



STUDY GUIDE FOR *THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES*

About the Playwright:

Frank Gilroy (*Playwright*) is also a novelist, television writer, screenwriter, director and independent filmmaker. His theatre awards include an OBIE for *Who'll Save the Plowboy?*, a Pulitzer for *The Subject Was Roses* and a Drama Desk nomination for *Contact With the Enemy*. His film *Desperate Characters* (adapted and directed from a novel by Paula Fox starring Shirley MacLaine) won two Silver Bears at the Berlin Film Festival. His adventures as an independent filmmaker are recounted in *I Wake Up Screening*. How he became a playwright is related in *Writing for Love and/or Money – Outtakes from a Life on Spec*. He graduated from Dartmouth College courtesy of the GI Bill and is a past president of the Dramatists Guild

Author's Notes:

I returned to civilian life in 1946 determined to go to college and become a writer.

The former goal born of a new estimate of myself gained in the Army where I realized I wasn't as dumb as school records suggested. The latter, a secret ambition since I was fourteen, when I wrote a short story that my aunt, who worked in the Photo Morgue of *The World Telegram*, showed to a reporter who wrote on it, "The boy has narrative ability."

Common to both goals was the need of a typewriter.

Someone steered me to the Royal Typewriter office located in Rockefeller Center or thereabouts.

I asked for Mr. So-and-So.

A small, pale, eye-glassed man acknowledged me furtively and said to wait in the corridor. After several minutes, the man appeared with a brand new Royal portable. I handed him one hundred and twenty-five dollars—possibly one fifty.

"I'm going to become a writer," I announced grandly.

I recall a look of supreme disinterest and he was gone.

All my plays have been written, not to mention TV, movie scripts, and novels on that Royal portable. If you look closely at the space bar you will see the shiny depression that my right thumb has worn over fifty-five years.

I wrote *The Subject Was Roses* during the epic Writers' Guild Strike in 1960. A six-month strike that began with jokes about writers borrowing to pay for swimming pools and ended as a bitter labor dispute (I can still name the scabs), including fisticuffs and enmities that never healed. "Epic" because it led to pension, welfare, residuals, and other valued things that today's membership is inclined to take as birthrights.

Off the soapbox and to *Roses*:

It's essentially my parents and me. Insights gained later imposed on events that took place twenty years earlier. I wrote it in a rented office on Via de la Paz in the Pacific Palisades. Except for depleted savings and the strike looking like it would go on forever, it was the happiest time of my life in L.A.

Since the first play I wrote had been a success, I figured getting *Roses* produced would be easy.

Wrong. It took several years. Too many rejections and expired options to enumerate. We opened on Broadway May 25, 1964. Won the Drama Critics Award, the Tony, and the Pulitzer. Ran for two years. Let the good times roll.

-Frank D. Gilroy (from *Volume One: Frank D. Gilroy's Full-Length Plays*, Smith & Kraus)

Notes from Director Michael Mastro:

“Every time I read the play, I find another layered theme waiting to be drawn out in the rehearsal process. It’s not like peeling one onion, but a bowlful of them!”

When asked to write some notes for this Study Guide, I found myself stumped. Not because I didn’t know what the play was about, but because it seems to me that it’s *such a beautiful play about so many things*.

So let me set down just some of the things I find ripe for exploring in both this production at George Street, and in your discussions before and after reading and seeing it.

First, there is the exploration of family dynamics and the unhealthy patterns of what has today come to be called “the dysfunctional family” (a term I sometimes object to, because whose family doesn’t have at least a *touch* of dysfunction?). The inability of family members to communicate effectively with each other; the problems that arise when parents vie for their children’s affections; and the struggles that occur when children assert their independence and attempt to break with their parents are all difficult familial themes explored in Mr. Gilroy’s play.

More subtly, the complications that arise from a marriage between two people of different ethnic and social backgrounds are seen in the relationship between John and Nettie, and they only add to the complex fabric of family life in the Leary household.

Themes of personal disappointment and forgiveness are explored, as well. John, Nettie and Timmy all grapple with their own feelings of failure to live up to the expectations that others (and they themselves) had for them. At the same time, each of them is also struggling with feelings of disappointment in the shortcomings of their loved ones, and at least in some cases they work to understand and forgive them.

