

Our Lady of 121st Street

by

Stephen Adly Guirgis

directed by

Phylicia Rashad



SignatureTheatre STUDY GUIDE

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Hill Harper and John Doman. Photo by Monique Carboni.

INTRODUCTION

SYNOPSIS

After the death of the beloved nun Sister Rose, a group of her former students return to their Harlem neighborhood to pay respects. But there's a problem at the Funeral Home: Sister Rose's dead body has been stolen. *Our Lady of 121st Street* paints a vivid comic portrait of what happens when old friends meet old wounds and how old habits die hard.



Quincy Tyler Bernstine and Hill Harper. Photo by Monique Carboni.

CHARACTERS



Victor

(John Procaccino)

Distraught over the passing of his childhood friend Sister Rose, Victor has come to pay his respects. After spending the night in the Ortiz Funeral Home, Victor wakes up to find Sister Rose's body gone and himself in the middle of a crime scene.



Balthazar

(Joey Auzenne)

Balthazar is one of Sister Rose's former students. He now works as a police detective in New York. His young son was murdered, and Balthazar carries the weight of his loss on his shoulders.



Rooftop

(Hill Harper)

Another former student of Sister Rose's, Rooftop is now a successful morning radio DJ in L.A. Rooftop was previously married to Inez, but their relationship dissolved after a slew of infidelities. He is hugely charismatic, restless, and generally follows his appetites with abandon. Returning to New York, he is terrified to see Inez and face his demons.



Father Lux

(John Doman)

Father Lux is the priest at the church. He uses a wheelchair after losing his legs in the Korean War. He's weary but tough and finds himself involved in the histories of the adults visiting for Sister Rose's funeral.



CHARACTERS



Flip

(Jimonn Cole)

A former student of Sister Rose's, Flip has since moved to Wisconsin and become a lawyer and live openly as a gay man. Flip is nervous of what his childhood friends may think of his sexual orientation, and he's desperate to keep his sexuality a secret. This poses a problem between Flip and his partner, Gail.



Gail

(Kevin Isola)

Gail is Flip's partner and an amateur actor. He's come with Flip from Wisconsin to attend Sister Rose's funeral. Gail is open about his sexuality and is upset by Flip's desire to keep their relationship a secret from his childhood friends.



Inez

(Quincy Tyler Bernstine)

Inez is a former student of Sister Rose's and Rooftop's ex-wife. They've been divorced for 15 years, but she's still angry at him. She's also maintained a grudge against her former friend Norca, with whom Rooftop cheated on Inez. Inez has since remarried and grown up but returning to Harlem opens up old wounds.



Norca

(Paola Lázaro)

Inez's former classmate and friend. She's quick-witted and fiery, unafraid to say what's on her mind. She knows everyone, and everyone knows her.



Edwin

(Erick Betancourt)

Edwin is a former student of Sister Rose's and now works as a building super. He's his brother Pinky's caretaker and bears an enormous sense of responsibility for him. He loves Pinky dearly but feels trapped and exasperated by his responsibilities.



Pinky

(Maki Borden)

Edwin's brother. Pinky suffered a head injury as a kid and has developmental disabilities. He looks for the good in everyone and wants to be their friend.



Marcia

(Stephanie Kurtzuba)

Sister Rose's niece. She suffers from a variety of ailments and sensitivities.



Sonia

(Deirdre Friel)

Sonia is Marcia's friend, and has accompanied her from Connecticut for Sister Rose's funeral. She's a bit of a fish out of water here. Sonia is often mistaken for other people.

A CLOSER LOOK: INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS

Photo by Gregory Costanzo



How did you get your start in theatre?

As a child, I was always interested and excited by television and movies. My family didn't have a lot of money, but my mom would take us to see a play about once a year. My mother was very strict, and I was only allowed to watch a half hour of TV a day, but on Saturday nights

I could stay up late with her and watch *All in the Family* and *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Carol Burnett*.

In high school, I auditioned and started doing plays. I was lucky that I had a drama teacher that took an interest in me. Then when I went to college, I thought I shouldn't study theatre, because if I was going to college and I was paying for it myself, I should study something sensible. So, I tried to study something sensible. I tried majoring in English, I tried majoring in Political Science, I tried majoring in Journalism. And I would lose interest or get bad grades. When I finally decided to become a theatre major, that's when I was able to A) graduate and B) do good.

