

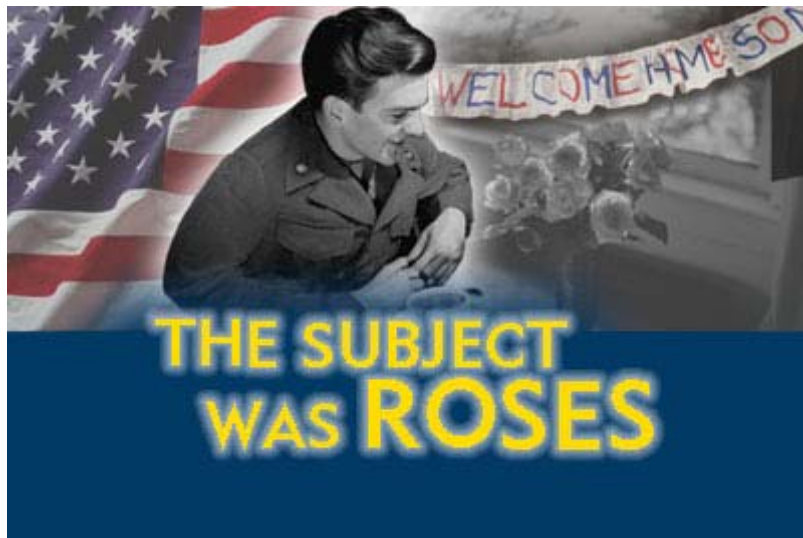
PITTSBURGH PUBLIC THEATER



THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES

by Frank D. Gilroy

Directed By Rob Ruggiero



STUDY GUIDE

A study guide to Pittsburgh Public Theater’s production of

The Subject Was Roses

by Frank D. Gilroy

January 22 – February 22, 2004

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Prepared by Angela Vincent. Additional support and materials provided by Kyle Brenton, Matthew Burtner, Lucas Fredland, and Kelly Yann.

***Articles reprinted from the Jean Cocteau Repertory *The Subject Was Roses* Study Guide (2001) with permission from Producing Artistic Director, David Fuller.**

***The Subject Was Roses* Synopsis**

by Kyle Brenton

The Subject Was Roses is Frank D. Gilroy's Pulitzer Prize-winning portrait of a family teetering on the brink of disaster. It is Saturday morning in the Cleary home—a small apartment in the Bronx—and John and Nettie Cleary are cleaning up the mess left over from the previous night's party. Their son, Timmy, returned just yesterday from World War II, and they all celebrated just a bit too hard. A very hung-over Timmy emerges, and Nettie is hurt when he can't remember what his favorite breakfast was before he left—waffles, which she has painstakingly prepared for his first morning home. This crisis blows over, and John and Timmy head off to a Giants game while Nettie goes to visit her mother.

The boys return a few hours later with a bouquet of roses that Timmy bought for his mother. Nettie comes home and Timmy tells her that John had remembered that her father always sent her roses on her birthday, and that dad had thoughtfully picked up a dozen for her while they were out. John doesn't deny it, and Nettie is deeply touched that her usually inattentive husband would be so sweet. The family happily heads out to dinner and a night on the town. In the wee hours of the morning they return, each at least three sheets to the wind. Timmy retires and John, feeling frisky, tries to take Nettie off to the bedroom. She angrily rebuffs him, insisting that she's not one of his "hotel lobby whores," and in her fury she hurls the vase of roses to the floor. Enraged and confused, she asks him what has happened to their marriage, and he frigidly informs her that he didn't buy her the roses—Timmy did.

At breakfast the next morning, it becomes clear that, while John is happy to have his son home, he also resents the special treatment he is receiving as a veteran—the kind of treatment to which John never had access. John tells his son to get ready for Mass, but Timmy doesn't want to go; he hasn't been to a service in two years, and while he insists he hasn't become an atheist, he's not sure what he believes anymore. John is livid, and when Nettie takes Timmy's side in the argument, John storms out of the apartment, furious at their alliance against him. When mother and son get into an argument over John's behavior, Nettie coldly thanks Timmy for the roses and leaves, presumably to go to her mother's.

