

**VILLAGE PRESERVATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

Oral History Interview

JOHN GUARE

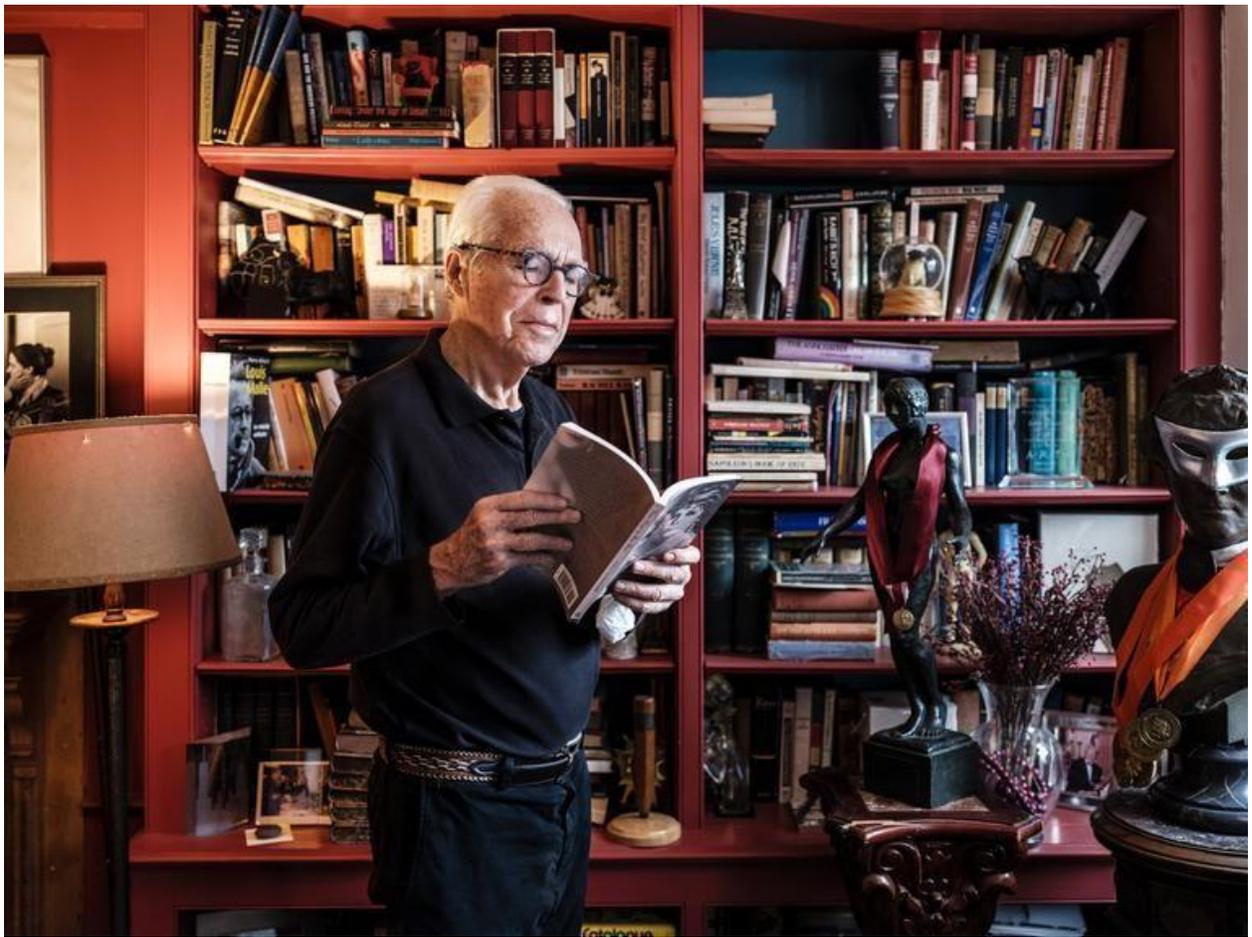
By Sarah Dzedzic

New York, NY

September 10, 2020

## Oral History Interview with John Guare, September 10, 2020

Narrator(s)	John Guare
Address	-
Birthyear	1938
Birthplace	New York, NY
Narrator Age	82
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
Place of Interview	remote
Date of Interview	September 10, 2020
Duration of Interview	69 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Email approval
Photographs	Y
Format Recorded	32 kHz
Archival File Names	-
MP3 File Name	Guare_JohnGVSHPOralHistory_zoomaudio.mp3 [28.4 MB]
Order in Oral Histories	47 [#4 2020]



John Guare, 2019  
Photo by Chris Sorensen for the *Wall Street Journal*

## Quotes from Oral History Interview with John Guare

### Sound-bite

“My name is John Guare. I’m a playwright, born in Manhattan, and lived here all my life. I’ve lived at the same address for forty-six years. And they’ll carry me out...”

“...I was trying to find a voice. I would write and write and write, but not so much as to write finished plays but to find a voice that was mine. When you’re young, you can copy, you’re good mimics...But to have your own voice was the thing that I was struggling with, hoping to find, working not to have finished products so much as to find something that sounded like me.”