When I got out of school, I helped start a theatre company in the Bronx on Arthur Avenue called the Belmont Italian American Playhouse. I did that for a year. Then I moved to Sante Fe, New Mexico. I started a theatre there. We did a whole bunch of plays. After a year I came back to New York and I was very fortunate that my friend John Ortiz had started a theatre company called Latino Actors Base and I became a member. The company became very close and we worked together from there. Even though I was an actor, they encouraged me to write. I started to write little plays and then longer plays and then I kept going. Now I'm a playwright and an actor, and I've been making my living doing just that for about 18 years. Before that I worked in restaurants. I did everything you could do in a restaurant. I was a bike messenger. I had a lot of jobs. But I always wanted to be in the theatre. And that drove me to keep going.

What advice do you have for young people interested in theatre?

My advice to aspiring theatre artists is, if you love it, keep doing it. Find other people who you like and are good and who also love doing it. A lot of times people will say that to have a career in the arts is very difficult, which it is, and many people aren't able to achieve their dreams. There are a lot of things that people say that make being an artist

sound like something that can't happen. What I would say to you is, almost everyone that I know in this business who really, really, really wanted to do it and worked really really hard is still in this business and they're still working.

When I started, I wanted to be Al Pacino or Robert De Niro or Meryl Streep. And you know what? I'm not Al Pacino. I'm not Robert De Niro. I'm not Meryl Streep. And I never will be. But I'm here, I'm in the game. And I get to work and play with people that I admire and respect. I get to make my living by creating things and by being in service of the creative process. It's a great life, but you have to work hard, you have to love it, and you have to believe in yourself. I'm someone who has struggled with self-esteem and feelings like, "Oh, I'm not good enough." I still feel like that. But I know that there's a part of me that believes I can do it. If you have that in you, that you really believe you can do it, then work hard; and I believe that you'll get there.

"I get to make my living by creating things and by being in service of the creative process. It's a great life, but you have to work hard, you have to love it, and you have to believe in yourself."



UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY:

The New York of *Our Lady of 121st Street*



“My plays are always on some level an examination of self. Every play is a chance to look at the things that hurt and that aren’t going away.

And in *Our Lady of 121st Street*, a theme that emerged was something that Gail says when he quotes St. Paul. ‘When I grew up, I put away childish things.’ That’s where I was at that time. I was aware enough that I was trying to be a self-actualized person, but I kept bumping up against these things that were challenging.”

– STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS, 2018

“I WAS IN LOS ANGELES FOR 9/11. I was working on a television show.

I was a staff writer, which is the lowliest position. On the morning of 9/11, I was doing an all-nighter. The security guard came in, and he didn’t speak English, but he tried to tell me to turn on the TV. So we turned on the TV and watched the second plane hit the towers. My boss called and I picked up the phone and he ‘Thank god you’re there. Don’t leave. We need to write a new episode to prep for Thursday.’ I asked why, and it was because the episode we were about to do was about terrorism. I asked my boss what I should write the new episode about he said ‘anything.’ So I stayed in the building for days. No one was in the building for days except me and the security guard. So while 9/11 was going on, I had the TV on and I was alone in this television studio writing something that ultimately was utterly meaningless to the world. I said to myself, the second that I’m free I’m going back to New York, and I’m going to write about something that means something. At least means something to me. The show got cancelled and I came back to New York and started writing *Our Lady of 121st Street*. It felt like the world was going crazy. That’s what I was feeling.” – STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS, 2018



NEW YORK IN THE WAKE OF SEPTEMBER 11

On September 11th, 2001, four passenger planes were hijacked by members of al-Qaeda with the intention of crashing into United States landmarks and causing mass destruction. The plot was orchestrated by al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Three of the four planes hit their targets, crashing into the twin towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon building in Arlington, Virginia respectively. The fourth plane was taken over by passengers and crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 people lost their lives in the 9/11 attacks, including over 400 first responders (firefighters, law enforcement officers, EMTs, and more). New York suffered tremendous emotional, financial, and environmental duress in the wake of the attacks. With phone lines down, transit halted, and most of downtown covered in debris, New Yorkers struggled to find their loved ones and ways back home. The stock market stayed closed for four days, and markets suffered tremendous losses. Fires continued burning on the site, now known as Ground Zero, for months after the attacks. The attacks also marked a significant shift in the United States’ approach to terrorism and prompted the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

The New York of *Our Lady of 121st Street*



“I GREW UP CATHOLIC [AND] SPENT ALL MY DAYS ABOVE 116TH STREET. I WENT TO CORPUS CHRISTI ON 121ST STREET FOR SCHOOL.

