THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES
II
THE PORTRAYAL OF NETTIE CLEARY

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BY

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The Portrayal of Nettie Cleary

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Walter Kerr, in the May 26, 1964 New York Herald Tribune, described Frank D. Gilroy's The Subject Was Roses as "a family triangle in which a father loves a son and a mother loves that son and the son loves both mother and father and not one of them can make a move or utter a sound that does not instantly damage the other."

Not so immediately evident but central to the character of Nettie Cleary, the mother, is the underlying tug-of-war that she has carried on continually with her husband for the emotional custody of their son. At the beginning of the play, she tries to resume her old game of long-suffering mother and wife. Her son Timmy, however, is no longer willing to play the game and tries to show Nettie that he demands of both parents a new game: honesty. Though Nettie flees the house in panic at the prospect of such change, the truth Timmy has faced her with will not go away. When she returns home, it is
WITH the knowledge that Timmy can only be hers now if she lets him go.

By the time the curtain falls, John and Nettie can let Timmy move away from home without further alienation. And in the coming to this end, they have achieved an emotional balance, however precarious, that allows Timmy's final insight: "When I left this house three years ago, I blamed him for everything that was wrong here. . . . When I came home, I blamed you. . . . Now I suspect that no one's to blame . . . not even me."

The problems I faced in creating Nettie Cleary were these: first, I could see very few similarities between Nettie's personality and my own; second, there must be the most careful balancing of character strengths or the play becomes simply soap opera; third, working in such intimate surroundings calls for the utmost simplicity and control from the actor.

If this show had had a larger cast, I might not have solved the first problem so fully. As it was, we spent the first six nights of rehearsal reading the play in depth. As we did so, we three actors began to establish a common subtext of the shared experiences of the Cleary family. This was also the period when most of my personal preparation went on and I began to find that I
had more in common with Nettie than had been obvious at first. My work was made much easier by the director's insistence that our production should show how any family can grow apart — or together.

The first several weeks of rehearsal were spent trying on attitudes and reactions, but as our work developed, the balancing of character strengths became most critical. It became obvious that my first conception of Nettie was too low-key to fit the playing style of the other members of the cast. I began to work toward making Nettie quieter than her husband, but not weaker. The director helped me greatly with this problem when he suggested that we think of our set as a playing field, with Nettie's domain, the kitchen, at one end of the acting area and John's area, the couch, at the other end, with Timmy most often caught somewhere in between.

As our work grew, the problem of simplicity and control solved itself. There was ample time to pare away all extraneous material from my characterization and because of our extensive probing of the subtext, the maximum control of performance was possible.

The addition of an audience came as a natural culmination. Each performance was, overall, an improvement over the previous one. (This does not mean that we made no mistakes, but only that we were able to handle our mistakes completely within the context of the character
AND THE PLAY.) Our performance schedule of a dark night between performances contributed to this continuously high level of playing, as did our short run of five nights. Another major factor was the receptiveness of our audiences. There is, I feel, a positive correlation between the actor's perception of audience approval and his output of creative energy. When actors are as well-received as we were (including a standing ovation one night), they are inspired to surpass themselves.

There are two ways in which an actor can evaluate his work: through the objective responses of his audience and through his own subjective evaluation. In both ways, Nettie Cleary came as close to being a fully realized character as any I have ever performed.

My public thesis defense served to reinforce my positive evaluation of my work. Those questions of motivation or choice which arose I could deal with satisfactorily because they had either been discussed in rehearsal or in my personal preparation. The generally approving tone of the comments seemed to indicate that I had succeeded in solving the problems of this character.

The strongly favorable audience reaction was, of course, another positive evaluation. Equally telling, for me, were the number of audience members who told me that Nettie reminded them of their mothers, since the
ACTORS AND DIRECTOR OF THIS PRODUCTION FELT THAT Mr. GILROY'S PLAY HAS SOMETHING UNIVERSAL TO SAY ABOUT ALL FAMILIES. IF THAT GOAL IS ACHIEVED, NETTIE WILL INEVITABLY REMIND PEOPLE OF THEIR MOTHERS.