Donald Margulies

By Steven Dedalus Burch

Biography:

After receiving the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for playwriting Donald Margulies emerged after two decades as one of the United States' finest dramatists, especially as a chronicler of late twentieth-century Jewish-American existence. He was born to Bob and Charlene Margulies in 1954 and raised in Trump Village, a high-rise housing project near Coney Island, Brooklyn built by the celebrity developer's father. As a child, Margulies was exposed to the Broadway theater by his parents, but he did not originally set out to make a career in the theater. He first attended Pratt Institute as an art major specializing in collages, and continued his studies at the State University of New York at Purchase. It was there that he decided to try playwriting. He requested a tutorial with Julius Novick, a professor of literature and drama studies and a renowned critic for the *Village Voice*, wrote his first play, and impressed Novick with the individual vision of American Jewish life that is to be found in many of his later plays..

After college, Margulies supported himself for three years as a graphics designer. In 1980 he was hired by the comedy team of Anne Meara and Jerry Stiller to write sketches for an HBO special. In 1983, the Jewish Repertory Theater in New York staged Gifted Children, Margulies' first full-length produced play. Found a Peanut, was produced by Joseph Papp at the Public Theatre in 1984, and in 1985 his next play, What's Wrong With This Picture?, began his long association with the Manhattan Theatre Club.

Sight Unseen received an Obie Award in 1992 and was a Pulitzer Finalist, as was Collected Stories in 1997. Both plays have been extremely popular around the United

States, receiving multiple productions in regional theaters. Margulies' most recent full-length play, Dinner With Friends, received the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Margulies joined New Dramatists in 1990 and was elected to the Dramatists Guild Council in 1993. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, New York Foundation for the Arts, and Creative Artists Public Service (CAPS), while his plays have premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club, South Coast Repertory, Actors Theatre of Louisville, and the Los Angeles Theatre Center. In the 1990s Margulies began teaching playwriting at Yale School of Drama. He currently lives in the East Rock section of New Haven with his wife, Dr. Lynn Street, and their son Miles.

Plays:

While Margulies' work largely focuses on the social and personal pressures of contemporary Jewish-American life, the impact of the Holocaust on his characters and on American Jewry in general looms largest in The Model Apartment (1985). While an inference may be found in his 1984 Found a Peanut in which a community of pre-teen Jewish children is disrupted by Gentile bullies, it is in his two later plays, The Loman Family Picnic (1989), and Sight Unseen (1991) that the subject of the Holocaust is peripherally approached.

The Loman Family Picnic presents a lower-middle class family's ascending the assimilation ladder, spending money it can never recoup to pay for their older son Stewie's bar mitzvah only to arrive at a more profound emptiness in their lives. Doris opens the play by sharing her dreams of upward mobility to the audience and confides that, though highly intelligent, her sons have not been brought up to display their

superiority: "I raised my boys to stand out but not too much, you know?, otherwise people won't like you anymore. Look what happened to the Jews in Europe. Better you should have friends and be popular, than be showy and alone" (Margulies, Sight Unseen and Other Plays 200). At the start of the play's second act, in a fantasy version of the bar mitzvah, Doris conjures up dead relatives, including Uncle Izzy from the concentration camp and Cousin Rivka from the Triangle Factory fire. The play, though, does not address directly the Holocaust except as one of many historical conditions that inform Jewish life in America.

Sight Unseen, in its tale of an artist's recent celebrity during his first European exhibition, presents a riveting showdown between the painter, Jonathan, and a German interviewer, Grete, in which she scathingly comments on Jonathan's most notorious painting which features a black man making love to a white woman in a vandalized Jewish cemetery. When he attempts to counter her interpretation of the painting as a rape, Grete responds by dismissing Jonathan's view of himself as a disruptive artist and outside the mainstream, asserting that "the artist, like the Jew, prefers to see himself as alien from the mainstream culture. For the Jewish *artist* to acknowledge that the *contrary* is true, that he is *not* alien, but rather, *assimilated* into that mainstream culture . . ." (316). Interrupting her, Jonathan immediately takes offense, more at being categorized as a Jewish painter and emphasizes, "I'm an *American* painter. *American* is the adjective, not *Jewish*, *American*" (316). This passionate and well-received drama continues one thematic line from The Loman Family Picnic, that of a perceived loss of Jewish identity, an identity that is partially informed by the Holocaust and the Diaspora, and codified by traditional enemies.