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### Additional Quotes

“...thanks to the McCarthy period, my father thought it was a Communist den. I didn’t have to go to school. So I stayed enrolled in Saint Joan’s. The nuns agreed with my father. That was what really made me a writer, because from the time I was eleven till I was fourteen, until I had to go to high school, I didn’t go to school very much. They would mail me—I’d go down every number of weeks to take tests and things. But I went to the movies every day and read and that’s all I did. And I had some great friends up there that I would meet after school, and I learned to ride a bike. That’s where my friendships started, in Ellenville. But again, it was always—I think of my youth as blessedly, very solitary—I was very happy. I loved my parents. I was happy at home. They didn’t bother me. I didn’t bother them. So that was that.” (Guare p. 3–4)

“...Off-Off-Broadway had started, and places like the Caffe Cino and Cafe La MaMa had sprung up, or at least came into my awareness. And then Edward Albee did something—a long-time Village resident—did something so great with all the money he made from *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* He leased a theater on Vandam Street. I think it’s called the SoHo Playhouse today. I think it’s still there. And from ’63 until ’69, he put on six months of plays. He paid for six months of plays to be put on, to be given a couple of weeks’ rehearsal, and run three or four or five performances. I was in that first group of playwrights.

So I had a home. There was suddenly a place for me in New York. I felt that I could fit into the Caffe Cino. The Village at that time was absolutely wonderful. I heard on a Thursday that Theatre Genesis was putting on—doing new works cold. They were doing new plays on the following Monday. And I wrote a play on Thursday and ran over there with it and the play opened on Monday. That’s what it was like. And for the first time, I met a whole lot of

like-minded people. Lanford Wilson, and I became aware of Terrence McNally, Village resident, Sam Shepard, Leonard Melfi, Megan Terry. There was a real community of people working. It was a thrilling time.” (Guare p. 6–7)

“...I picked up a piano. I used to love to play the piano. The day the piano arrived, I started playing pop songs, Cole Porter and stuff, and singing, which I loved to do. I heard this voice on the other side of the wall saying, “Shut up! Shut up!” It was in the middle of the day! I wasn’t going to shut up. I kept going and they threw stuff against the wall. The next day, it happened all over again. I went to see at 107 Bank Street, who lived next door, and I checked the directory. I had moved next door to John Cage and Merce Cunningham. So my music and piano playing tormented them for about two years. And I loved living there. I just loved that intimacy. I loved that wall being between me and Merce Cunningham and John Cage. But that’s what the Village was in those days.” (Guare p. 9)

## Summary of Oral History Interview with John Guare

John Guare was born in Manhattan and raised in Jackson Heights, Queens as well as upstate New York, and East Atlantic Beach, where his father built the family a house in 1930. Guare describes spending much of his childhood alone, as was his preference, reading, listening to soap operas, and going to the movies. He wrote his first play at age eleven and cultivated his knowledge of theater while he was at Georgetown University, attending shows at the Shubert Theater in Washington, DC.

He went on to attend Yale Drama School at a time when the work of Edward Albee caused a major shift in the landscape of American playwrighting. He discovered a home within the Off-Off-Broadway scene in New York and was soon part of the Albee-run Playwrights Unit, where he was able to write and test out new material weekly in front of a community of like-minded people. He also credits the advent of not-for-profit theater as an important milestone in increasing general access to experimental plays and bemoans the prohibitive expense that has driven much experimental theater out of the Village starting as early as the 1980s.

Despite the fact that the Village is no longer the nexus of the experimental theater scene, Guare—with input from his wife, preservationist Adele Chatfield-Taylor, who joined the interview—recounts that the Village has been the perfect fit for his career as a playwright: living in close proximity to other artists, the “life-size” scale of the neighborhood, and its unpredictable and regenerating energy. Guare speculates that some of the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on New York could be corrections to the expense of living in Manhattan, and the Village in particular, as well as corrections to the injustices that have driven movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too.

John Guare has been a resident of the Village for the last sixty years and has lived in the same home on 12th Street with his wife since 1974.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

## **General Interview Notes**

This is a transcription of an Oral History that was conducted by Village Preservation.

The Village Preservation Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Greenwich Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

THANK YOU

## Oral History Interview Transcript

**Dziedzic:** Today is September, 10, 2020 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing John Guare for the Village Preservation Oral History Project, and we're conducting this interview remotely during the global COVID-19 pandemic and connecting via video conference. I'll add that John's wife, Adele Chatfield-Taylor, is also listening in. Before we begin, I wanted to start with a living land acknowledgment. Today, I'm on the traditional land of the Munsee Lenape people and acknowledge for this archival recording the Lenape community and especially their elders, past and present, and express gratitude for their stewardship of this land, for contributing to its geography and the use of their language and place names.

So John, can you start first by telling me where you are?

**Guare:** I'm out at East Atlantic Beach in a house my father built in 1930, right on the ocean. I've spent almost every summer of my life here. So I've lived over fifty-five years—I don't know how many—near sixty years in the Village and I've been in this house for eighty-two years. So I don't move around much.

**Dziedzic:** [laughs] And before we begin with questions, can you just say your name and just kind of a brief two-sentence introduction.

**Guare:** My name is John Guare. I'm a playwright, born in Manhattan, and lived here all my life. And still love the Village. I've lived at the same address for forty-six, forty-five, fifty years—forty-five, forty-six years. And they'll carry me out. So that's it.

**Dziedzic:** And can you tell me a little bit more about your early life, and your roots, and where you grew up, and who you grew up with?

**Guare:** Well, I was raised—I went to school in Jackson Heights. We moved to Jackson Heights because it was on the same block as St. Joan of Arc Grammar School. I didn't have to cross the

street to go to class. And also it was close to the Woodside stop on the Long Island Railroad, so we could get out to the beach, which has always been the center focus of our lives. Yes, then we lived up in Ellenville, New York, off and on for part of the time, upstate New York. And then I went to high school in Brooklyn, Saint John's Prep, now out of business. I guess so—I guess it's not there anymore. And then I went to Georgetown [University], to Washington, D.C., to college, and Yale Drama School for graduate school. Then I was in the Air Force for six months and then I came and headed right for the Village. That was 1964.