Looking for more?

How about the inability of a family to deal honestly with the way war experiences may have affected a returning veteran?

Or the damaging affects of alcoholic behavior (it is never labeled as such in the play, but it is unmistakably there) on a family?

I’ll leave you with that much food for thought now, as well as the questions enclosed, at least some of which I hope are helpful as a starting point for discussion. I hope that you find *The Subject Was Roses* as rich in reading, discussing and viewing as we are in bringing it to life for you.

-Michael Mastro

Excerpts from “Psychic Injury from Bull Run to Fallujah”

By John E. Talbott, from HBO Documentaries’ *Wartorn: 1861 – 2010*

In July 1862 Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., left the Union Army, still locked in a struggle to the death with the Confederacy, and returned home to Boston. The Civil War had nine months to run, but Holmes’s war was over. He wrote to his parents to explain why he would not be reenlisting when his three-year obligation expired: “Many a man has gone crazy since this campaign begun from the terrible pressures on mind and body. Doubt demoralizes me as it does any nervous man...I cannot now endure the labors and hardships of the line.”

In the summer of 2003 Captain Nathaniel Fick returned home from Iraq, where he had commanded a platoon in a Marine reconnaissance battalion that raced toward Baghdad ahead of the main invasion force. The war followed him home in nightmares and apparitions. “I thought I was losing my mind,” Fick later wrote. “The only way I knew I was still sane was that I thought I might be going crazy. Surely, that awareness meant I was sane...I was reduced to taking comfort in a tautology.”

Nearly a century and a half apart, Holmes and Fick discovered that war inflicts wounds on the mind as well as the body. They characterized their bouts of combat stress in virtually identical terms. Between the Civil War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, the labels affixed to this ancient malady changed many times. “Soldier’s Heart” described the heart-attack-mimicking symptoms of patients in a Civil War military hospital. World War I’s label emphasized a presumed cause: “Shell Shock.” World War II retreated to euphemisms like “combat fatigue.” Following the Vietnam War “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder,” or PTSD, came to characterize all manner of responses to stress – from flashbacks through emotional numbing and beyond.

Holmes and Fick, like most combat veterans, recovered from their sense of “going crazy.” Their mind wounds proved to be comparatively mild – or at least not life-inhibiting. Holmes went on to become a Supreme Court Justice and Fick is well launched on a career in public service. But others emerged from their wards disabled by chronic combat stress. Unlike physical wounds, mind wounds are invisible. They appear only as mysterious alterations in character, personality, and behavior. They can make warriors return home as strangers.

The relationship between the battlefield environment and the incidence of combat stress has been variously explained. The outbreak of “shell shock” in World War I, for instance, has been ascribed to the industrialization of warfare, which made of soldiers cogs in a largely stationary killing machine. World War II, a war of movement, liberated armies from trenches, but not from combat stress. Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, followed as frontless, asymmetrical wars, where the enemy seemed everywhere at once, as did the risk of psychic injury. It could be that environments have changed but combat soldiers haven’t. Throughout the history of warfare they have endured, hardy yet vulnerable. Some have brought their demons to the battlefield; many have seen and done things they find hard to live with, a few have found these things unbearable.

World War II Army psychiatrists discovered that the longer a soldier was in combat, the more susceptible he grew to combat fatigue. Some said a man would reach his breaking point within 30 days of continuous fighting. The implication was clear: every combatant, regardless of character, training, or experience, was at risk. Lessons learned in World War II were forgotten when it came to Vietnam, where an absence of small -unit cohesion-- serving a long time with buddies you knew and trusted -- may have contributed to the incidence of combat stress. In Iraq, increases in the number, frequency and length of deployments, combined with shorter stays at home, have once again led to high incidence of PTSD.

Created in 1980 at the confluence of science and politics, where the concerns of reformist psychiatrists met the interests of veterans’ groups, PTSD became part of the psychiatric lexicon. Like all entries in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, post-traumatic stress disorder appears as a list of symptoms, including flashbacks, exaggerated startled response, emotional numbing, insomnia, and so on. But a full-blown cast of chronic PTSD is far grimmer than the items on such a list can convey.

