



# SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION

BY JOHN GUARE

TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK  
RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN BY  
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# SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION INTRODUCTION

*Six Degrees of Separation* opened in New York City in 1990 and was an immediate critical and popular success. Outstanding reviews and full houses greatly extended the play's original ten-week run. John Guare's play won the New York Critic Circle Award for Best Play of the Year and London's Olivier award, and was nominated for a Tony Award. In the New York Times, Frank Rich wrote that seeing *Six Degrees of Separation* was "a transcendent theatrical experience that is itself a lasting vision of the humane new world of which Mr Guare and his New Yorkers so hungrily dream."

The play is loosely based on real events reported in the New York papers in 1983. Guare was inspired by the story of a young African-American man, David Hampton, who manoeuvred himself into the households of wealthy New Yorkers by claiming to be Sidney Poitier's son, and then conned many of them out of money. Guare became interested in Hampton's story through his friendship with two of his duped hosts — Osborn and Inger Elliott, who were outraged to find 'David Poitier' in bed with another man the morning after they let him into their home.

In his body of work, Guare frequently deals with metamorphosis, parent-child relationships, and violence, and *Six Degrees of Separation* is no exception. Ouisa Kittredge, who is alienated from her children, finds in Paul a substitute child, even remarking that "[H]e did more for us in a few hours than our own children ever did." The dissatisfaction of the relationships in the Kittredge family is made clear by Ouisa's interest in Paul.

One of the most important themes raised by the play is the attitude of the rich towards the poor, and issues such as class conflict, generational disagreements, sexual orientation, and race.



# SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION SYNOPSIS

The play opens with a middle-aged, upper-class New York couple, Flan and Louisa 'Ouisa' Kittredge eager to share what happened the previous night. Flan and Ouisa invited a wealthy South African friend, Geoffrey, for dinner. Flan, an art dealer, planned to ask Geoffrey for two million dollars that he needed to purchase a Cézanne. In the midst of their drinks, there is a knock on the door – it is the doorman, accompanied by a young African-American man who has been beaten. The young man introduces himself as Paul, a friend and Harvard classmate of the Kittredges' children. He has been mugged in Central Park and now has no money until he meets his father, the famous actor Sidney Poitier, the following day. Ouisa and Flan take care of Paul's wounds, give him a clean shirt, and invite him to go out to dinner with them. Instead, Paul makes everyone a wonderful meal. He tells them about his theories of the imagination and Ouisa and Flan insist that Paul spend the night at their home and give him fifty dollars. Everyone has a delightful evening, including Geoffrey, who agrees to give Flan the two million dollars.

The next morning Ouisa knocks on the door to wake Paul up so he can go to meet his father. When she opens the door and turns on the light, a naked man is in Paul's bed. Flan throws nude stranger out of his house; Paul tries to explain, but despite his apologies, they make him leave.

Later that day, they meet their friends, Kitty and Larkin, who have a similar story to tell. Paul had shown up at their apartment on Friday night, mugged, and they had also invited him to spend the night. That evening, they woke up to hear someone yelling "Burglar." Paul was chasing a naked thief down the hallway. They believed that Paul saved their lives — until Ouisa and Flan tell their story. The couples try to get in touch with Sidney Poitier, but they are unable to do so. They call the police and a detective comes to the apartment but, upon finding out that Paul did not steal anything, leaves. Later, however, the detective tells them of another man who had a similar run-in with Paul. The man told his son about meeting Paul, and the son says he knows no such person — Paul is an impostor.

The only connection between the adults' children is their boarding school. It turns out that Paul learned all about the families from a high school classmate, Trent Conway, who was briefly Paul's lover.

Flan and Ouisa hear no more of Paul for a while, but later they learn that Paul had met a young couple in the park. Rick and Elizabeth came to New York from Utah to be actors. Paul made up a story about his father — Flan — who denied his existence. Under their urging, Paul agrees to try and reconcile with his 'father.' He tells them that he has been successful and that Flan wants to introduce him to the family, only he needs money to travel up to Maine to meet his father. Against Elizabeth's wishes, Rick takes all the money out of their joint bank account and gives it to Paul. In celebration, Paul takes Rick to the Rainbow Room and for a carriage ride in Central Park, and the two men have sex. Upset at what he has done, Rick commits suicide. Elizabeth goes to the police with her story, and the police swear out a warrant for Paul's arrest for theft.

Flan gets the paper to run a story about Paul's behaviour and soon after Paul calls the Kittredges. Ouisa answers the phone and convinces Paul to turn himself in. She promises to visit him in prison and help him start a new life when he gets out of jail. He wants her and Flan to come with him to the police station. Ouisa says that they will come pick him up, but they also tell the detective his whereabouts. The police arrive and arrest Paul before the Kittredges get there. Ouisa is unable to track down Paul — she doesn't even know his real name. She fantasises about what happened to Paul, even imagining his suicide. Though Ouisa is unable to help Paul, she recognises that her connection with him has been meaningful.



## BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN GUARE

John Guare was born in New York City on 5 February 1938, the only child of Irish Catholic parents. He wrote his first play aged just eleven and later graduated from Georgetown University in 1960 and the Yale School of Drama in 1963. At Georgetown in 1958, he contributed a song to an original musical revue entitled *The Natives Are Restless* and presented by the Mask and Bauble Dramatic Society. The song humorously attributed the success of many famous people to the syllable 'O' in their names. Under the direction of Donn B Murphy, his play *The Toadstool Boy*, about a country singer's quest for fame, won first place in the District of Columbia Recreation Department's One-Act-Play competition. In 1960, the Mask and Bauble presented *The Thirties Girl*, a musical for which Guare did the book, much of the music and the lyrics, again under Murphy's direction. Set in Hollywood's turbulent 1920s, it dealt with the dethronement of a reigning diva by a fresh-faced starlet. Management of identity and celebrity, and the quest for fame, the focus of these early efforts, are recurring themes in the body of Guare's work.

After studying at Yale, Guare set out to develop his own unique style of theatrical comedy, and he was soon rewarded with an Obie Award for his one-act play, *Muzeeka* (1968). In 1970 he exploded onto the American theatre scene with *House of Blue Leaves*, a darkly comic attack on American values that disrupted the conventions of realistic theatre, but cramming it with "lots of songs and talking to the audience." It won an Obie and the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the Best American Play of 1970–71 and received four Tony Awards during its 1986 revival. In 1971 Guare wrote the libretto for *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a pop-rock musical adaptation of Shakespeare's play which he created with composer Galt Macdermot (*Hair*) and Mel Shapiro. The musical was designed to play in the back of a truck from which it would tour the parks of New York, but the show was so successful that it soon moved to Broadway where it went on to win the Tony Award for 'Best Musical'.

Guare explores realism on stage, and has asked "Does the playwright elect to keep that kitchen sink to soothe the audience? Does the playwright dismantle the kitchen sink and take the audience into dangerous terrain? How the playwright resolves this tension between surface reality and inner reality, how the playwright restores the theatre to its true nature as a place of poetry, song, joy, a place of darkness where the bright truth is told, that war against the kitchen sink is ultimately the history of our theatre."

*Six Degrees of Separation* received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1990 and an Olivier Best Play Award in 1993; a film version followed later that year. Other well-known works include *Marco Polo Sings a Solo*, *Bosoms and Neglect*, *Moon Over Miami* and *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*.

Guare is a council member of the Dramatists Guild and co-edits the Lincoln Center Theater Review. He is currently writing a musical version of the 1950s' film classic *Sweet Smell of Success* with music by Marvin Hamlisch and lyrics by Craig Carnelia. The American Academy of Arts and Letters elected him a member in 1989 and he was elected to the Theater Hall of Fame in 1993. He and his wife, Adele Chatfield-Taylor, President of the American Academy in Rome, live in New York City.





# SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION CONTEXT

## The Reagan Years

Ronald Reagan was the president of the United States throughout most of the 1980s, from 1981 to 1989. Reagan was a conservative Republican. He believed in the theory of supply-side economic, which argued that lowering the top income tax rates would cause people to invest their savings, thus spurring economic growth overall. Under Reagan, Congress passed a plan to cut federal income taxes by 25%. Congress also supported Reagan in decreasing government involvement. His economic plan called for cutting back on government regulations in industry, as well as cutting back on funding for social programmes.

By the mid-1980s, the economy was booming, but many critics charged that not all Americans were benefiting equally. The very small percentage of wealthiest Americans grew richer, while the incomes of the middle class fell. Spending cuts on federal programmes also hurt poor people. While employment rose, joblessness remained high among minority groups.

## Racial Issues

As in the decades before it, racial tensions continued to be a concern in the 1980s and 1990s. Several incidents became headline incidents around the country. In 1984, a white man, Bernhard Goetz shot four African-Americans youths on a New York subway. He claimed that they were trying to rob him, but he was still put on trial for attempted murder. In 1987, he was acquitted of these charges. Civil rights leaders expressed their opinion that if the youths had not been African-American, the trial's outcome may have been different.

Throughout the 1980s, many students on college campuses protested racial incidents and practices. In January 1987, tens of thousands gathered in Cumming, Georgia, and held the biggest civil rights protest since the 1960s. Also that year, President Ronald Reagan came under attack. The US National Urban League called his administration morally unfair and economically unjust to African-Americans. Noted African-American Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall ranked Reagan at the bottom of US presidents on civil rights.