**Dziedzic:** Can you tell me a little bit more about your parents, where they had come from, how they—

**Guare:** My father was from Brooklyn but his family was from Gloucester and Montpelier, Vermont. My mother was from Lynn, Massachusetts. My father lived in New York all his life and my mother moved here. They were both just New Yorkers. My father worked on Wall Street, the New York Stock Exchange, and my mother, I guess, was what they called in those days a housewife, even though she hated it. She missed working. She loved to go back to work whenever she could. And I have no brothers or sisters.

I was very grateful to be an only child, living in New York City, growing up in the '40s and '50s. I realized that—when I was seven in 1945, was when the war was over, and that's when everything in New York City after the war was absolutely brand new. So the place has always been miraculous to me, even in these ghastly times.

**Dziedzic:** Can you explain, I guess, what the block was like that you lived on, and who you used to hang out or play with when you were young?

**Guare:** Nobody. I loved to listen to soap operas. I was always happy when I thought I had the flu—the grippe, they called it then—and I could stay home. [00:05:07] And I could hear the kids up at school and I didn't have to be there. Not until I got into high school did I have friends, and

they lived in Staten Island. I went to Staten Island a lot. And had great friends in college. But I was just a very quiet, a happily isolated kid, who loved to read.

I wrote my first play when I was eleven and it was done in the garage across the street here where we are in East Atlantic Beach. Long Island's leading newspaper came in to do the story on our show and an eleven-year-old playwright, and that was that. I lived to go to the movies, and we'd go to see a show once or twice a year.

**Chatfield-Taylor:** Talk about Bank Street.

**Guare:** What?

**Chatfield-Taylor:** Talk about Bank Street.

**Guare:** Well, but that's later on. She's talking about growing up.

**Taylor:** Okay.

**Dziedzic:** We'll talk about Bank Street later. I'm curious about how you developed an ear for dialog as a kid.

**Guare:** By being very quiet and listening to everything around me.

**Dziedzic:** I think I can relate, but I never developed an ability to write dialog [laughs]. So you did mention briefly moving Upstate and I'm wondering about that change of scenery, how that kind of opened up a different world.

**Guare:** Well, it was wonderful because thanks to the McCarthy period, my father thought it was a Communist den. I didn't have to go to school. So I stayed enrolled in Saint Joan's. The nuns agreed with my father. That was what really made me a writer because from the time I was

eleven till I was fourteen, until I had to go to high school, I didn't go to school very much. They would mail me—I'd go down every number of weeks to take tests and things. But I went to the movies every day and read and that's all I did. And I had some great friends up there that I would meet after school, and I learned to ride a bike. That's where my friendships started, in Ellenville. But again, it was always—I think of my youth as blessedly, very solitary—I was very happy. I loved my parents. I was happy at home. They didn't bother me. I didn't bother them. So that was that.

**Dziedzic:** You mentioned going to Georgetown. Can you talk about your thought process around deciding to attend Georgetown?

**Guare:** I had no choice because it was a Catholic school. I went to a Catholic high school and we were only allowed to apply to Catholic colleges.

**Dziedzic:** And what was it about Georgetown, of the Catholic colleges that existed?

**Guare:** Mainly the drama club and a couple of writing classes. Georgetown was like an extension of high school than a college. It was just fun. We had a lot of parties. I learned to party there. Georgetown was scholastically a non-event.

Then Yale was great. Yale, the whole world became Technicolor when I went to Yale because it was people doing what they wanted to do.

**Dziedzic:** Do you think that that was a characteristic of the time or a characteristic of Yale?

**Guare:** Of Yale. What's wonderful about—I know these are very troubling times in schools now but back then, the one thing that Yale taught me was courage. [00:10:01] And a place like Georgetown taught you only to be frightened of everything—lead a quiet life, make money, and donate to the college and go to Mass every day, every week. I mean, I was at Yale in 1960. I had

been there for about six to seven weeks and who came to speak to Yale, T.S. Eliot. I said, oh, my God, this is a different world!

The things that I loved about it, memorably about Georgetown and Yale, was that they were both—in those days, shows tried out of town before they opened on Broadway. So every week, there would be a new show opening at the National [Theatre] or the Shubert [Theatre] in Washington. Then at Yale, at the Shubert [Theatre] in New Haven. And that was thrilling to see new plays all the time in the process of being rewritten. That, to me, was the most magical thing about both of those experiences.

**Dziedzic:** What was the canon like when you were at Yale in terms of studying in the drama school?

**Guare:** Well, Edward Albee—*The Zoo Story* opened in 1959 and changed all the rules. It was the first time that we had an American playwright. I mean, we had Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, who were great, but they belonged to the [19]40s. They belonged to another time. All the playwrights we had to study and revere were European, whether it was [Eugène] Ionesco or [Samuel] Beckett or Jean Anouilh, who was big then, or [Jean] Giraudoux. When Albee came, *The Zoo Story* changed all the rules because for the first time, people on that stage talking the way, living the way they did in a world that I recognized. That was the most thrilling thing.

**Dziedzic:** What was that like to be a student at that time?

**Guare:** Thrilling, because the professors didn't know what they were—they were trying to make Albee be much more conventional than he was. They were trying to make him pure [Henrik] Ibsen. In those days, [Anton] Chekhov wasn't very—genuinely, Chekhov was secondary to Ibsen. He was felt as being soft and Russian, undramatic. When [*Who's Afraid of*] *Virginia Woolf?* opened up in '62, the world really changed. I'll have to check my dates but it was mainly Edward who was the one who changed all the rules and made a future possible.

