

KANSAS ABDUCTION

Catherine Filloux, a new League member, recently was a playwright in residence at the William Inge Center for the Arts in Independence, Kansas. During the two-month residency she lived and wrote in Inge's boyhood home. Her play, *Lemkin's House*, won the 2006 PeaceWriting Award from the Omni Center for Peace. It will be remounted at the McGinn-Cazale Theatre in New York in September-October 2006, a co-production with Vital Theatre and Body Politic Theater. The opera for which Ms. Filloux wrote the libretto, *Where Elephant's Weep* (Composer Him Sophy), will be workshopped in Cambodia in November and in Lowell, Massachusetts in April 2007. Ms. Filloux is currently working on a play about Hurricane Katrina; playwright Joe Sutton is her collaborator on this project, which will premiere at Southern Rep in New Orleans in 2007.

ON A 90-DEGREE DAY in April 2006, I'm invited to speak to the Rotary Club of Independence, Kansas, about my playwright's residency at the William Inge House. When I get to my lunch table I shake hands with a Rotary Club member who is retired from the electricity business. He tells me I have a painfully strong handshake. I must add that this man's hand is probably twice the size of mine. My handshake is, according to him, "a New York City handshake." I ask the men at my table what they think of New York and the one who suggested I hurt his hand says that when he did business in New York City the attitude was cutthroat and distrustful. Another man, who worked in the computer business in Boston, tells the group that Boston was luckily much better than New York. Originally from Kansas, the man in the computer business saw "the sunflower state" as the perfect place to retire. He came home and foresees peaceful years ahead. I can see the restfulness in his eyes as I turn to look out at the golf course. Also at the table is the first African-American member of the Rotary Club in Independence. He is retired from work in postal services and has been active in civil rights in the region.

Soon after we start to eat, everyone stands suddenly to pledge allegiance to the flag, which is to the left of the podium. We then join in a Christian prayer, thanking God for Easter. The electricity man asks me if I pledge allegiance in New York and I say, no I haven't done it since high school. Still I believe in "Liberty and Justice for all." He laughs. One of the only two female

members in the Rotary Club introduces the three women scheduled to speak: a young actress, and two female playwrights, including myself. When the young actress rises, the older gentleman who led us in the pledge and the Easter prayer calls out with delight to the group that the actress really livened up their table. The whole room laughs heartily. The actress speaks of a large federal grant she is writing to fund theatre education in the Kansas public schools.

Next up at the podium I say that I came to Kansas to acknowledge the divide between my state and this one. I've made my home in New York City for the past twenty years, surrounded by mostly like-minded liberals. I've felt, after writing plays about Cambodia, Turkey, Bosnia, Rwanda and my parents' homelands of France and Algeria, that the world, *abroad*, is better known to me than Kansas. I'm not proud of this. Teaching a playwriting workshop at the high school in Coffeyville, eighteen miles from Independence, I've learned that all my students are against the war in Iraq, so I've instantly found the exception to the stereotype. Teaching theatre in the public schools is one of the most important goals I can endorse, having had quite a long playwriting career and love affair with the theatre. Remarkably, besides his name, William Inge, the city's hero has only one beautiful word emblazoned on his tombstone in the local cemetery: "Playwright." In addition, theatre subscribers in New York City seem to be getting older and older so education for the young can only help my field. As I say goodbye to the electricity man he tells me I have "a great personality."

At the high school in Coffeyville when

we talk about the war in Iraq one of my female students looks at me with her face scrunched up and asks, "Why are we at war again? Terrorism?" This young woman is writing a play about herself and her father, whom she hasn't seen in years. Though she remembers watching him slash her mother's arm to the bone, she still dreams of going to see him in prison, because they share a bond. When I ask the students to bring in photos, which inspire them for their plays, she brings in photos of her whole family in a scrapbook. Another young man, who is painfully shy and soft-spoken, lives in foster care. The picture he chooses is of a man carrying a large bundle of wood on his back into a slum in Nairobi. Actually the photo is of a woman carrying wood, but he's changed it to a man for his play. The man has his back to the camera. There's something about this young man that catches my attention. He has an obvious interest in lumber; he's a theatre *techie* who likes to work backstage. When I suggest that he look for research on the Internet, he tells me he doubts his mother will let him get on her computer. His foster family is so large he seems to lose track of his siblings, except for one sister. She threw away her copy of Inge's *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. She always does things to bug him. Later he informs me that she didn't actually throw it away. Anyway, he shows me the keys he now has to lock his bedroom door. A few weeks into the class he waves his hand passionately to read one of the roles in a play we're studying. He reads well and everyone can hear him.

The landscape around Independence
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is flat yellow hills with black cows. At dusk the trees become very dark and the ground seems to light up. As spring arrives the yellow changes to verdant green and there are purple, star-shaped Cat-Claw Mimosa flowers, rows of soft pink Cobaea Beardtongue blossoms and white bursts of Spider Milkweed. In the neighborhoods where I run I see virtually no people outside. When I hear noises my New York instincts make me turn around: the sounds are falling leaves or American flags blowing in the wind. No one is ever behind me.

On September 11 I remember walking across the Manhattan Bridge in the morning to get home, because I had been teaching in Brooklyn. I thought I saw the towers smoking in front of me but what I found out soon after was that what I'd seen were the towers *gone* in a massive cloud of smoke. People of all ages and races covered in white dust streamed across the bridge in the hot sun. The truth of September 11 has always felt different to me as a New Yorker than it feels in the rest of the nation. It struck me as a horrible and contained event, but there is something uncontained about how it serves as an icon for the nation. Uncontained in the

way it brings ghosts of terrorists sweeping through the flatlands of Kansas. In his Nobel Lecture, "Art, Truth and Politics," the playwright Harold Pinter says, "We were told that Iraq had a relationship with Al Qaeda and shared responsibility for the atrocity in New York of September 11, 2001. We were assured that this was true. It was not true."

Days before I went to the Rotary Club, a sixteen-year-old woman was abducted from her home right near the William Inge House. An "Amber-Alert" brought FBI special agents straight to the area, and the news vans lined the usually empty streets. Reports said the woman made a cell phone call to 911 at 6:30AM the day she was kidnapped. She had been forced at gunpoint into a white van after being told to run to a lumberyard. "I don't know which way I'm going. I can't see out," she is heard saying on the 911 audiotape.

Fifteen hours later the girl showed up unharmed at a neighbor's door saying she used glass to hit the male perpetrator in the back, nearby in the woods close to the ball fields. The girl is said to be one of the finest students at Independence High School, involved in sports and cheer-leading. Two days later it was announced at a press conference that the abduction

was a lie. It was confirmed that the girl had made up the whole story.

If the American flags and yellow ribbons in Independence do represent pride in our country and its actions, I wonder about the *truth* of what people believe the war to be about. The "war on terror" in the U.S. has convicted few terrorists, while in Iraq it may have served to recruit and train more than it has stopped. What would it mean if the flags actually represented the opposite of "And Liberty and Justice for all?" Pinter also says, about writers: "You find no shelter, no protection—unless you lie..." and it's true that I'd be lying if I found shelter at the Inge House. Perhaps the girl's problem will be explained as a product of her unstable mind. But what then in our country is the measuring stick for truth and sanity?

I know nothing about the *truth* of the woman who lied. "I don't know where I'm going. I can't see out." But I wonder what we are teaching our children to do? Running down the side of a slightly busier boulevard in Independence I have seen a series of wreaths along the side of a house, in memory of a little girl who was killed when she ran unexpectedly into the road. She was killed by a local ambulance. ●