

# Handling Their Mother's Affairs

BY JOHN GLORE

“Who was she?” That’s the line that starts Richard Greenberg’s *Our Mother’s Brief Affair*, spoken by the play’s central character, Seth, in reference to his aging, declining mother. The rest of the play sets out to find an answer, not only for us but for Seth as well. His tersest of questions serves to unleash a winding river of words that traces a story as funny as it is fascinating.

Almost every character Greenberg has created — in more than a dozen plays spanning 20 years — shares a facility for language. His people use words liberally, often aggressively, sometimes evasively, always expressively. In many Greenberg plays the protagonists talk not only to other characters but also directly and effusively to the audience. We are enlisted as confidants, or simply to bear witness. And when a Greenberg character talks to us we get the feeling that it’s because they need us to hear their case, if only to release an unbearable psychic pressure.

Seth is the primary talker in *Our Mother’s Brief Affair*, though we also hear from his twin sister Abby and his mother, Anna. Seth has a story to tell, but we quickly become aware that he isn’t necessarily privy to all the facts, and Anna and Abby may not always agree with his version of their common narrative. In fact none of the three characters is an entirely reliable narrator, so we find ourselves having to puzzle together the details that each of them offers us in order to come to our own conclusions about what happened — and what’s important about what happened.

Seth has been thrown into a sort of existential quandary by a revelation from Anna: when Seth was a boy of fifteen (or was it thirteen, or twelve?), Anna by chance met a man who charmed her; she shared a park bench with him over a succession of Saturday afternoons, until their flirtation evolved to something more serious. And then, within a matter of weeks, their affair ended as quietly as it had begun.

Three things about this story bother Seth deeply. First, he can’t bring himself to imagine that his mother ever had the capacity for sexual adventure; surely the recollection must be a fabrication of a mind enfeebled by age. But if it isn’t, then he can’t believe that she used his hated viola lessons as a smoke-screen for her dalliance. And he’s aghast to learn that his sister Abby may have known much more than he did about what went on back then.

But Seth’s disquietude over these three imponderables pales in comparison to his horror when Anna reveals one final, salient fact about her brief affair: the man on the park

Matthew Arkin, Jenny O’Hara, Marin Hinkle and Arye Gross



## *Seth responds to his mother’s story:*

*“I could only think it was some kind of etherized fantasy, a bit of mental mayhem natural to someone who’d had too many operations, and way too much anesthesia, and was rising dotty to boot... . But it can be awfully vivid, this — the mind’s waste product. Seventy years of bad novels meet a squadron of frizzled synapses. And it’s, you’ll see, kind of torrential — she just goes on and on as if nothing else is happening in the room. Believing herself.”*

bench had a secret past, and the truth about his hidden identity turns him into the personification of evil in Seth’s eyes. This last discovery is what has led Seth to ask the question that opens the play. His mother has opened a gaping chasm in his knowledge about himself and about the life he has led since she indulged in her brief affair. If she indulged.

Greenberg has shown an abiding interest in the relationship between young (and not-so-young) adults and their parents. It’s the central issue in one of his best known works, *Three Days of Rain* (commissioned and originally produced by SCR), in which another brother and sister come together after the death of their famous father and puzzle over the mystery of their parents’ relationship. The parent-child conundrum also figures importantly in several other Greenberg plays that have debuted here, from the early *Night and Her Stars* to *Everett Beekin* and last season’s *The Injured Party* (in which a grandmother fills the parental role). The tortured and tortuous relationship of a Jewish mother and her mentally damaged daughter drives

the plot of his *The American Plan*, currently enjoying a critically lauded revival on Broadway.

SCR began working with Richard Greenberg in 1988 and since then has commissioned 12 plays and produced 10 by the prolific author. One of the satisfactions of such a long-lasting relationship is the opportunity to gain insights into a playwright’s work across years of development and maturation. SCR audience members who have been with us long enough will no doubt be able to recognize Greenberg’s distinctive voice by now, and to take note of the subjects that recur through his body of work, from the complex dynamics within a family, to the way money can wring the decency out of an individual soul, to the various forms that betrayal can take, and the price it can exact on both the betrayer and the betrayed. The issues are always deeply serious, yet the plays inevitably percolate with wit and abundant humor.

Those qualities make Greenberg the quintessential SCR playwright.