**Dziedzic:** And what was your relationship to content, I guess? What were you writing about at that time?

**Guare:** I wrote my Albee plays. I also liked comedies. I was trying to find a voice. I would write and write and write, but not so much as to write finished plays but to find a voice that was mine. When you're young, you can copy, you're good mimics. You can copy Tennessee. Young writers are like parrots, mynah birds. You can copy down what it is—mimic their voice. But to have your own voice was the thing that I was struggling with, hoping to find, working not to have finished products so much as to find something that sounded like me.

**Dziedzic:** And can you talk about deciding to move back to New York? [00:15:03]

**Guare:** Sure. I had written a play at Yale that Audrey Wood—Tennessee's agent, the great agent, Audrey Wood—became aware of and she signed me as a writer. To graduate from Yale with Audrey Wood as your agent was stupendous. I said I had no money. I literally didn't know what I was going to do after Yale. I had no money at all! And she said, "I'll do for you what I did for Tennessee. I'll get you a job in California." So I went out to California to start work and I got my draft notice. I had to spend that summer of '63 trying to get into a reserve unit because I couldn't bear to spend two years in the service. Nothing was really going on in the world—Vietnam was just sort of a distant something. [President John F.] Kennedy had sent some soldiers over there to look at something. It wasn't an issue in any way. It was just going to Germany for two years. Literally, at the last minute, I got into a reserve unit in the Air Force.

So that took care of me until April of 1964. I was going to stay in California because the money at this job was absolutely terrific. I had just learned—it was \$150 a week and it would go up to \$300 a week—and it just seemed to be an unbelievable amount of money. But at that time, in New York, it was phenomenal. I mean, Richard Burton was in *Hamlet*, and Barbara Streisand was in *Funny Girl*, and Carol Channing was in *Hello, Dolly!* There were all these plays opening up and I wanted to see them. On the spur of the moment, I just never showed up at MGM and I came back home to New York.

That's also the time I discovered, in that period in 1964, something I had never heard of before: Off-Off-Broadway had started, and places like the Caffe Cino and Cafe La MaMa had sprung up, or at least came into my awareness. And then Edward Albee did something—a long-time Village resident—did something so great with all the money he made from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* He leased a theater on Vandam Street. I think it's called the SoHo Playhouse today. I think it's still there. And from '63 until '69, he put on six months of plays. He paid for six months of plays to be put on, to be given a couple of weeks' rehearsal and run three or four or five performances. I was in that first group of playwrights.

So I had a home. There was suddenly a place for me in New York. I felt that I could fit into the Caffe Cino. The Village at that time was absolutely wonderful. I heard on a Thursday that Theatre Genesis was putting on—doing new works cold. They were doing new plays on the following Monday. And I wrote a play on Thursday and ran over there with it and the play opened on Monday. That's what it was like. And for the first time, I met a whole lot of like-minded people. Lanford Wilson, and I became aware of Terrence McNally, Village resident, Sam Shepard, Leonard Melfi, Megan Terry. There was a real community of people working. It was a thrilling time.

What had first drawn me to the Village was when I was—I'll just go back one little flashback, but it's a key flashback. In 1953, I think it was, my fifteenth birthday, my parents took me to see *Wonderful Town*, a [Betty] Comden, [Adolph] Green and Leonard Bernstein show. [00:20:01] It took place in Greenwich Village and the opening number was, "Here we live, here we love, this is the place for self-expression. Life is great, life is sweet. Interesting people living on Christopher Street." And before that number was over, I knew that's where I was going to spend the rest of my life, in that world. And it never disappointed me.

**Dziedzic:** Can you talk more about why you were drawn to experimental theater and also a place like Greenwich Village when you were—

**Guare:** Because it was all brand new! I mean, at that point, you felt, in the early '60s, that in the Village, you were living in the equivalent of Paris in the 1920s. And who wouldn't want to be

there? Everything was new. Everything was brand new. There was a whole new way of putting on plays, a new way of going to the theater. It was not Broadway. It was not yesterday. It was right now. It just seemed to be a brilliant present, and who wouldn't want to live there?

**Dziedzic:** Where were you living at the time?

**Guare:** I was all over the place. I was half living out here. When it would get warm, I'd live out here at the beach. I would stay at my parents' in Jackson Heights, which I hated. But I couldn't find a place to live. I didn't want to get trapped into a lease. And then I got, in 1966, [Robert] Brustein took over Yale Drama School and that became a center place for me. It was just a wonderful, wonderful place. Sam Shepard, and Ken Brown, and Megan Terry, and Barbara Garson, who wrote *MacBird!*, were fellows at Yale that year and it was just a wonderful, wonderful year. And I lived up there. I moved back to New Haven and then I went to Europe for about six months.

And then I came back and I found an apartment on the corner of 10th Street and West 4th Street, a fourth-floor walkup with a twenty-foot ceiling, with a skylight, and a wood-burning fireplace, and an eat-in kitchen, a nice bathroom. Man! And there were five windows in the apartment and it looked out onto gardens in the back. The rent, unbelievably, was \$32 a month. The landlord said, that's all I can charge you because the previous tenants were two sisters who lived in this studio, this walkup, for thirty years at \$22 a month. So that's all I can go up to. He finally asked if he could go up to \$90 a month, and I was like okay, okay, I'll do it. I'll take it.

It was great because Terrance McNally lived over on 4th Street, as did Lanford Wilson. You could hear them typing, and we'd all type to torment each other. I'm romanticizing it but it was that romantic. So that's where I lived. I lived there for seven years until I moved in 1973. A friend called me. She said, "John Lennon is leaving his apartment, him and Yoko are leaving their apartment on Bank Street. I can get it for you. Do you want it?" So I took that apartment and I moved to Bank Street, and I lived in John and Yoko's apartment, which was an experience unto itself, for the next three years.

