$606 million of community development money along with millions in private donations and federal and state funds would be applied toward the city’s regeneration.<sup>22</sup> An established, prestigious regional theatre would signify that the city was healthy and growing. It would help attract elite business leaders to the area so that the city would thrive. But two things were needed for the Trinity Square Rep to help establish Providence: financial stability and a reputa-

tion for respectable, high-quality art. A focus on marginalized American populations, recurrent depictions of non-heteronormative sexuality, and critiques of America's violent nature would hardly serve to bolster *either* goal. While Hall was certainly not opposed to creating an institution that would help the city thrive, he was interested in developing theatre that seemed necessary and vital to the city that was, not the city that could be.<sup>23</sup>

Another complication in the conflict between the board and Hall centered around a program known as Project Discovery, which was initially funded by the U.S. Office of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts. Under this program, the Trinity Square Repertory Company presented several of its productions each season to high school groups from around the state. Initially, the project was meant to help high school students connect to classic dramatic literature, but Hall had noticed that the students were bored and restless during the productions.<sup>24</sup> Hall switched gears: "We couldn't hang back and do what had been done, do polite productions of Shaw. I had to get in there and find out, go further. And it had to be full of hostility; full of pain and anguish and beauty. It had to be flung out there in ways that surprised them, shocked them, and scared them."<sup>25</sup>

This approach eventually led to controversy. When the company presented the piece on Charles Manson, several high schools withdrew their participation in the project, and, as noted earlier, the board tried to oust Hall. While *Eustace Chisholm* was not offered for student audiences, and the advertising strongly advised that the production was "for mature audiences," it must have been difficult for educators, administrators, and community leaders to reconcile support for a theatre with a growing reputation for shocking its audiences with sex, violence, and politically charged material.

Additionally, Trinity had been struggling financially for some time. According to Hall, he was "constantly in hot water with the Board, mostly because of money things," which was probably the major cause of anxiety for the board.<sup>26</sup> So, when *Eustace Chisholm* stirred up controversy among the community, the board saw its opportunity to part with Hall. When the board announced its decision to dismiss Hall, the actors and many of the staff walked out of the theatre, refusing to work unless Hall was reinstated. Taking advice from Joseph Papp, Hall asserted his own authority to fire the board.<sup>27</sup> An arrangement was later made that enabled Hall to keep his position and to rent the theatre building from the board.

Even with support from actors, members of the academic community, and theatre artists from around the country, Hall had to deal with a significant financial problem that would likely have halted the operations of the theatre re-

ardless of the other factors. Hall hoped to raise the money by creating a new board of directors with strong connections to the business community. Apparently, the immediate issue was that the theatre owed \$65,000 to the federal government for worker's compensation taxes.<sup>28</sup> When Hall went to Bruce Sundlun, a prominent lawyer and former prosecutor in Providence (who would later become governor of Rhode Island), he was informed that this financial problem was not simply a tax issue but a criminal one with legal ramifications. This revealed the degree of financial negligence and fiscal irresponsibility that must have made the previous board so nervous. This must also have clarified for Hall the relationship between financing and artistic freedom.

A brief anecdote of the first encounter between Hall and Sundlun challenges the usual interpretation of Hall's revolutionary defeat of the establishment. According to Sundlun, he initially refused to help.<sup>29</sup> He had heard about a play Hall directed that had featured masturbation, but this was not the primary deterrent. He simply was not impressed with the young man who had arrived in a T-shirt and khakis to discuss business. "He looked like he was dressed for bed, not for business," Sundlun recalled.<sup>30</sup> He sent Hall away, then left for lunch. Upon his return, he was startled to see, standing in his office, Adrian Hall dressed in a double-breasted suit, polished shoes, hair combed back. Hall addressed him, "You want me to play the part of the businessman? I can do that. Role-playing is my business." Stunned, Sundlun agreed to chair the board and help the company out of its financial crisis. This story indicates that Hall, who was often considered anti-establishment and uncompromising, was neither. He was aware that the theatre could not survive without the involvement of prominent leaders of the community. He was willing to adapt in order for his company, a close-knit group of remarkable talent, to continue to thrive. It also became clear that Sundlun was impressed with Hall as an artist. He had little respect for Hall as a businessman, but he revered him as an artist and soon helped make it possible for Hall to focus his energies exclusively on the artistic side of the theatre.<sup>31</sup>