Unlike Margulies' other plays, <u>The Model Apartment</u> directly, pointedly, and disturbingly confronts the Holocaust's legacy among the survivors, their descendants, and even the bystanders of those descendants. In his "Introduction" to the second volume of <u>The Theatre of the Holocaust</u>, Robert Skloot invokes the public image of Anne Frank (as does Margulies in the play) to ask incisively: "What ethical place can be occupied by audiences whose familiarity with history is *inevitably* biased or partial, and therefore in some absolute sense, *always* mistaken?" (Skloot 11). This question seems to strike at the very heart of Margulies' profoundly upsetting "comedy." In the course of its often scabrous depiction of a monumentally dysfunctional family, the play continues to force us to choke on our own laughter as we confront our own culturally preconditioned responses to the survivors of the Holocaust, their families, and to the real – and imagined? – ghosts of its victims, in this case Max' daughter Deborah and Lola's camp friend, Anne Frank.

<u>The Model Apartment</u> opens with the arrival of Max and Lola at a model condominium showcase apartment in Florida in the middle of the night. They have purchased a new condominium apartment only to discover on their arrival that it has not been completed, necessitating their spending the next couple of days at the development's showcase apartment. As they fumble around the apartment and discover that most of its appliances are for show only and have no practical function, we quickly learn that they have left New York City to begin their new life of retirement. But we also learn that they have fled their only child, their grown daughter Debby.

Later that night, however, Debby arrives, a grotesquely obese woman-child in her thirties, who is both disturbed and disturbing. Much later that night Debby's lover Neil, a

fifteen-year old mildly retarded African-American youth, breaks into the apartment searching for her. For the remainder of the night, Debby consciously disrupts the sanctuary to which her parents have fled and we discover that the parents have kept their move a secret from their profoundly needy daughter. A fifth character also "joins" them as Max sleeps: the ghost of his first daughter, Deborah, who died in infancy along with Max' first wife in a concentration camp while Max spent the war hiding in the woods. In Max' dreams, she is an adult, having somehow survived, and she soothingly converses with him, offering Max an emotional and spiritual succor from the monstrosity of his everyday life.

At the play's core is the fragile attempt, wildly and frighteningly comic, by each member of this dysfunctional family to seek and claim a refuge from their overwhelmingly sad present-day existence. For the remainder of the evening, Debby subjects her parents to yet another display of her gluttonous needs for food, sex, and affection. Her arrival brings with it an all-out, continuing assault on Max' wall of silence regarding his guilt over the trauma of surviving.

Told in fifteen short scenes, The Model Apartment displays the anguish and the anger that this cataclysmic event has had upon the children of the survivors. In Scene One, Max and Lola arrive at night only to find that nothing in the showcase condo is real. The refrigerator and television especially are just hollow shells, yet Max and Lola grumpily make their adjustment to the temporary inconveniences, unwilling to complain or to touch and alter anything in the apartment. By Scene Four Debby arrives and proceeds to wreak her emotional havoc with devastating precision. In a near Joycean stream-of-consciousness reverie, Debby energetically delivers an aria of historical and

pop cultural references and juxtapositions, from singer Connie Francis' rape trial to Howard Johnson's restaurant and motel chain being a front for the Nazis, before she moves on to pizza and love-making with her boyfriend Neil, and concludes by accusing her parents of running out without telling her they were moving to Florida. By Scene Six, as Lola attempts to accommodate her daughter's physical and emotional needs, Max finds his only refuge in sleep as he conjures for the first time in the play the ghost of his first daughter, Deborah, a gentle and elusive presence who slips around the darkened room as her father lovingly hums a Yiddish lullaby to her.