Twelve hours later, John returns home to find that Timmy is drunk and Nettie has vanished—she never reached her mother's apartment. Father and son begin arguing—about Timmy's sudden drinking habit, about John's selling the family's lake house, about whatever topic is convenient—and finally John slaps his son in the face. As Timmy gets back up, Nettie returns to the apartment.

The Subject Was Roses Synopsis continued

She insists that she's been at the movies for the last twelve hours, but John refuses to believe her. As their argument escalates, Timmy gets sick from all his drinking and rushes to the bathroom, prematurely ending the fight.

At two a.m. Monday morning, neither Timmy nor Nettie can sleep. Timmy tells his mother that he's decided to leave home. She understands, and tells him about his father as a young man—vital, vibrant, loved by everybody. But, she says, he could only shine in impersonal situations. He could never really show affection to his family. The next morning at breakfast, John tries to apologize to his son and to convince him to stay, at least for a while, but Timmy is adamant. Timmy realizes that he's never told his father that he loves him, and he does so. John breaks down in tears in his son's arms, but quickly regains his composure. As Nettie comes in to serve breakfast Timmy announces that he's decided to stay with his parents a few weeks more. But John replies that he's already scheduled the painters to redo Timmy's room, so he'll have to leave today after all.

Author's Notes

I returned to civilian life in 1946 determined to go to college and become a writer.

The former goal born of a new estimate of myself gained in the Army where I realized I wasn't as dumb as school records suggested. The latter, a secret ambition since I was fourteen, when I wrote a short story that my aunt, who worked in the Photo Morgue of The World Telegram, showed to a reporter who wrote on it, "The boy has narrative ability."

Common to both goals was the need of a typewriter.

Someone steered me to the Royal Typewriter office located in Rockefeller Center or thereabouts.

I asked for Mr. So-and-So.

A small, pale, eye-glassed man acknowledged me furtively and said to wait in the corridor. After several minutes, the man appeared with a brand new Royal portable. I handed him one hundred and twenty-five dollars—possibly one fifty.

"I'm going to become a writer," I announced grandly.

I recall a look of supreme disinterest and he was gone.

All my plays have been written, not to mention TV, movie scripts, and novels on that Royal portable. If you look closely at the space bar you will see the shiny depression that my right thumb has worn over fifty-five years.

I wrote *The Subject Was Roses* during the epic Writers' Guild Strike in 1960. A six month strike that began with jokes about writers borrowing to pay for swimming pools and ended as a bitter labor dispute (I can still name the scabs), including fisticuffs and enmities that never healed. "Epic" because it led to pension, welfare, residuals, and other valued things that today's membership is inclined to take as birthrights.

Off the soapbox and to *Roses*:

It's essentially my parents and me. Insights gained later imposed on events that took place twenty years earlier. I wrote it in a rented office on Via de la Paz in the Pacific Palisades. Except for depleted savings and the strike looking like it would go on forever, it was the happiest time of my life in L.A.

Since the first play I wrote had been a success, I figured getting *Roses* produced would be easy.

Wrong. It took several years. Too many rejections and expired options to enumerate.

We opened on Broadway May 25, 1964. Won the Drama Critics Award, the Tony, and the Pulitzer. Ran for two years. Let the good times roll.

-Frank D. Gilroy (from *Volume One: Frank D. Gilroy's Full-Length Plays*, Smith & Kraus)

Production History of *The Subject Was Roses*

The Subject Was Roses was written in 1960. In April of 1962 the play was sent to several well-known producers and returned with no expression of interest. All of these producers now say they never read or even heard of the play.

Frank D. Gilroy raised the money to produce the show himself. Good friends (card playing buddies) got him started by putting up \$1,000 each. Edgar Lansbury, a scene designer at CBS offered to raise the rest of the money in exchange for the privileges of doing the set and producing.

