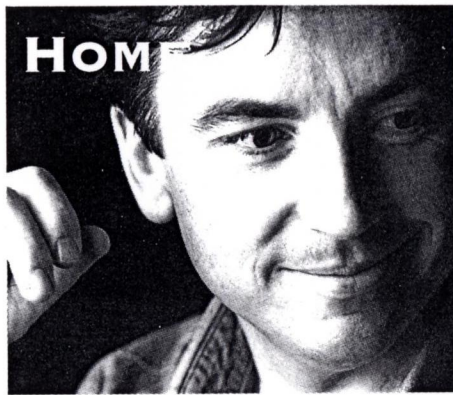


# HOUGHTON'S HOME

BY MICHAEL GILTZ



Visiting the Signature Theater Company's offices on 42nd St. is like visiting artistic director James Houghton's home: His two-year-old daughter Lily is sitting on the floor playing with Mr. Potato Head; a dog ambles across the room; and one shelf along the window is lined with photos of his favorite playwrights, including Adrienne Kennedy and Edward Albee.

Home is an apt image for Signature since that's what it provides a writer. Beginning with Romulus Linney in 1991, Houghton's company has devoted an entire year to one living playwright, tackling five or so of their plays — usually — a new one in the process. Next year, the legendary Arthur Miller is the company's playwright.

"A writer knows that for a whole year they have a place to go to focus on their work. And maybe do some of the pieces that other people won't, because they're not commercially viable or the casts are too big or whatever," says Houghton, who directed "Curse of the Starving Class," now at the Joseph Papp Public Theater and the final show in a season focused on Sam Shepard.

From the beginning, Signature has been charmed. Its very first production — funded almost solely by money that Houghton set aside while working as a waiter — was reviewed favorably in "The New York Times." Press coverage about the concept behind the company was equally positive, calling Signature's approach "radical," "dazzling," and, most often, so obvious and smart that it was shocking no one had ever thought of it before.

More of that charmed luck is needed, for after two years at the Public, Signature is about to be homeless. "We've been told, 'This is it,'" he says bluntly. "So we have to find a space for next year's season." They've certainly been looking. For the past three years, Houghton has scoured Manhattan, checking out nearly 200 spaces. "We've looked at some warehouses on the

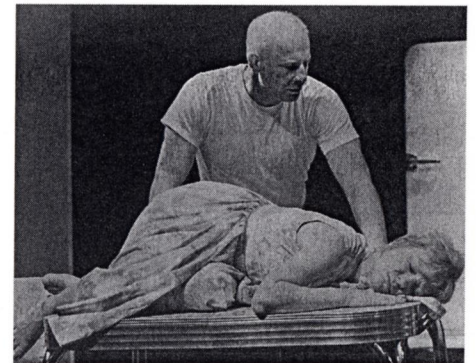
West Side along Chelsea. We've looked down in the East Village. We've looked on the Upper East Side. We've looked midtown. It's a constant search. We've been very fortunate to be able to rent at the Public for the last couple of years. But that was a temporary fix."

One dream location in the Village was simply too much money. Clearly, obtaining any permanent home will mean finding the right space and the right landlord willing to give them a special break. Ironically, Signature might not exist at all if Houghton hadn't enjoyed another break on rent: He and his wife stumbled upon a \$400-a-month rent-controlled apartment in Hell's Kitchen, allowing them both to pursue artistic careers (she's an actress) while raising two children (along with Lily, they have a son, Henry).

It's easy to imagine something fortuitous will come of Signature's struggle — because another reason the company exists at all is Houghton's struggle with dyslexia. "I've always had difficulty reading for long periods of time and I find plays much easier to read," says Houghton, whose condition wasn't identified until graduate school. "I don't know if it's because of the spatial relationship on the page or it's easier to follow or what. The irony is that most people I know have trouble reading plays."

That stumbling block gave Houghton his love for the theatre (naturally he gravitated towards the reading that came easier) and a certain patience that has stood him well (unlike people who read with ease, he doesn't expect every play to give up its secrets after one try). "I worked with Romulus Linney eight

years ago on a production he directed," says Houghton by way of example. "When I first read the play, I don't know if it was due to my dyslexia or just not quite getting it, but I couldn't make heads or tails of it. But each time read it I loved it more and more and now it's one of my favorite plays. It's definitely an example where an initial impulse could be misleading. And out of it you can really track Signature down to that moment: being introduced to Romulus' work and Romulus as an individual and finding a deep respect and love for him as well as his plays."



Opposite page: Director James Houghton  
Top Right: Deborah Hedwall & Gretchen Cleveley in "Curse of the Starving Class"  
Bottom Right: Jude Ciccolella & Deborah Hedwall in "Curse of the Starving Class" Photos by: Carol Rosegg

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