**Dziedzic:** Can you talk more about how that was an experience?

**Guare:** Well, because people didn't know that John—the first night I moved there, I heard somebody knocking on the door. [00:25:01] The entrance is right off the street. It's right across from the HB Studio, with a red door, right off the street. 105 1/4 Bank Street was the address. The first night, I heard scratching on the door, "John! Let me in, let me in! John, please! Let me in!" And I went and said, "Who is it?" "John, we love you! Let me in!" I realized they didn't know that John and Yoko had left. The next three years, nobody knew. There were always bouquets of flowers being left outside my door, or cakes being delivered to me, "To John and Yoko. We love you."

I remember my favorite was a Passport to the World. I was made a Citizen of the World. So that's what was fun. And the apartment was so eccentric. It was a whole floor-through but the garden had a sculpture studio, and the back room, where the bedroom was, was literally a thirty-foot ceiling with a spiral staircase leading up to a roof garden. In the summer, it was unbearably hot, and in the winter, it was impossible to heat. So you had a glass of water by your bed or something, you'd wake up and it'd be frozen. The apartment was impossible to live in but it had a certain glamour. But then I was happy when I moved over to 12th Street when I met Adele, and was happy enough to move in.

**Chatfield-Taylor:** Tell her about John Cage.

**Guare:** Do what?

**Chatfield-Taylor:** John Cage.

**Guare:** Oh, yes, it was hilarious because—I picked up a piano. I used to love to play the piano. The day the piano arrived, I started playing pop songs, Cole Porter and stuff, and singing, which I loved to do. I heard this voice on the other side of the wall saying, "Shut up! Shut up!" It was in the middle of the day! I wasn't going to shut up. I kept going and they threw stuff against the

wall. The next day, it happened all over again. I went to see at 107 Bank Street, who lived next door, and I checked the directory. I had moved next door to John Cage and Merce Cunningham. So my music and piano playing tormented them for about two years. And I loved living there. I just loved that intimacy. I loved that wall being between me and Merce Cunningham and John Cage. But that's what the Village was in those days.

**Dziedzić:** I wanted to ask about, I know a lot of people left New York during those years, or in the following decade or so. What kept you through those hard times of hearing everything happening in your neighbors' apartment, and your apartment being freezing or boiling hot—what kept you connected during that time?

**Guare:** New York! It's simple as that, the energy that was here. This is where my life was. It was a small price to pay. That was just part of oh, that's what I have to do to live here. I never thought of it to say I've got to get out of here. At one time, for various reasons—I had been working at The Public Theater, and I couldn't take The Public anymore. Joe Papp was just too overwhelming. It was oppressive. So there was a whole new theater world starting out in Chicago. So I went out there. I worked in Chicago a lot and I loved having that new room, again, another room outside of New York. But it's the only time that I have ever gone to another city to find work. New York, that was in the mid-'70s, it was reshaping itself.

The energy had moved to Chicago. Steppenwolf [Theatre Company] had just started with [John] Malkovich and Gary Sinise and Gregory Mosher taking over the Goodman Theater. [00:30:01] And there was just a real vitality in Chicago at that time. It was wonderful. It was a real sense of renewal. But then they all moved to New York. So New York drew everybody back.

**Dziedzić:** You were talking about Edward Albee before and the Playwrights Unit, so I wanted to ask about this idea of playwrights "learning and taking risks in full public view." I wanted to ask about if you could give an example of your work where you really learned through the performance or through this kind of exposure.

**Guare:** Well, you learned—I mean, I just had a play done last year and I’m still learning from audience reaction. Yes, you’re always learning. Playwriting is especially humiliating because you have to make all your mistakes in public. They always say, “Oh, God, it was a miracle it was a hit!” The miracle isn’t the show was a hit. The miraculous thing is that it ever got on in the first place. Imagine getting all the right people, the right cast, the right set designers, the right costumes, the right room, the right producer, the right director. There are so many variables that can go. So you’re constantly learning new things. And the nightmare is whatever you learned on the last show has no application to the next show. So there’s never a moment where you say, “Okay, now I’ve learned how to do it. Now I know how to do it.” No, you never do.

**Dziedzic:** So I wanted to ask you since you’ve had a long career, what do you identify as real milestones, real learning moments—?

**Guare:** When I came back to New York in 1964 and elected to stay here. That’s the main milestone and everything else has just been my life. And there have been good things and bad things, and I accept them all. I don’t say oh, God, I wish I would have done that differently, or how did that work? You don’t know. So there’s only one decision. The only milestone is when I said, I’m going to be a playwright no matter what, and I’m going to live in New York City, and take what comes.

**Dziedzic:** And how has your writing process changed over the years? Has it changed?

**Guare:** Not much, not much. I write, I write. What I like to do is, I write and try to create as much material as possible. I just let it all pour out. If I’m interested in a subject or a character, I just let it all pour out. And then I create—generally, generally—my job as a playwright, the w-r-i-g-h-t part, the craft part of it, is shaping all that material into giving it a form, giving it the form of a play, whether it’s a one-act play or a two-act play, whatever. That’s been the main thing, mainly learning. I think Henry James said—I hope the quote is right, he said, he writes every day not to improve his craft, but to kill the censor inside himself. So that’s what you’ve got

to do. You have to keep writing every day, to kill that voice that says, who the hell are you? This is crap. What are you doing? You've got to just plow through all of those negative voices in your head. That's the main challenge.