My mother was very Catholic. We didn't have a lot of money, so when all the other kids were taking karate classes, she found a Buddhist monastery uptown that taught classes for much less money. She thought that if there was religion behind it, it would be a much more loving environment for the students. So I went to the Buddhists for karate and to the nuns for school. That was my indoctrination. I also went to Riverside Church for elementary school but that wasn't Catholic at the time.”

– STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS, 2018

“The first line of the play is ‘What kinda fuckin’ world is this?!’ And that came out of me observing the world. I remember reading the New York Post, and whatever the [worst] crime of the day [was] would be the headline. And that kind of inspired me. I tend to write about what keeps me up at night. And all these things were going on and I was having a lot of feelings and I just wrote down that line and then I started writing dialogue. I didn’t really know what was going to happen. But then the dialogue started to reveal maybe they are at a wake.”

– STEPHEN ADLY GUIRGIS, 2018



INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR JIMONN COLE

How did you get your start in theatre?

I attended a performing arts high school in Virginia, so I've always been drawn to the stage. As part of the program, we got to see professional plays at the Virginia Stage Company. The first professional play I ever saw was Athol Fugard's *The Road to Mecca*. That production inspired me to pursue my course of study further. It made me even more curious about stage craft and storytelling. I got my professional start and Equity card soon after graduating from Juilliard, when I was cast as Roderigo in William Shakespeare's *Othello*, starring Patrick Stewart, at the Shakespeare Theatre in D.C.

What initially drew you to the role of Flip? How have you gone about preparing for the part?

The writer, the director and the venue are all yes, yes, yes when it comes to wanting to be involved in the production. I've prepared like I normally do, investigating who my character is from a 360-degree angle, and what this play is off the page.

Sister Rose's funeral is the first time Flip and many of his friends from the neighborhood have seen each other in years. What's your interpretation of how revisiting the people and places of his past affects Flip?

Flip is overwhelmed by this looming reunion. He needed to come back, decided to come back with Gail even, but when he does he gets freaked out and can't handle the rush of emotions.

Is there a theme you find yourself coming back to in *Our Lady of 121st Street*?

The idea of us walking around as half a person.

Is there a part of your role you find more challenging to play? How do you work through these moments or beats in the script with your castmates and Phylicia?

This work and material and examination of human existence is not easy. We rehearse, we talk, we eat together, we cry together, encourage each other and go in as deep as we possibly can trying to tell these stories.

Do you have any advice for students who may be interested in pursuing theatre?

It's not steady work, for your financial security and peace of mind, I advise having a second interest that you love just as much as the theatre. If you truly love that other thing you won't feel like your time not acting is wasted or not as important.



Joey Auzenne,
Jimonn Cole
and Hill Harper.
Photo by
Monique Carboni.

INTERVIEW WITH SOUND DESIGNER ROB KAPLOWITZ



Photo by Stephen Mann.

How did you first become interested in sound design?

I started in high school. We didn't really differentiate much then between design and technical theatre - we just sort of did it all: scenery, lights, sound, costumes, stage management. I came in through a spur-of-the-moment acting audition. I'd never done any theatre, but I got cast because I looked young enough to play an 8-year-old. I didn't enjoy being onstage very much, but I loved making theatre and was very interested in other aspects of the storytelling process, so technical theatre and design became my main extracurricular activities.

I became specifically interested in sound when we did a rock 'n' roll Twelfth Night by William Shakespeare with a live band onstage and classic rock tunes blended into the show. I got to mix it and decide how the system would work, and I loved that so very much. I was also writing a lot of electronic music at the time, so the intersection of the live stuff, and the process of content creation all inspired me to pursue sound design for a living.

I moved to NYC when I was 17 to go to NYU's undergraduate drama program. At the time, it was one of a small handful of programs that had any sound design courses at all. Once I got there, NYU cancelled the sound design class, so my actual learning process focused on the ideas of design in general in the classroom, and then a lot of assisting to learn the specifics of sound design in the real world, as well as going at it kind of blindly and instinctively and getting it wrong a whole lot until I got it right.

You're also a composer. What are the differences between composing and sound designing, and how do they inform each other?

The line between composition and sound design is a whole lot more porous than one would imagine. On a show like this, I'm doing a lot of cutting and re-arranging - collaging is really the closest word for it - of other people's music, blending it with the rhythms of the street, the church, bars -- life in NYC. So, in a sense, I'm always composing, even when I'm not writing notes.

I guess the primary difference between sound design and composition is that sound designs are intrinsically tied to plays, while traditional music compositions live on their own. I once had a producer suggest releasing a soundtrack of the music

I wrote for her play; I told her it'd be like listening to a pop album without any vocals. My designs and compositions for the theatre always want to leave space for that central voice: that of the playwright.

