

The Resonance of Remarkable Women

by Casey Kaleba, M.A. student in theatre history and criticism

In a speech to the 2001 graduating class of Reed College, Lee Blessing voiced a theme that weaves through his twenty-year body of work: "Somewhere along the line, we have to develop the capacity to 'breathe in' the great ocean of pain that surrounds us and transform it into that which keeps us alive."

Throughout his work, Blessing has explored the role of human emotion and personal failings, often against a larger political backdrop. He addressed violence and the media in *Down the Road*, AIDS and health policy in *Patient A*, and the first Gulf War in *Fortinbras*, named as one of *Time Magazine's* ten best plays of 1991. Blessing earned both Pulitzer and Tony nominations for his exploration of nuclear arms control in *A Walk in the Woods*.

Eleemosynary has become Blessing's most-produced play. It was commissioned for the Park Square Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota, and had its first professional production at the Philadelphia Festival Theatre For New Plays in 1986. Like many of his works, *Eleemosynary* explores the space between language and communication, the tension between societal expectations and personal need, and the search for both mystery and order in life.

The matriarch and self-created eccentric, Dorothea pursues the mysteries of spiritualism, telemutation, and the writings of Edgar Cayce. Cayce, the most notable psychic of the twentieth century, claimed to be able to see visions from the age of six, and by the age of 26 was conducting "readings" of people. For 40 years Cayce dispensed medical advice based on his psychic readings, often without having met the subject. In addition to allegedly curing his wife of tuberculosis, Cayce suggested the existence of a peaceful race of non-corporeal Atlanteans, and that China would convert to Christianity by 1968. Other anecdotes suggest that Cayce used clairvoyance to pass spelling tests.

Named for Artemis, goddess of the hunt and protector of children, Artie's rationality comes in conflict with her role as both mother and daughter. The free-spirited and independent Artemis is associated with childbirth, and brought a swift and painless end to mothers dying during delivery. Artemis also sought the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenia, as punishment for his boasting. It is this surrender of a daughter that allowed the Greek fleet to sail for Troy.

For Echo, whose mythological namesake found power and beauty in language, the act of spelling draws together the mystery of words and the rationality of ordered letters. The National Spelling Bee was started by the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in 1925. The winning word—*gladiolus*. Since 1941 the Spelling Bee has been sponsored by the Scripps Howard media company, and students under 16 continue to be sponsored by their hometown newspapers for the national competition held in Washington, D.C. The 1999 Bee (*logorrhea*) drew 249 finalists from a field of 9,000 competitors and was filmed for the Oscar-nominated documentary *Spellbound*.

Lee Blessing's

ELEEMOSYNARY

THEATRE AT THE CENTER

DEPARTMENT
OF THEATRE
UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Originally commissioned and produced by Park Square Theatre of St. Paul, Minnesota.

Initial professional production by Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays.

Director	Leslie Jacobson
Scenic Designer	Sonalee Hardikar
Lighting Designer	Justin Thomas
Costume Designer	Esther Van Eek
Sound Designer	Veronica Lancaster
Original Music	Roy Barber
Dramaturg	Carrie Cole

February 13 - 21, 2004

Robert & Arlene Kogod Theatre
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center
University of Maryland, College Park

director's note

by Leslie Jacobson

My first encounter with *Eleemosynary* came in the winter of 1987. The literary manager of Horizons Theatre had seen a production of the play in Chicago, and gave me a copy of the script for consideration.

Horizons Theatre was founded in 1977 by myself and three other women. First called Pro Femina Theatre, we were dedicated to giving voice to women's experiences, to telling stories from a woman's perspective. And while we often worked with male artists, we only produced plays *written* by women, since we believed that the primary voice in a theatre piece comes from the playwright.

I'll never forget listening to that first "in-house" reading of *Eleemosynary*. Some of Horizon's artistic associates read the play aloud, and I found myself sobbing at the end of the reading. At this time in my life, I was the mother of a four-year old daughter. I was attempting to commute between Michigan, where my husband's work had taken us, and Washington D.C., where my work lay. So the separations between mother and daughter, the painful phone conversations, the guilt, self-doubt, and self-condemnation found in the play resonated deeply within me. Dorothea expressed my fears eloquently in Scene 3: "We all try to be just right, just what the next one needs. And we never come close."

In the spring of 1987, I accepted an award from the Dramatists' Guild given to Horizons for its work in producing plays by women. At the same time, I began a discussion with our artistic associates about producing a male playwright. This play, *Eleemosynary*, spoke powerfully to our mission—and to our audiences—when it opened a year later in spring 1988 (with lighting design by Dan Wagner and original music by Roy Barber). Nominated for four Helen Hayes Awards and running for ten weeks (extended from an initial 6 week run), it was both an artistic and commercial triumph for Horizons.

Like a many faceted jewel, the play sparkles with wit, vibrant language, deep emotion, unexpected humor, and enormous intelligence. And it offers the hope of forgiveness and renewal, things we seek in our most significant relationships.

For me, personally, Dan Wagner's invitation to direct this play again offered the opportunity to revisit an extraordinary script. My life has changed (my daughter, now 20, has a sister, fourteen; my husband, children, and I all reside together in the same city, D.C.). Yet, *Eleemosynary's* message of forgiveness and love speaks as strongly to me as ever. Creating the play anew with the artists here at the University of Maryland reminds me of its rich and enduring qualities.