**Dziedzic:** And what about other instincts or skills that you would need to nurture along the way in order to—

**Guare:** Seeing other plays, other people at work. I absolutely—at least I am—energized by seeing the work of other people. [00:35:00] Oh, look at that actor. I didn't know you could do that. Oh, look at that director. He's telling a story in a new way. I want to work with him. Oh, look at the way that set looks, yes, or that's the wrong set. Why is that the wrong set for that play? I love to go to the theater. I went to the theater, when there was one, a couple times a week because I still am fascinated by the energy that a play emits, that a play exudes, and I love to live in that energy, because the theater, it's constantly changing.

When a new playwright like [Harold] Pinter comes along, you say how does this change the rules right now? The theater is a place where the rules are constantly changing and how we keep up with it is, that's my life. That part of my craft is taking energy from my fellow workers around me and the joy in that.

**Dziedzic:** Have there been any other shifts that you've lived through or witnessed that are akin to that shift that happened in the late '50s and early '60s, in terms of theater?

**Guare:** Well, I mean the main thing was by the end of the '60s, thanks to The Public Theater, by the mid-'70s, the creation of when not-for-profit theater became a player on the main field and the old-time Broadway was a show-stopper, thanks to Edward Albee's show stoppers, going out of town to try out. By the mid-'70s, Broadway and Off-Broadway, the lines had blurred between them. All the plays that not-for-profit theater has fed into Broadway was the most incredibly nourishing thing, and still is the most powerful thing, the death of that traditional old-time Broadway. And other milestones, for me, nothing has ever been as radical as the change between

European theater ruling everything and then the advent of Albee, when America finally started trusting its own voice. And we've been living in that ever since.

**Dziedzic:** Just thinking about what you said, America trusting its own voice. I wonder if you can reflect on what's happening now. There's so much happening now with the pandemic and so much social unrest. How does this feel for you, having lived through so much change and experimentation and confrontation?

**Guare:** Well, I would have hated to have missed this. I would hate not to be alive for this. I would hate not to—who could have imagined? March 13th, I was on my way to a show and it was over. It was Friday the 13th. And who would have thought that the theater would shut down, would just shut down and God knows when it's going to reopen? And who knows what the future holds? I think it's incredibly healthy. I think what's happening between Black Lives Matter and the Me Too Movement, the voices that are coming into power today, I think nature created this COVID virus just to say, you know what, the ticket prices got too high, everything got too corporate, it's gone too much.

Another thing, I'll just go back to answer another question. Another milestone in theater was when Broadway started charging \$100 for a ticket, for *Nicholas Nickleby*. [00:40:07] That to me was the minute they found out that people would pay \$100 for a ticket. And I think this incredible shutdown is—I mean, I love Bette Midler but to think that at the box office they were charging \$900 for a ticket was, I think, again, a major milestone in theater history, where a show like *Hamilton*, which is a wonderful show—but lucky I'm a Tony [Award] voter so I saw things for free. That, to me, is what has to be done away with, making the theater a corporate extension, where people are paying \$2,000 to scalp, to see *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Mainly, the box office at \$900 for *Hamilton*, or Bette Midler in *Hello, Dolly!*, was disgusting because it's preventing a whole generation from seeing theater—by finances.

So I hope that this whole COVID thing so reorganizes everything, that the theater gets to be a place where people can afford to go to the theater again and see it. Even Off-Broadway will charge \$185 for a ticket. That, to me—they have to do it in the current environment in the last ten

years—but it’s completely unhealthy. So I hope that this COVID takes the corporation out of the theater and lets people live lives, make life, and give life for a whole generation to see it because I know if I was a kid today, I would not be able to see any of these shows. Who could afford it? So that, I hope, is one of the things that COVID-19 will reorganize and restructure the entire world in ways that we don’t know.

**Dziedzic:** And what about the impact of COVID on the Village, and your neighborhood and so many things being boarded up? What do you think about the potential for this to reorganize certain aspects of the Village?

**Guare:** Ever since 2016, I’ve given up predicting anything. I’ve lived in the Village in the ‘60s, when things were boarded up and you could afford to move around from apartment to apartment, where things cost \$32. Yes, so the Village, they wanted to tear it down but thanks to people like Adele who worked in landmark preservation, the Village was protected and made into—

## **INTERRUPTION**

**Guare:** Yes, so I lived in the Village when things were boarded up. Our apartment house was empty—there would be empty apartments. I’ve lived through all that. So I have no doubt that it will come back. We just have to wait and be patient. I’ll probably never live to see it but I predict, I think when this COVID ends, we’re going to be living—this the only prediction I’ll make—is I think that we’re going to experience—a hundred years ago they had the Roaring ‘20s after the Spanish Flu and World War I ended. [00:45:17] It went into the Roaring ‘20s. I think we’re going to see that all over again. We’re going to have a version—at least, I hope so—of the Roaring ‘20s in the 2020s with a whole new kind of vitality brought in by what we’ve learned during this horrible period.

We don’t know what the next generation, what they’re going to transform this experience into. And that’s one of the things that’s exciting to watch. You have no idea what’s going to

happen, but I believe that it still will happen in New York. At least one of the places it will happen will be in New York—and not on Zoom.

**Dziedzic:** [laughs] Right. I hadn't thought about that, a second Roaring '20s. I think that's something to look forward to, or help bring about, and I hope it will be possible.

I wanted to ask about reflecting on living in the Village and some of the changes that you witnessed and can point out as being really significant. Does the Village still feel experimental to you or expressionistic in a way?

**Guare:** Well, no. Because NYU [New York University], the way that the schools have taken over the Village is really oppressive. I mean, NYU is like this behemoth that's over the Village. And The New School. The New School is a wonderful institution but the way it's made it a transient neighborhood, it's made it impossible for people to move here. So between NYU and *Sex and the City*, everybody wants to live like those girls in *Sex and the City*, come to New York. Repeat the question again because I'm just sort of—what did you say?

