

OLIVER MORRIS



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ELOQUENCE OF THE INARTICULATE

NEW YORK—"To me, a lack of eloquence can contain a wealth of truth." John Patrick Shanley is speaking about his play "Danny and the Deep Blue Sea," an L.A. Theatre Works production opening Feb. 1 at the Back Alley Theatre.

He is also speaking about himself and the early years that drove him inside himself.

"When I'm truly moved, I don't speak reams. I croak out a few words and that's it." So it is with the two characters of the play, the frenzied young man and fragile young woman who meet by chance in a neighborhood bar and begin a courtship that is alternately tender and violent.

Their language is that of the emotionally disenfranchised. They choke on their own anger, frustration and disconnection. Usually in very loud voices.

"It wasn't a play I chose to write," Shanley says, speaking easily in his white-walled apartment in the unfashionable northern tip of Manhattan.

"It was a play I had to write. I was in a place in my life where I

By ERNEST SCHIER

felt unbearably lonely. The distance between me and the next person was several thousand miles. I could let out my feelings by killing someone, or by writing a play." Afterthought: "The someone I might have done away with was myself."

Shanley's eyes are wide open, almost innocent, behind glasses that give him the look of an owlish cherub. He is 6-foot-1, but he slouches, a condition that may reflect a relationship he had with a girlfriend who was 14 inches short-

er, or a subconscious rejection of a hitch in the Marine Corps.

"I wrote 'Danny' in an effort to understand myself, not as a sociological tract about the lower classes," he recalls. "It was very much about me, the people I grew up with, went to school with, lived with. It's about the eloquence of the inarticulate."

Shanley grew up in the East Bronx. He had a stable home life, but the streets were mined with aggression.

"From the time I was 5 years old,

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INSIDE CALENDAR

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SHANLEY

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I was in several fights a week. It was a very hands-on neighborhood, a real boxing ring. Once an older guy and his friend chased me up five stories of an apartment building and dangled me by my legs from the roof."

A smile. "You don't forget stuff like that."

He went to "four high schools in four years. The Irish Christian Brothers were bad teachers, very brutal and insensitive. I couldn't function in that environment. My reaction was to read a book.

"I lived in a dream world. If somebody asked me where I had been, I might say, 'I was climbing the Himalayas.' And I meant it. I couldn't tell the difference between illusion and reality."

He was made to see a psychiatrist, who congratulated him, after their discussion, on being so well-traveled. "And I had never been out of the Bronx."

He relishes the irony of the day he came home from school with (1) a report card showing he had failed six out of six subjects, (2) a notice of suspension and (3) a gold-lettered certificate from a scholastic testing service awarded him for scoring in the top 1% in the nation.

After dropping out of New York University, where he had been on academic probation, he joined the Marine Corps.

"Here was yet another violent, repressive place with disturbed people. But in the Marines, there were rules." His voice rises to express how amazing that had seemed and grins: "It was so civilized after my neighborhood that it

was very relaxing."

Shanley returned to NYU, wrote plays and graduated valedictorian. His transformation was almost complete.

"For a very long time my goal in life was not to see anything, because I found it so painful. I wanted to shut out the real world because I didn't like the signals I was getting from it."

At 35, Shanley is a prolific writer who is beginning to taste success. A screenplay about his old neighborhood, "Five Corners," has been optioned by Tony Bill and will be made by Handmade Films, an English company. ("I hope they make it soon. I only have enough money to live until Valentine's Day.")

Manhattan Theatre Club has scheduled the premiere of another of his plays, "Women of Manhattan." He has also completed a new full-length play, "Italian-American Reconciliation: A Fable," set in New York's Little Italy.

Shanley writes rapidly: "I spend about nine months of the year thinking and about three months writing." And he is on a roll. "I've finally started to write about what I want to write about. For a long time I felt I had a lump in my

throat—it was real, a physical feeling. Then I broke through to writing about what means something to me.

"I hadn't realized the power of the truth. If a play is not the truth, it is boring. The audience knows when you're telling the truth and when you're lying."

He also wrote poetry for many years, some of it published, and a novel. "I burned the novel. I had forgotten to put a plot in it."

He has another reason for writing plays. "It's boring to spend all your time in a room writing by yourself. If you are a playwright, you have to come out of that room and be with other people. That's part of your job."

Shanley has no rules for writing. "I try to say everything I know in the first five minutes. Then I'm in unknown territory. Then the play takes place in the present tense.

"So it isn't something I figured out and now I'm going to share my wisdom with the audience.

"I love the people I write about. I know them. I was one of them."

Schier is director of the National Critics Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Conn.

MUSEUM

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former president of the County Museum of Art's board of trustees, noted that his institution and the Museum of Contemporary Art both would be "delighted" to have the collection, which he characterized as among "the finest in private hands." Since Weisman prefers to house his foundation's art as a separate entity, Sherwood urged

the council to take advantage of its "extraordinary opportunity."

Stansbury said the council had been "extremely cautious" in working out a "prudent use of Greystone" and advocated positive action.

Donna Ellman likened her city to "a modern-day Camelot in a day of 'Clockwork Orange'" and urged the addition of "a cultural gem to our crown" of wealth and commerce.