## Americans and Apartheid

Many Americans also protested civil rights violations abroad, particularly South Africa's apartheid system. Over the decade, these racist policies began to attract increasing attention from foreigners as well as foreign governments. In 1985, a dozen Western nations, including the United States, voted to impose economic and cultural sanctions against South Africa's government. Measures included the prohibition of most loans to the government as well as the sale of computer and nuclear technology. A few months later, the South African government barred television camera crews and photographers from covering racial incidents. Officials claimed that the foreign press was misrepresenting the country.



### Other Social Issues

Many other issues concerned American in the 1980s. Crime rates in the United States had dipped in the early 1980s, but by the middle of the decade crime rates were on the rise again, significantly so for violent crimes. The rising crime rate was a major issue in the 1988 presidential elections. Republican advertising portrayed Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis as weak on crime. Dukakis was governor of Massachusetts when a convicted murderer, out of prison on a weekend pass, attacked a couple in Maryland. The murderer was African-American, so some critics charged that the adverts played on racist fears of black criminals.

AIDS also came to the forefront of the American consciousness. The first cases of AIDS in the United States were reported in the early 1980s. By the mid-1980s, more and more Americans were becoming concerned by the spread of AIDS. In 1993, AIDS was the leading cause of death between men ages 25 to 44 in 64 US cities. Between 1986 and 1990, new AIDS cases reported for women more than tripled.

The abortion debate was also an important issue throughout the decade. The Supreme Court upheld several challenges to the constitutional right to legalised abortion. However, Reagan's administration, along with the growing conservative movement and fundamentalist Christian organisations, opposed abortion. State legislation as well as federal courts eroded a woman's right to obtain an abortion, and the availability of abortions became restricted over the years. Two divisions grew: pro-choicers, who wanted to eliminate most legislative restrictions on abortion and pro-lifers, who wanted to outlaw almost all abortions. Operation Rescue, an anti-abortion group, organised the barricading of abortion clinics, and some abortion clinics were even bombed.

### The Theatre

In the 1980s, many 'blockbuster' musicals were produced in theatres all over the world. These musicals involved spectacular sets and lavish musical arrangements, and often had unusual themes or settings. British composer Andrew Lloyd Webber produced several musicals in London. *Cats*, which was based on the work of English poet TS Eliot, became the longest-running Broadway show in history.



# SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION CHARACTERS

## Louisa 'Ouisa' Kittredge

Louisa Kittredge is a rich, attractive, middle-aged woman. She lives with her husband in an Upper East Side apartment in Manhattan. As the play opens, Ouisa is characterised by superficial traits: she is a good hostess, a quick conversationalist, and a dramatic storyteller. However, she also is the character most affected by the meeting with Paul.

The experience leads to growth and her spiritual rebirth. Ouisa gives voice to the play's title, that there are "Six degrees of separation. Between us and everybody else on this planet." This allows her to recognise the potential for a sincere connection between herself and Paul despite their vastly different backgrounds. Although in the end she does forsake him to the heartless bureaucracy of the police department, her meeting with Paul leads to an inner transformation and a new way of looking at the world around her.

She no longer values anecdotal experience but yearns for true experience, which indicates her desire to forge deeper relationships with others. She comes to realise that while her life has been filled with interesting experiences it has no inherent meaning of its own.

## Paul 'Poitier'

Very little is known about Paul's true identity. He claims to be the son of Sidney Poitier as well as a Harvard classmate of the Kittredges' children. In reality, he became aware of the Kittredge children, and others in their social milieu, when he met Trent Conway with whom he had attended high school. Paul used this young man to learn how to comport himself in upper-class society and also to learn enough details to pass himself off as belonging in the Kittredges' world.

Though Paul is not really an actor's son, he is a good actor himself. He easily convinces the Kittredges of his false identity; and his affability is a crucial determinant in Geoffrey's decision to invest the money in the Cézanne painting. His articulate and intelligent conversation belies his background.

Paul is equally adept working himself into the good graces of Rick and Elizabeth, a young couple who have moved to the city from Utah to become actors. Paul's experience with the couple, and his seduction of Rick, teach him that his self-centered actions and lies can have devastating results on others. At Ouisa's urging, he turns himself into the police, but he maintains his hope of becoming a better man in the future — the man he pretended to be.





### **Flanders 'Flan' Kittredge**

Flan is an attractive, middle-aged art dealer. His business is the discreet buying and selling of expensive works of art. Flan got into the art business out of a sincere love for art, but by the play's opening, he has lost this idealism. The passion he once felt for art has been supplanted by the great sums of money it can earn for him. He recognises that some of the people to whom he sells great works of art value them not for their beauty, but for their social cachet. Like his wife, Flan is drawn to Paul, but unlike his wife, when he learns the truth, he detaches from Paul. Even though he acknowledges the service Paul provided in obtaining the two million dollars from Geoffrey, he continues to refer to Paul as a "crook" and wants little to do with him.