The notion that Hall created a board more sympathetic to his mission is suspect. Under Sundlun's leadership, the board supported Hall's artistic leadership and viewed him as a world-class director, though it would not likely have supported a production like *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* any more than the previous board did. Sundlun had little to say about what plays Trinity staged, though he did mention that he did not want it doing overtly sexual plays, and he must have had some influence.<sup>32</sup> It was also clear that Sundlun saw the Trinity Square Repertory Theatre as an attraction meant to strengthen the prominence

and cultural life of the city; therefore he, too, would prefer less-controversial material. The primary difference between the new and the old board, ultimately, is that the new board could significantly contribute to fund-raising, and therefore worry a little less about the artistic programming. With the serious legal and financial issues worked out, the board had less fear and need to control the artistic director's decisions.

In 1976, the company proceeded with a large endowment, and soon, with Sundlun's leadership and Hall's ability to focus on the artistic rather than financial aspects of the theatre, the company was firmly established as a world-class cultural institution. The 1976–77 season featured more popular comedies and fewer scathing American voices, though a provocative *King Lear* helped continue Hall's exploration of individuals in a world that promotes extreme hatred and violence, albeit in a less-controversial form. Hall continued to experiment with these themes, to stage the underprivileged, unheard voices in America, though without the shock created by his adaptation of *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*. Now, he had the support of a board that respected his artistic leadership, worried less about the company's financial future, and worked with him rather than against him to promote the theatre as a civic and cultural institution.

### Notes

1. Oscar G. Brockett, "Special Reprint from Vol. 7: The American Theatre, 1961–1986," *Theatre History Studies* 20 (2000): 17–33, quote on 20.
2. William A. Henry, "A Man for Parallel Seasons," *Time*, March 17, 1986, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,960896,00.html>.
3. Ibid.
4. Jeannie Marlin Woods, *Theatre to Change Men's Souls* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993), 62.
5. Adrian Hall, interview by the author, January 9, 2008.
6. All News WEAN, "The Final Play," Trinity Square Repertory Theatre Archive.
7. Ibid.
8. Tony Angevine, "Farthest Out Yet for Adrian Hall," *Bristol Phoenix Times*, April 15, 1976, Trinity Square Repertory Theatre Archive.
9. James Purdy, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (1967; reprint, New York: Carroll and Graf, 2005); Adrian Hall and Richard Cumming, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, unpublished adaptation.
10. Several characters suggest this by asking Daniel about his "Indian blood," which he denies, but in an interview with Christopher Lane, Purdy clears up any confusion when he calls Daniel "a young man who is really an Indian chief." Christopher Lane, "Out with

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- James Purdy: An Interview," *Critique* 40, no. 1 (1998): 75. Purdy has stated that his own maternal great-grandmother "was said to be part Indian." "Purdy, James," <http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/jumpstart.jhtml?r>.
11. Purdy, *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, 66.
  12. Arline Aissis, "Eustace Chisholm: A Trinity Clunker," *Narragansett Times*, April 8, 1976, Trinity Square Repertory Theatre Archive.
  13. Ibid.
  14. Elliot Norton, "Eustace Is Ugly at Trinity Square," *Boston Herald American*, April 16, 1976.
  15. Samuel Coale, "Eustace Chisholm: Surrender to the Nightmare," *The East Side*, April 8, 1976, Trinity Square Repertory Theatre Archive.
  16. Norton, "Eustace Is Ugly at Trinity Square."
  17. Coale, "Eustace Chisholm: Surrender to the Nightmare."
  18. Ibid.
  19. Quoted in William P. Hutchinson, "Trinity Square Repertory Theatre, 1976-1977 Season," *Educational Theatre Journal*, March 1978, 122-24.
  20. Hall interview.
  21. "Three and One-half Centuries at a Glance," <http://www.providenceri.com/history/centuries2.html>.
  22. Ibid.
  23. See Woods, *Theatre to Change Men's Souls*, 33.
  24. Ibid., 33-41.
  25. Quoted in *ibid.*, 38.
  26. Hall interview.
  27. Ibid.
  28. Governor Bruce Sundlun, interview by the author, January 15, 2008.
  29. Ibid.
  30. Ibid.
  31. Sundlun said in an interview that he "made" Hall put Tim Langham, who had impressed Sundlun, in charge of the business management. It must have helped that Langham, who had accompanied Hall to this meeting, supported Hall's artistic leadership and may have helped alleviate the friction between Hall and previous general managers. Ibid.
  32. Sundlun objected to "masturbation" plays. Ibid.



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