Roses was first presented at the Royale Theatre, New York City, on May 25, 1964 starring Jack Albertson (John Cleary), Irene Dailey (Nettie Cleary), and Martin Sheen (Timmy Cleary). This Broadway play had a producer, director, scenic artist, and general manager who had never performed their tasks on Broadway before.

The opening was uncertain with a \$165 advance sale. In addition, *Roses* consistently lost money until its fourth week and borrowed around \$10,000 to stay afloat during that time. It did not have a sold-out house until its 136th performance. It played in three different theatres during its first year during which only the actors were paid.

In the end *The Subject Was Roses* won the Drama Critics Award, the Tony, and the Pulitzer. A movie was made resulting in Oscar nominations for Patricia Neal and Jack Albertson. Jack Albertson won the Oscar.

The Works of Frank D. Gilroy

Gilroy's Complete Full Length Plays

Who'll Save the Plowboy? (1962)

The Subject Was Roses (1964)

That Summer - That Fall (1966)

The Only Game in Town (1969)

Last Licks (1979)

Any Given Day (1993)

Contact With the Enemy (2000)

Gilroy's One-Act Plays

So Please Be Kind, 'Twas Brillig, Come Next Tuesday, Present Tense (1973)

The Viewing (1976)

The Next Contestant (1978)

Dreams of Glory (1979)

Reel to Reel (1987)

Match Point (1990)

A Way With Words (1991)

Give the Bishop My Faint Regards (1992)

Fore (1993)

Getting In (1997)

The Golf Ball and Far Rockaway (1997)

Gilroy's Film Credits

Fastest Gun Alive, Screenwriter (1956)

The Gallant Hours, Screenwriter (1960)

The Subject Was Roses, Writer and Conception (1968)

Doc, Director (1971)

Desperate Characters, Director/Writer/Producer (1971)

From Noon Till Three, Director (1976)

Once in Paris, Director (1978)

The Gig, Director (1985)

Frank D. Gilroy and Ohrdruf Nord by Matthew Burtner

Frank D. Gilroy, author of *The Subject Was Roses* was kind enough to share some thoughts with me recently concerning his experiences in World War II Europe and how they relate to *The Subject Was Roses* and his more recent work. Mr. Gilroy described *The Subject Was Roses* as being “very autobiographical” (FDG Interview 1/10/04). Timmy is of course the character based roughly on the author.

After serving in the United States Army in World War II Europe, Timmy returns to his home in the Bronx, and the strained marriage of his parents (John and Nettie). He reassures his parents, but offers few substantial specifics about his war experience. What is apparent, however, is that he has acquired a taste for alcohol, which he had shunned before the war. His mother shows concern about the drinking, but does not want to acknowledge or address potential causes:

Nettie: Home two days and both nights to bed like that.

John: He’s entitled. You should hear some of the things he’s been through. They overran one of those concentration camps--

Nettie: I don’t want to hear about it now.

John: You’re right. It’s no way to end a happy evening.

This is the only mention of the concentration camp in the play, and one of the few specific comments about a significant event in Timmy’s role in the war. Many things are left unsaid in *The Subject Was Roses*, just as many things were left unsaid in the lives of thousands of returning veterans. The horror of a concentration camp or the violence and fear of war must have seemed out of place or even surreal after coming home to a family and neighborhood that remained more or less unchanged since before the war. That which is left unsaid, and the subjects that are not broached, create much of the tension in this piece.

Yet, subjects that weren’t broached in *The Subject Was Roses* (1964) are openly and honestly addressed in Gilroy’s much later play entitled, *Contact With the Enemy* (2000). In *Contact With the Enemy* the main focus of discussion and debate is the Ohrdruf Nord concentration camp. This was the first concentration camp to be overrun by the Western Allies, and more specifically, by the 89th division of Patton’s 3rd Army, of which Mr. Gilroy was a member. It was a satellite of the infamous Buchenwald camp, and was located north of the town of Ohrdruf. Generals Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton went to the camp immediately upon hearing of it. As a result, “Eisenhower ordered everyone who could be spared to visit the camp- to see what we were fighting for. And my unit was pulled off the line to see the concentration camp. Nobody had heard that name before- concentration camp.” (FDG interview 1/10/04). This is how Frank Gilroy came to visit Ohrdruf Nord.