Sound design can be harder for audiences to understand, often because when it's done well we may not even recognize it's happening. Can you tell us more about the work of a sound designer and what makes for good sound design?

There are lots of different opinions on what makes up good sound design. There are the essentials: audibility, believability, storytelling basics, but those don't make great design to me. For me, a great design is striving to add layers to the world that the playwright and director originally imagined - deepening the storytelling, expanding the environment, finding another road to help the production and the audience connect. Sometimes that's all about super subtle layers that no one truly notices, for example, shifting the emotional landscape in tiny ways. Sometimes, it's about lifting the words of the actors, creating tensions against which the performers get to struggle, or helping them launch into deeper reflections. The great director Liz Diamond once told me "Rob, stop buttering the butter!" - by that, she meant that, if the script is the bread, the actors are bringing the butter, and she didn't need me to add another layer of the same flavor. I guess, to me, great sound design is Nutella, Vegemite, or a nice home-made jam...

How does your work as a designer influence the way you read a script? How do you begin to outline your ideas and figure out which moments may benefit from sound design?

I can't honestly separate my work as a designer from the way I read a play, because I've been a designer my whole adult life. I will say that I always try to begin with the script as a script, rather than as a puzzle to be unpacked or a palate for the design. I usually don't begin hearing sounds until my second or third time through the text. Once I do, I try and just sketch what I hear, either in words or in music, and start sharing it with the director. Some of the moments where sound belongs are obvious: beginnings and endings, moments in which the characters interact with the unseen world, either in reality or in imagination. But for me, most of where the sound goes gets realized is in rehearsals, watching what the actors do, getting a sense of the director's vision, and hearing the way the language is landing.

You've referred to yourself as a dramaturgically driven designer. What does this mean to you? What type of research do you do when creating your design for a play?

Dramaturgically driven design is design that launches entirely from the text in an attempt to deepen or expand the writer's work while staying entirely anchored in their intentions. Some of the research I've done includes: traveling to the locations of plays set in real places; diving deeply into the movement of time through a play; exploring the way the world outside the story is changing during the events of the play; reading up on

the origins of ideas espoused by the characters in the play, and studying the places of origin or the histories of the characters. This has led to shows where the sound or music is inspired by the texts referenced by a character, where the rhythms or keys of the music are all based on the cultural backgrounds of the characters buried within contemporary sounds, or where I help the audience travel through history to land us where we are. It has even occasionally led me to bring my knowledge of sound and music into the room with the playwrights, who use this information as they continue to revise the play.

Our Lady of 121st Street takes place in New York City. How do you convey place through sound design?

We do some fairly straightforward stuff – bringing voices and sounds from the streets of Harlem into the theatre (Harlem in 2018 is a lot different from the Harlem of 2002, when the play was written. There’s a lot of gentrification that’s happened). I’m also trying to make sure the music we use in the show has the rhythms and pulses of this particular neighborhood, without losing track of the wider community that Stephen Adly Guirgis is invoking. Part of what’s magical about the character of Sister Rose is that she touched a huge number of lives, from the school on 121st Street to her home in Staten Island, to her niece in Connecticut. This play is so much about the community that gathers in the aftermath of this one woman’s death, and I’m looking for ways to help embrace and convey that community.

Do you have any advice for young theatre artists who may be interested in design?

There are lots of aspects of sound design that are super familiar to younger artists: playing with chopping and changing rhythms, listening to and sharing a wide array of music, computer editing, finding the strange rhythms of life. These are all part and parcel of the constant stream of media with which young artists constantly interact. If you’re interested in pursuing a career in sound, I’d suggest spending as much time in live-sound environments as possible, constantly pushing the envelope of the music you listen to, introducing yourself to sound designers wherever you go (we’re a remarkably friendly bunch), and reading everything about everything that interests you. Not only plays, but literature, history, philosophy... the more deeply you’re rooted in the history of human nature, the easier it will be for you to connect to the characters who drive every story playwrights are telling.

“For me, a great design is striving to add layers to the world that the playwright and director originally imagined – deepening the storytelling, expanding the environment, finding another road to help the production and the audience connect.”