**Dziedzic:** Well, one thing I asked was—I asked a couple things. That's probably why. I'm sorry! One was about if Greenwich Village still feels like a place where people are experimenting and where—

**Guare:** No, it doesn't! No, it doesn't. Because there are no store-front theaters. No, it's not a place for experimentation because the people who experiment can't afford to live here.

**Dziedzic:** Do you have a sense of when you noticed that that had changed?

**Guare:** It started in the—no, it was sort of gradual in the '80s, as NYU started to expand. It was very, very gradual as things happened in slow increments. But suddenly there were no more theater groups here. They're down in SoHo, all the ways you go to plays in lofts. The way The

Open Theater—remarkable theater—were performing in lofts. No, all that energy has moved to Brooklyn and I don't know how long that's going to last.

I hear the Upper East Side is the best place to get bargains now to live. Ironically, artists are moving to the Upper East Side. Painters are moving to the Upper East Side because the rents are less than they are in Brooklyn. And people are leaving the Upper East Side to live and be hip in Brooklyn. So who knows where it's going to follow? The Village to me, mainly because—what I love about the Village is it's always life-sized, aside from Fifth Avenue, the twenty-story buildings on Fifth Avenue. [00:50:18] It's all life-sized. It's not out of shape. It's not like the way New York is becoming one big Hudson Yards. But the Village is not a place of experimentation anymore. It's just a terribly pleasant place to live.

**Dziedzic:** As you said, thanks in large part to your wife's efforts and other historic preservationists' efforts.

There's a quote of yours I read about your thoughts on New York, that it's "...a complete addiction. Every day it presents you with something for horror or amusement, despair, and glee." I wondered if you could share a story about living in the Village that could illustrate some of that.

**Guare:** We're in it right now. Look no further than out your window—even though I'm not in the Village, I'll be back next week. No, COVID, it's inexplicable, whether we're at Ground One of 9/11 [September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks], whether it was that. The way the Village, yes—I can't believe that 9/11 was nineteen years ago. And COVID, yes, it's always a test living here, whether it's water mains breaking, economics, chain stores moving in, the absence of any local bars or restaurants. Yes, it's all things that you have to—I mean, in our neighborhood, there's no place to eat. There used to be little dives you could go to and just get a simple dinner. There's only one of those places around us now, The Knickerbocker. New York is a constant challenge. But luckily, thanks to the luck of the gods, we're able to afford to live here because we bought our apartment, many, many, many years ago. But I wouldn't be able to afford to live in the Village now if I was coming here.

COVID is an enormous spanner thrown into the works and I'm curious to see how we're going to worm our way out of this, but we will somehow. Somehow. New York has an incredible ability to correct itself somehow. So I'm still high on the place. Probably a lot of it is just sheer memories. I'm like a dog. I live in an eternal present here. I still fully expect to turn down a block and see the Cafe La MaMa has reopened here, or Cino is back. I'm very curious about the future because I have no doubt that it is a challenge living in New York. I'm curious to see how the story turns out while I'm on this planet.

**Dziedzic:** I wondered if I could ask your wife if there is anything that you're thinking maybe I should ask your husband to talk about, a list that you've got going, or anything like that. And, John, I also want to ask you directly too if there's anything you want to add or talk about.

**Guare:** No, I'm just here to serve you, to serve the Greenwich Village Preservation, life in Greenwich Village. [00:54:57] I'm completely dependent on you for your questions.

**Dziedzic:** [laughs] Okay. Well, I was hoping that you could describe in detail, if you can, Caffe Cino, the interior, and what it was like to see your work there the first time?

**Guare:** Well, I've described it as sort of like an attic in hell. It was a little coffee shop. I had never seen a coffee machine before, a big espresso machine, and the heroic Joe Cino would open this place. And it had a small theater, I don't know, maybe ten by fifteen playing space. It was filled with Christmas trees and Christmas lights, and giant photos of Jean Harlow and Maria Callas. And there was always opera playing. It was like a hallucination. It was like a holiday on some foreign—a holiday on Mars. You never knew what you were going to see and it was always fun. So that was the main thing. It's where the Cornelia Street Cafe is now on Cornelia Street, down in the basement. Not in the basement, but in that area. La MaMa is still in the same place on East 4th Street between Second and Third Avenue. So that's still visible to see what that was like.

But it was mainly completely evanescent. And when Joe Cino died, killing himself in 1967, it just all ended. It couldn't survive without the breath of Joe Cino. He was a heroic man who worked in the industrial steam iron company out in New Jersey where they were pressing with enormous driers, steam driers. And he would take the ferry over to the Village, across the Hudson, every day and he'd turn the key about six o'clock into the Caffè Cino, and his life would begin. And he opened up a life for so many people. He just defined a life. He defined a territory. So that's what it was. Everything was on—beyond a shoestring. It was wonderful that way.

**Dziedzic:** And where did people go when the cafe ended up closing or burning down, right?

**Guare:** No, it didn't burn down. No, Joe emulated. Joe just stabbed himself to death. I mean, the police said if they hadn't seen him doing it, they would have looked for the most vicious murderer.

**Chatfield-Taylor:** But it was because he was on drugs.

**Guare:** He was on drugs, yes. And where did people go after? Well, La MaMa was there and The Public was coming into focus. So Joe Papp and Bernie Gersten redefined the territory and it became their world after that.

**Dziedzic:** What was the community like between other playwrights? Did you feel like you were part of a cohort?

**Guare:** I've already told you that, where we all lived. Terrance lived over there.

**Dziedzic:** Well, let me ask you this. Was there a relationship where you were workshoping and sharing ideas together? Were you talking about your work or were you just presenting alongside—typing on the other side of the walls?