In the long arc of history from the Civil Wars of our time, the interpretation of mind wounds changed from moral failing to injury...Like a physical wound it manifests itself in all degrees of severity. You can’t see it, but you can try to heal it.

John E. Talbott is Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His work includes ‘The War Without a Name; France in Algeria, 1954-1962’ and ‘Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma,’ The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Vol. 27, No. 3 (winter, 1997), 437-545. He is working a book to be called ‘Mind Wounds; War and Psychic Injury from Bull Run to Fallujah.’

Topics and Questions for discussion:

- Certainly some things have changed in the culture of the American Family since 1946 (for instance, a young man of 21 would no longer necessarily be expected to live at home with his parents after returning from years away at war), but there are still so many things we can relate to in *The Subject Was Roses*

What are some of the aspects of the Cleary family's situation and behavior that you can relate to in terms of your experience with your own family?

What are some of the parallels you can make from the Cleary's experience in 1940s that are still relevant today?

- John and Nettie clearly come from families of different economic status, as well. John speaks of a childhood of poverty, while Nettie speaks of her genteel middle class upbringing. How has this difference affected their marriage and their family?
- Another problem in the play is the inability of John and Nettie to face the reality of what Timmy's experience in World War II was like, and how it may have affected him. It is an unspoken "elephant in the room," and for the most part remains so throughout the play. Discuss your experiences with those you know who returned from active duty.
- Family counseling didn't really exist in the 1940s as it does today. But if it did, and you were going to send this family to family counseling, what would you suggest the counselor work on with them?
- John is clearly from an Irish-American family, and there are many clues in the play that suggest that Nettie is from an Italian-American family. There were many such Irish/Italian marriages in America during the early/middle years of the Twentieth Century. What do you think was the attraction between these two cultures? What might have been some of the problems inherent in these marriages due to different cultural backgrounds?
- It is clear that Timmy has learned something over the course of the play's two days; it is why he decides to leave his parents' home for good. But critics often argue that John and Nettie have learned nothing and will go on acting out their old patterns with each other in a troubled marriage. Discuss.

Recommended reading:

FRANK D. GILROY, Volume 1, Complete Full-Length Plays 1962-1999 (includes *The Subject Was Roses* and its "prequel" written years later, *Any Given Day*)

ARTHUR LAURENTS, *Home of the Brave*.

For a discussion of family dynamics/family systems:

BRADSHAW ON: THE FAMILY: A New Way Of Creating Solid Self-Esteem

By JOHN BRADSHAW (book based on PBS series, itself worth checking out)

Films for further thematic exploration:

WarTorn 1861 – 2010 – HBO Documentary

From Executive Producer, James Gandolfini, *WarTorn: 1861 – 2010* explores combat stress and post-traumatic stress on military personnel and their families throughout recorded American military history. Beginning with the first documented cases from the Civil War, the film examines occurrences of PTSD through two World Wars and Vietnam, as well as more recent cases involving soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. The stories are told through soldiers' revealing letters and journals; photographs and combat footage; first-person interviews with veterans of WWII, the Vietnam War, Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom; and interviews with family members of soldiers with PTSD. Also included are insightful conversations between James Gandolfini and top U.S. military personnel, enlisted men in Iraq, and medical experts working at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.

The Hurt Locker (2008) Winner of 6 Academy Awards including Best Picture, *The Hurt Locker* is based on the personal wartime experiences of journalist Mark Boal (who adapted his experiences with a bomb squad into a fact-based, yet fictional story), Director Kathryn Bigelow's Iraq War-set action thriller *The Hurt Locker* presents the conflict in the Middle East from the perspective of those who witnessed the fighting firsthand -- the soldiers.

Best Years of Our Lives (1946) Winner of seven Academy Awards, including best picture, director, actor, and screenplay, William Wyler's drama about domestic life after World War II remains one of the all-time classics of American cinema. Inspired by a pictorial article about returning soldiers in *Life* magazine, the story focuses on three war veterans (played by Fredric March, Dana Andrews, and Harold Russell) and their rocky readjustment to civilian life in their Midwestern town of Boone City. Capturing the contradictory moods of America in the mid to late 1940s, this three-hour drama spans a complex range of honest emotions, from joyous celebration and happy reunion to deep-rooted ambivalence and reassessment of personal priorities.