



by Michael Glitz

IMAGINING BRAD

Marilyn Monroe knew about the seven year itch. Peter Hedges knows about the seven year gap.

In February, Manhattan Class Company will present “Good As New,” Hedges’ first produced play since 1990, a sharp-witted three-character drama about a mother who returns home after plastic surgery, her 16-year-old daughter with a disapproving attitude, and the husband/father caught between the two.

Hedges has hardly been idle for seven years; among other projects, he wrote the novel and screenplay for the much acclaimed “What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?” So why this long absence from the theatre?

Fade to 1990. His first Off-Broadway play, “Imagining Brad,” had just opened at Circle Rep, following what Hedges considered a “miraculous” workshop production.

But instead of celebrating what he had expected to be imminent success, Hedges was literally trapped on an airplane with a dismissive, if well-read, theatregoer.

“I remember the day after the opening, I got on a plane to go to Georgia,” Hedges recalls. “And there was a man with a toupee sitting next to me, who asked what I did. I said, ‘I’m a writer’ and this was the first time I could say, ‘Oh, and I have play at Circle Rep.’ And, then he said, ‘Imagining Brad,’ kind of pursed up his face, and then said, ‘I read that review in the Times.’”

“And that’s when it hit me,” Hedges continues. “I think 6,000 people saw the play and a million grazed the review.”

That rude awakening, coupled with a slew of mixed-to-negative notices, pushed him away from theatre and into the waiting arms of the world of fiction.

“I don’t think I wrote ‘What’s Eating Gilbert Grape?’ out of spite,” he insists. “But after wallowing for a few weeks, I rose up and finished my work on it in probably an eight week period.”

After its publication, Hedges once again had cause for celebration. And after the well-received movie version, starring Johnny Depp, Darlene Cates and Leonardo DiCaprio (who earned an Oscar nomination), Hedges had a new career as screenwriter-for-hire.

Recently, he adapted the late Harry Kondoleon’s “Diary of a Lost Boy” and Jane Hamilton’s “A Map of the World,” which may mark the screen directing debut of Scott Elliott (who will direct Hedges’ black comedy, “Baby Anger,” at Playwrights Horizons in May).

Hedges first presented “Good As New” as a one-act during an MCC “marathon” weekend about three years ago. The positive reception prompted him to try to expand the play, and, despite the hard work, he now seems very pleased with the results.

“These characters feel a lot more complex and smarter to me [than my others] and I think I kind of delve into more complex gray areas than before,” says Hedges. “My plays have often been very schematic, more short scenes. But I realized that the only great conversations I was having were on the phone late at night, or in the car, or at a family wedding, where you can get into these long conversations.

“Until recently, it wasn’t obvious to me that plays can be about great conversations. About how we talk to each other.” says Hedges. “So ‘Good As New’ came out of an interest in this kind of discourse, of putting

people in a heightened place in their lives and letting them go at each other.”

Not long ago, Hedges also found his faith in “Imagining Brad” restored.

“I did have this interesting experience with the Drama Dept. last year. We were about to revive ‘Imagining Brad’—I had done a little rewriting and I was very proud of it—and I get this call that this woman was trying to reach me. I call, and she tells me that she had seen ‘Imagining Brad’ years ago, when she was in college, and that she had been in an abusive relationship and that it had helped her to get out of it, and, now I’m paraphrasing, that it really helped save her life.”

Although Hedges has returned to Off-Broadway, he hasn’t given up fiction. His second novel, “An Ocean In Iowa,” is due out in September. Hedges unabashedly admits that this tale of a little boy who believes his seventh year of life will be the defining one is autobiographical.

“My sister told me that right before I turned eight, I cried for about three days, because I didn’t want to be eight. And that’s what got me thinking,” he says.

But even more grounding than his success as a writer is Hedges’ family; he and his wife, Susan, welcomed their second son in mid-December. “There is nothing like feeling as if I have a fuller life than when I come home and my older son, Simon, crawls up on my lap,” says Hedges. “He really doesn’t care if the rewrite was good or not.” ★

Photo courtesy of Peter Hedges.