Scene Seven brings more of Debby's stream-of-consciousness chatter as she verbally juggles late twentieth-century American pop cultural images – Beefsteak Charlie's, Hogan's Heroes' Captain Klink, Miss America, Hollywood – with a comically grotesque fantasy of a beauty contest and summer camp outing in the concentration camp. Later, as Debby and Max sleep, Lola awakens from a dream/memory of abandoning *her* own mother in the concentration camp at Belsen, by not allowing herself to be visibly connected to the older woman by the Nazi camp guards.

In Scene Nine, Neil crashes into the apartment looking for Debby, and they immediately begin fornicating in the room in front of her horrified parents. While examining the apartment, Neil accidentally snaps off a fake candle from the apartment's dining table display, antagonizing Max who wants to be accommodating to the condo company and to not disturb anything that does not belong to him or Lola. Trying to alleviate the tension between her husband and the stranger, Lola engages him in conversation about his family, discovering that Neil is homeless but that he had grown up in the same section of Brooklyn where Max and Lola used to live. This prods Lola to

remember her time at Bergen-Belsen, equating his present homelessness with her youthful misery. In one the play's most dazzling sequences, Lola describes her friendship at Bergen-Belsen with another teenager, Anne Frank, and Lola's encouragement of Anne to write another diary, of her experiences in the camp. Lola weeps at the memory of Anne dying in her arms and of the Nazi's destruction of the second diary in which Lola was the heroine:

> The Heroine. Well, it was *her* book, true, but I was there, on every single page. "Lola did *this*," or "Lola said *this* today." "Lola gives me the strength to go on." "Lola has such courage." Can you imagine? *Me*, Lola, I gave Anne Frank the will to live may she rest in peace (247).

After lamenting that if this diary, her story, had not been destroyed it would have given hope to millions, and that she, Lola, could have inspired others through her example of triumphing against suffering, Lola finishes this sad, ridiculous, mesmerizing story only to have Neil respond with "Who?" (248).

The play reaches its almost unbearable crescendo of comic horror when Max decides that they must escape from Debby as Lola grows weary from this battle between husband and daughter. When Max tells Debby that he and Lola are leaving, Debby begins to frantically rearrange the furniture in an attempt to create more space in the cramped apartment. Then she confronts Max with her fears that he does not love or like her, that she is too fat, and this leads to an implosion of all the cultural references that she has carried with her, from Josef Mengele to Maximilian Schell in <u>Judgment at Nuremberg</u>, as she tearfully explains:

> They're all inside me. All of them. Anne Frank. The Six Million. Bubbie and Zaydie and Hitler and Deborah. When my stomach talks, it's *them* talking. Telling me they're hungry. I eat for them so they won't be hungry. Sometimes I don't know what I'm saying 'cause it's *them* talking (255).

This startling speech ends with Debby bewailing that she can never be Deborah to Max, that she's sorry that she was not exterminated like her, before she angrily accuses Max of letting all the dead people inside her room. The scene ends as she attempts to strangle Max.

Trussed up and waiting for the ambulance to arrive, Debby sits gagged as Max lovingly strokes her hair and explains that all he wants is peace and that they must part forever. Lola, however, realizes that she can neither abandon her daughter nor can she join Max. In the play's moving final scene we are presented with a final ambiguous image in the play, that of Max asleep in a chaise lounge, dressed in a cabana suit, and listening to an opera on a Walkman as Deborah enters and brings Max up to date on all he has missed since the war. She concludes with a description of a seder Max missed, and of her being continually hungry at the feast: "but my eyes are closing, they're closing, and I don't want to fall asleep and miss the feast, I don't want to miss the feast" (261).

Commentary:

In Stages of Annihilation: Theatrical Representations of the Holocaust, Edward Isser sub-classifies Holocaust drama into three major groupings: ghetto and martyr drama, survivor drama, and death camp drama. Logically placing The Model Apartment into the second category, Isser submits that this second category is the most common of

Holocaust theatrical reenactments for it presents haunted or obsessed protagonists for whom the trauma continues to intrude on their contemporary lives. More recently, new survivor drama adds another element to the Holocaust's lasting legacy: alienation between the generations (Isser 23-24). This legacy, in Margulies' drama, is, in part, one of profound longing for an escape not only from a memory that is unsustainable, but from a culture and a world which cannot restore dignity to the victims.