**Guare:** Well, see, nobody was developing plays together. You'd always go to watch what other people were doing, but there were no shared workshops where we were all working together. [01:00:09] It was life on the street. Everybody was living their own life and you would run into people at the theater or when you were going to see their plays, but there were no official times where—the nice thing about The Public Theater, when that opened, was that one of their unwritten rules was everybody's rehearsal was open to everybody else. So you could wander into anybody else's rehearsal and they could wander into yours.

But I don't want to give the impression—this never happened at least—where one playwright said to another, I think you should do this with your play. I think you should do that with your play. I would do this. There was no—unless you were asked. But between The Public Theater—I mean Albee's Playwrights Unit, there were never any joint meetings. Everybody did their shows. There were never any meetings where we would all get together and discuss, Chairman Mao-style, each other's work. But a place called the O'Neill began in 1965, the Eugene O'Neill Playwright Center up in Waterford, Connecticut where plays were developed, and everybody was living together. That's where that communal feeling really existed because you were all on top of each other living together. So it was only at the O'Neill where people were actually living together for three weeks, four weeks of the year. The Public Theater, that just became a hangout. That just became a place where you went to live. It was mainly thanks to what Joe Papp and Bernie created.

**Dziedzic:** Do you have a particular style or schedule that you keep when you're writing?

**Guare:** Yes, I get up in the morning and I work.

**Dziedzic:** And how long do you work?

**Guare:** Three or four hours.

**Chatfield-Taylor:** Five or six hours.

**Guare:** Five or six hours, yes. I mean, I love to work.

**Dziedzic:** And when you finish a work or you are seeing it performed, what sort of break do you give yourself before you pick up a new project?

**Guare:** Oh, when I go into rehearsal with a play, which I have done in the past, I always have another play ready to go. So that the morning after an opening, I have something to go to because if the reviews are good, God forbid, you don't want to lose yourself and try to repeat that again. And if the reviews haven't been good, which is more to the point, you don't want to put your head in the oven. You want to have something new to go to. So a new work is always a sense of renewal and possibilities.

**Dziedzic:** Can I ask you how you learned that lesson?

**Guare:** By doing it, by sheer saving my skin.

**Dziedzic:** Survival mode.

**Guare:** Yes.

**Dziedzic:** And can you tell me where you and your wife live, your house on 12th Street?

**Guare:** We still live there. She's there right now. I mean, it's 12th Street and Fifth Avenue.

**Dziedzic:** Can you tell me when you moved there and what it was like when you decided to move in, and what the block was like?

**Guare:** It hasn't changed that much. Across the street, there was an upholsterer and there were lots of craft shops around, where you could go to get things fixed, which you can't do anymore because everything is either a bar or a fancy, fancy restaurant that you don't want to go to. But it's still pretty much the same. It's a nice wonderful building. Adele had moved there a couple of years before, and the John Lennon place on Bank Street was impossible for two people to live in. [01:05:08] And so luckily in those days apartments were free and the apartment right next door to Adele became available, and I could move in and we could make a life.

**Dziedzic:** Well, those are pretty much all my questions, unless you have any other stories that you want to share.

**Guare:** No, none, unless you ask me questions, I have nothing to say. It's my hopes, my dreams.

**Dziedzic:** Hopes and dreams. Well, I guess what I'm asking is putting you on the spot about stories about what you've experienced in the Village, of living there day to day, quotidian stories that have become, I guess, illustrative of what it's like to live in the Village.

**Guare:** Well, in the mid-'70s, there was a series of terrible murders going around the Village, and I wrote a play about that, *Landscape of the Body*. That was really something. There was a thing called the West Side [Elevated] Highway, which was absolutely terrifying, and there were all trucks that parked underneath there, and the crime! The river was a place that you never wanted to go to, at least the minute it got dark, unless you were on some nefarious mission.

But Adele, can you think of any Village—

**Chatfield-Taylor:** Well, my favorite thing, John, is the point of view you developed over the years about how you do business, because you would go out in the morning or whenever you'd finish working, with the dogs, and you would invariably run into every single person that you owed an answer to, or wanted to see, or something like that. And it became established just the way you did business. The way everybody else does it, by writing a letter or making a call, you

got it done by walking down the street and running into every single person you needed to run into. And then you would come back with your day's work done, between having written for many, many hours, and then found these other souls that you needed to communicate with. So I was always very impressed and actually jealous of that because it's so much better than the way the rest of the world has to do things.

**Guare:** Well, at that time, there were a lot of people in the theater who were—

**Chatfield-Taylor:** I know, but I don't think you know how unusual it is to run into every single person you need to communicate with. So that's all.

**Guare:** Well, okay. So Sarah, you have that. The street life in the Village is what keeps me there.

**Dziedzic:** Thank you for that.

**Guare:** Thank you, Adele.

**Dziedzic:** Yes, thanks. Thank you, Adele. That's the end of my questions and if any other stories come to mind when you're reviewing your transcript—

**Guare:** —then I'll put them in.

**Dziedzic:** We can connect again. Great. And thank you for connecting with me today. Thank you, Adele, for tuning in and adding what you have.

**Guare:** Thank you for asking me.

**Dziedzic:** Well, enjoy the rest of your day and you'll be hearing from me in the next few weeks.

**Guare:** Wonderful, Sarah. You're doing a wonderful job. Thank you.

**Dziedzic:** Thank you. Bye-bye.

**Guare:** The Village forever! The Village forever! Take care, bye-bye.

**Dziedzic:** Thank you. Bye-bye.

**END OF RECORDING**