Frank D. Gilroy and Ohrdruf Nord *continued*

After touring the Ohrdruf Nord, Eisenhower wrote a letter to George Marshall dated 15 April 1945, in which he wrote: “In one room, where they were piled up to twenty or thirty naked men, killed by starvation, George Patton would not even enter. He said he would get sick if he had done so. I made the visit deliberately in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to ‘propaganda’.” (The room Eisenhower refers to is pictured above right – there were actually forty-four bodies present in this shed.)

Eisenhower’s fears turned out to be well-founded, as holocaust deniers have since appeared. This is in part what prompted Frank Gilroy to speak more openly on the subject, as he “never spoke about it until I got older – until these lunatics started saying it never happened.” (FDG interview 1/10/04). After a visit to the Holocaust Museum several years ago, Mr. Gilroy wrote *Contact With the Enemy*, which deals directly with the subjects of Ohrdruf Nord, the Holocaust in general, and the capacity of otherwise ordinary people to contribute to such things. The one act play is based upon the chance reunion of two veterans of the 89th Infantry Division at the Holocaust Museum, but it is not an exercise in righteous outrage. Rather than simply asking “How could this happen?” *Contact With the Enemy* takes a much more disturbing and self-reflective turn.

It took years for *Contact With the Enemy* to be written, and Mr. Gilroy offers an explanation in its introduction: “Seeing Ohrdruf (thirty-two hundred matchstick corpses piled like cordwood) proved the most influential day of my life though it took years for the full impact to register. Longing to bear witness in a way that might resonate, I wrote reams about Ohrdruf without success...Now, with witnesses dying off and lunatics proclaiming ever louder that the Holocaust was a myth, I feel it vital to speak.” Having at last spoken about the camp and other wartime experiences, Mr. Gilroy said he “finally made peace with that element of my life. The subject is close to my heart, and even more so as I get older.” (FDG interview 1/10/04).

Frank D. Gilroy and Ohrdruf Nord *continued*

Back of an Ohrdruf Nord Photo, 1945.

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SS MURDER CAMP UNCOVERED

The swift advance of the Third U.S. Army's famous Fourth Armored Division uncovered the horror of a Nazi SS murder camp at Ohrdruf, entered April 4, 1945, after the fall of Getha, eight miles to the north. American soldiers who seized the camp found the courtyard littered with the bodies of Czechoslovakian, Russian, Belgian and French slave laborers, slain because they were too weak to be evacuated. In a shed, they found a stack of 44 naked and lime-covered bodies.

According to survivors, 3,000 to 4,000 prisoners had been killed by SS troops, 70 being slain just before the Americans reached the camp. The 80 survivors had escaped death or removal by hiding in the woods. They reported that an average of 150 died daily, mainly from shooting or clubbing. The Nazi system was to feed prisoners a crust of bread a day, work them on tunnelling until they were too weak to continue, then exterminate them and replace them with another 150 prisoners daily.

Led by Colonel Hayden Sears of the Fourth Armored Division, prominent German citizens of the town of Ohrdruf saw with their own eyes the horrors of SS brutality during a conducted tour of the Ohrdruf charnel house April 8, 1945. As they stood over the slain prisoners, Colonel Sears said: "This is why Americans cannot be your friends..." The enforced tour of the Germans ended with a visit to a wood where 10 bodies lay on a grill, made of railway lines, ready for cremation. Colonel Sears asked a uniformed German medical officer: "Does this meet with your conception of the German master race?" The officer faltered and at last answered: "I cannot believe that Germans did this."