Max and Lola are both initially escaping from a daughter who engorges on the trash of a disposable culture and whose physical and emotional monstrosity is the ultimate and final grotesque distortion of their identities as European Jews. But Debby does not alone account for their pathetic flight to a Florida condo. Max and Lola's discomfort in the model apartment provides possible echoes in the audience of Max and Lola's existence in the ghettoes and camps where a numbing passivity and acquiescence toward authority had taken hold of their daily living. That the apartment's refrigerator is only a prop, like the shower heads at Auschwitz, stirs a discomfort in the audience toward this couple's inability to assert their agency by rejecting their circumstances. Max and Lola, at least initially, want only to shut their eyes and blot out the world around them. It is a measure of the play's sadness that, in the end, Lola's absence in the final scene suggests that she cannot shut out the world which contains her disturbed and needy daughter, even as Max has finally freed himself from his real family and found instead his refuge in imagined conversations with the ghost of his dead daughter.

Lola's struggle becomes perhaps more profound, at least more life embracing, as she potentially severs her connection with the present (Max) in order to remain with the deeply troubled future (Debby). Even her compulsive need in re-telling her (perhaps

imagined) connection to Anne Frank (and in Debby's echoing and prodding of the story, it has clearly become a ritualistic re-telling in the life of Lola and her family), Lola continues to seek meaning and closure about her own suffering as she laments the loss of Anne's second diary in which Lola was the book's heroine: "I could've given people hope" (Margulies 248).

Yet while generally acclaimed, The Model Apartment has not surprisingly alienated some audiences and critics, such as Laurie Winer of the Los Angeles Times, who, reviewing a 1997 production at the La Jolla Playhouse, faults the play as "stubbornly problematic" and a "deeply disturbing comedy [which] rings hollow in a futureless setting" (Winer 1). Part of the problem for some is what Winer decries as the play's hopelessness. Faulting what he perceives as the incessant need in the American theater and cinema for heroic narratives with hopeful and uplifting endings, Lawrence Langer writes of this dichotomy that "Holocaust writing itself serves two masters: a clear intellectual perception of how Nazism shrank the area of dignified choice and reduced the options for human gestures; and the instinct to have victims survive heroically even within these less-than-human alternatives" (Langer 223). But such heroic survival of the meaningless cruelty of the Holocaust, Langer claims, only falsifies the experience of those who suffered and perished. The Model Apartment bravely refuses to sentimentalize the victims of the Holocaust. That said, however, Margulies' grotesque comedy remains a difficult and frequently painful portrait at odds with our need to sanctify the sufferers.

Robert Skloot calls The Model Apartment "an adult cartoon" (Skloot 26), and rightly concludes that the play is a failed "search for meaning and love in a post-

Holocaust world" (28). All four of the play's characters skate quite perilously close to the thin ice of trivializing the enormity of the pain and loss of all who have suffered. Max, Lola, Debby and Neil are the human detritus of the late twentieth century and none of them finds either meaning or justification for their sufferings. Only Max, through abandoning all ties to the real, human world of his earthly family, appears in the final scene to be able to release himself from his trauma. Or does he? Can he? How deep is this freedom from history that he is finally experiencing? Margulies wisely concludes his story here, leaving any further resolution up to the audience, challenging us perhaps to accept that the price we all must pay for the Holocaust is that there will never be any resolution.

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Plays:

Luna Park. 1982.
Gifted Children. 1983.
Found a Peanut. 1984.
The Model Apartment. 1985.
Zimmer. 1987.
What's Wrong With This Picture? 1988.
The Loman Family Picnic. 1989.
Sight Unseen. 1991.
Pitching to the Star. 1992.
July 7, 1994. 1995.
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