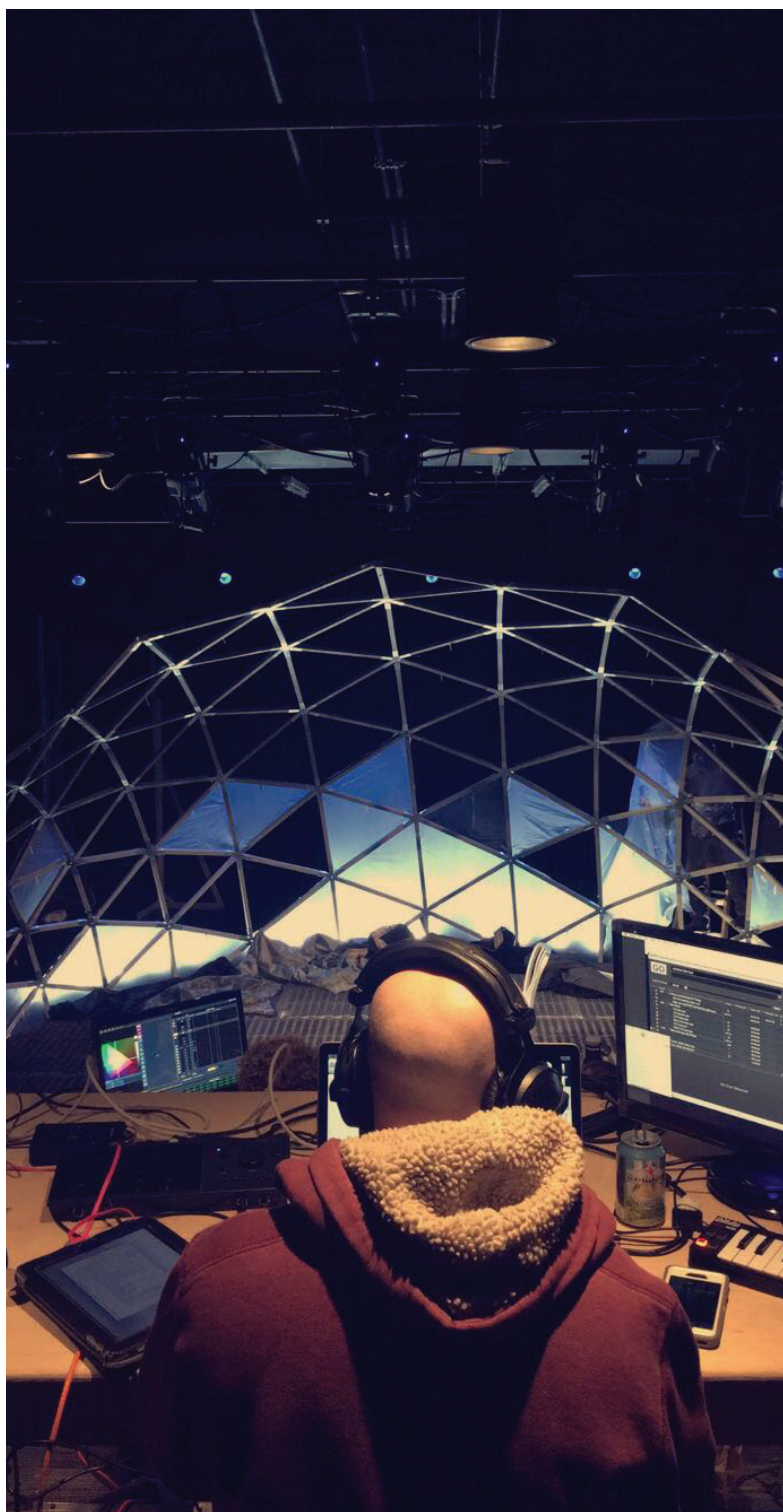


Photo by Bianca Sanchez.

ABOUT SIGNATURE

Signature Theatre celebrates playwrights and gives them an artistic home.



The Pershing Square Signature Center. Photo © David Sundberg / Esto.

Signature makes an extended commitment to a playwright's body of work, and during this journey the writer is engaged in every aspect of the creative process. By producing a series of plays by each resident writer, Signature delivers an intimate and immersive journey into the playwright's singular vision. In 2014, Signature became the first New York City company to receive the Regional Theater Tony Award®.

Signature serves its mission at The Pershing Square Signature Center, a three-theatre facility on West 42nd Street designed by Frank Gehry Architects to host Sig-

nature's three distinct playwrights' residencies and foster a cultural community. At the Center, Signature continues its original Playwright-in-Residence model as Residency 1, a year-long intensive exploration of a single writer's body of work. Residency 5, the only program of its kind, was launched to support multiple playwrights as they build bodies of work, by guaranteeing each writer three productions over a five-year period. The Legacy Program, launched during Signature's 10th Anniversary, invites writers from both residencies back for productions of premiere or earlier plays.



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