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THIS PHOTO SHOWS: A corner of the prison showing a guard tower in the foreground. The bodies were planted in neat even rows out

Germany

Germany - Concentration Camps / Ohrdruf Camp

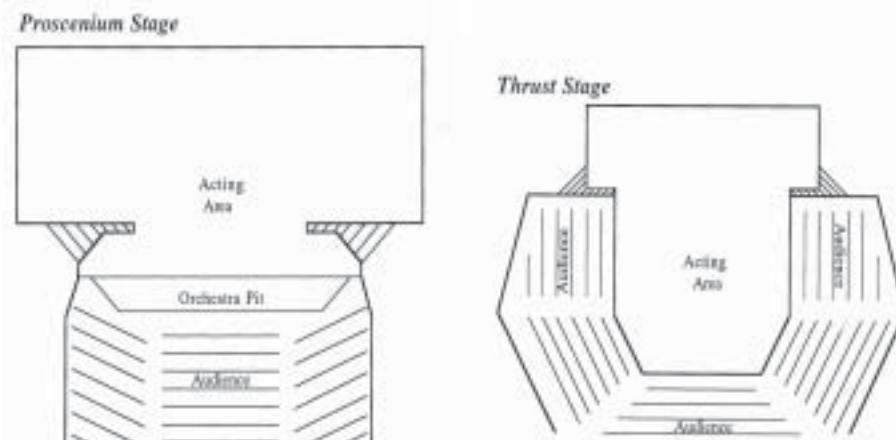
From a Set Dresser's Point of View by Kelly Yann

The set dresser is the person responsible for providing many of the physical details of the play. Working with the set designer, the set dresser's job is to bring life and depth to the world of the play by decorating the set with the appropriate furniture and props.

There are essentially three different types of properties, or "props." Hand props are the small objects handled by the actors. In *The Subject Was Roses*, these include the dishware, money, food, and roses. Set props are larger items, usually incorporated into the set design, that are also used by the actor. In *Roses*, these include the furniture, rugs, practical lamps, and appliances. Dress properties, or set dressing, are all of the other elements not used by the actor that fill in the set. In *Roses*, these include the books, throw pillows, a cookie jar, and a recipe box. Although the chief function of these items is decorative, their visual significance in a realistic interior such as this is immeasurable.

Defining a Stage

An intimate "thrust theater" such as ours—one in which the audience is seated on three sides of the acting area—creates some unique challenges for the set dresser. This type of configuration brings the bulk of the audience nearer to the actor than in a proscenium theater—a more common type of theater consisting of a raised acting area with the audience seated on only one side. As a result, the finished detail and quality of all properties are subject to closer scrutiny from the audience than those on a proscenium stage.



A set on a proscenium stage can have as many as three walls and the action on stage will still be visible. In the thrust configuration, on the other hand, the set is usually made up of a back wall, levels on the stage floor, and properties. The wide range of perspectives afforded by a thrust theater makes it necessary for all areas of the set to be dressed. The man in the center section first row will never see what is in the drawers of the kitchen, but those seated in the left and right balcony will. Likewise, the balcony members will never see the book titles in the downstage round table.

From a Set Dresser's Point of View *continued*



The set itself, distinguished from all of the items mentioned on the previous page, is the floor, wall, windows, and doors. The set is conceived of by the set designer and initially takes the form of plans and/or renderings. Set plans are technical drawings that indicate measurements in scaled form.

To the left is a small section of the ground plan drawing for *The Subject Was Roses*, showing only the kitchen.

This drawing depicts the back wall of the kitchen as well as the placement of the cabinets, appliances and furniture on the raised upstage platform of the set. This represents only a small portion of the drawings necessary to build a set. Obviously, it is difficult to visualize what this kitchen might look like three dimensionally—which is where a model or rendering comes in handy. A rendering is a sketch of what the finished set will look like, not always accurate in scale but giving the proportions of what the actor will look like on the set.



Here is a section of the rendering for *The Drawer Boy*, also showing only the kitchen.

Although this is a different kitchen than the one depicted in the technical drawing, it is clear how this rendering adds another level to one's understanding of the visual composition of a set. These drawings and renderings are a representation of a set designer's vision, but the set dresser has to interpret his or her vision and make it a reality. And, although the actual dressing of the set doesn't happen until after the set is constructed, the acquisition and research of these items starts four to five weeks earlier.

From a Set Dresser's Point of View *continued*

There are a number of steps to be taken by the set dresser in preparation for decorating the set. First, it's necessary read the play, usually more than once. The play is filled with insights into the characters' hobbies, religious beliefs, life-styles, economic situations, jobs, idiosyncrasies and more—all of which is critical information when choosing even the smallest element of the set dressing.

The play also gives information on the period in which the play is set, in the case of *Roses*: May 1946. As the play begins, Timmy has just come back from fighting in World War II, a war that ended the Depression Era in America but was also the cause of rationing certain items and saving scrap metal—an important context for the set dresser to understand.

Once the set dresser has a solid understanding of the play, it's time to go over the set dressing with the designer. It is often helpful for the set dresser to have a list of the furniture items and the ground plan in front of him or her for this conversation. That way the set dresser can ask specific questions as to what should go on the kitchen shelf or in the hall closet, etc. The designer is also the source for the color palette of the show—another crucial thing for the set dresser to have a firm grasp of before picking even a coffee mug. Decorating the set basically consists of carrying out the set designer's vision, but the set dresser still needs to employ his or her cunning as part interior decorator and part historian to round out all of the tiny details. A good set dresser follows the wishes of the designer while not neglecting to bring his or her own ideas and suggestions to the table (sometimes literally!).

The designer may or may not provide period-specific research. Here is a photo from the packet of research for *Roses* from a book titled *Documenting America*.



From a Set Dresser's Point of View *continued*

A photo like the one on the previous page can inform the set decoration process in significant ways. On the *Roses* set, like in the dishwashing photo, you will see a shelf above the sink, scalloped shelf paper and a lamp. You will also see a match safe and a towel bar on the set. However, there will also be items on the shelf that are not included in the photo you see here—things that are part of the unique life of our play.

How one goes about researching a play depends largely on the period in which the play takes place. A play that is set before the twentieth century is always more difficult to research, as photography did not become widespread in books and magazines until the mid 1890's. When researching a realistic interior of the 1940's, however, there are many resources available. The Internet is often a good starting point for specifics such as "What does a radio from 1946 look like?"

A Google image search for "1946 Radio" found an image of a cream colored version of the radio on our set (www.virtualauctions.com/images/radio/bendix.jpg). An Ebay search is also a great place for a quick answer. And when the Internet fails, there is nothing like a trip to the Carnegie Library in Oakland, where, in addition to books, there are also photo files in the Art Department, period magazines, and old Sears' catalogs on microfilm. Research might even include rummaging through the attic for an ancestor's hand-me-downs.

When one goes about the preparations for dressing a set, the most important thing to remember is to add history and life, but not overwhelm or interfere. The audience should leave the theater talking about the play, not about a really distracting hot pink throw pillow. If the set dresser has done a good job, the set will give the audience subtle, almost unconscious clues, to the life of the play and its characters. This dimensionality is the key to successful set dressing.

Resources and Suggested Reading

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“Ohrdruf Description.” <http://www.library.gatech.edu/projects/holocaust/ohrdrufdes.htm>

“Ohrdruf Photos.” <http://simmins.org/Fifth/Ohrdruf.html>

“Ohrdruf Remembrances 89th Infantry Division.” <http://www.89infdivww2.org/ohrdruf/index.htm>

Review of Contact with the Enemy. <http://www.aislesay.com/NY-CONTACT-WITH.html>

“Silflay Hraka:Unseen History: Ohrdruf.” <http://silflayhraka.com/archives/000102.html>