### **Geoffrey**

Geoffrey is a liberal South African billionaire. He is an acquaintance of the Kittredges and is at their home when Paul arrives. Geoffrey is charmed by Paul, and his apparent relationship to Sidney Poitier. He enjoys the evening so much that he gives Flan the money for the painting.

### **Rick**

Rick has moved to New York from Utah with his girlfriend Elizabeth. They want to become actors. The couple met Paul in the park and believe his story about being Flan's ostracised son. When Paul needs money, Rick secretly withdraws it from his and Elizabeth's account. Rick and Paul dance together at the Rainbow Room and then have sex in a hansom carriage in Central Park. Devastated by what he has done — betraying Elizabeth's confidence and having sex with a man — Rick commits suicide by jumping out a window.

### **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth moved to New York from Utah with her boyfriend Rick. They want to become actors. They befriend Paul in the park and believe his story about being Flan's ostracised son. When Paul asks them for money, Elizabeth refuses but later learns of Rick's deceit. After Rick kills himself, Elizabeth presses charges of theft against Paul. She believes that he has taken everything from her.

### **Trent Conway**

Trent Conway attended the same high school as the Kittredge children. The two young men had a three-month affair, during which Trent told Paul all about the wealthy New York families he knew.

### **Talbot 'Tess' Kittredge**

Tess is the Kittredges' rebellious daughter. She tracks down Trent Conway and finds out about his relationship with Paul.

# SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION

BY JOHN GUARE



**Obi Abili**  
PAUL



**Zoe Boyle**  
TESS



**Sarah Goldberg**  
ELIZABETH



**Michael Goldsmith**  
BEN



**Ilan Goodman**  
DOUG



**Stephen Greif**  
DR. FINE / DOORMAN



**Anthony Head**  
FLAN



**Kevin Kiely**  
HUSTLER



**Lesley Manville**  
OUIA



**John Moraitis**  
DETECTIVE



**Luke Neal**  
RICK / POLICEMAN



**Steven Pacey**  
LARKIN



**Ian Redford**  
GEOFFREY



**Sara Stewart**  
KITTY



**Paul Stocker**  
WOODY



**Kevin Trainor**  
TRENT

**DIRECTOR DAVID GRINDLEY**  
**DESIGNER JONATHAN FENSOM**  
**LIGHTING JASON TAYLOR**  
**SOUND GREGORY CLARKE**

# SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION THEMES

## Race and Racism

Paul is the only African-American character in the play. He recognises that his race is a detriment in the society in which he wants to immerse himself, so he makes the best of it by claiming to be Sidney Poitier's son. Paul draws on the appeal of one of the first African-American actors who successfully challenged the race barrier, much as he is attempting to do now.

Paul makes pretensions to that world. He tells the Kittredges "I never knew I was black in that racist way til I was sixteen and came back here [to the United States]. ... I don't even feel black." He claims not to experience the typical problem of "being black in America" while he pretends to be of their world. Once the truth about his background has emerged, however, and Paul faces arrest, he admits the falsity of his earlier words. He asks Ouisa to take him to the police station because "I'll be treated with care if you take me.... If they don't know you're special, they kill you." When Ouisa protests, he says, "Mrs. Louisa Kittredge, I am black," which is his first admission that race has had its effect on his life, his actions, and his choices.

## Family

Paul's primary motivation in tricking the Kittredges and their acquaintances is to win their "everlasting friendship." Most important to Paul is creating a family for himself. Although his claim that Sidney Poitier is his father is calculated to win the trust of the liberal, wealthy Manhattanites, the lie also plays into Paul's sublimated desire for a family. Similarly, when he claims to be Flan's neglected son, his yearning to forge a relationship with his father is quite real. Paul's fantasies all surround familial ties, but significantly, those that he describes to others are all broken relationships. Paul reveals nothing about his past, but his isolation is physically and symbolically indicated by his first introduction to any member of Manhattan's upper class, when Trent Conway finds him standing alone in a doorway.

Paul preferred the Kittredges to the others because they paid attention to him and welcomed him into their circle. Kitty and Larkin as well as Dr. Fine all left him alone, but at the Kittredges, "We all stayed together."

The final conversation that takes place between Ouisa and Paul shows his desire to belong to them. He wants to live with them or take over Flan's business. He has started to call himself Paul Poitier-Kittredge. For her part, Ouisa understands what Paul wants and she seems to demonstrate some willingness on the telephone to make it happen. As she tells him, "We'll have a wonderful life." Despite this, and for reasons that are somewhat inexplicable, she tells the police Paul's whereabouts instead of taking him down to the station herself. In so doing, she loses all connection with him. As she tells the audience, although she tried to track him down, she was unable to do so, for "I wasn't family."

## Imagination

Imagination is an important theme in the play. Paul has an active and vivid imagination. For one thing, it allows him to assume easily and convincingly the role of an upper-class young man. He uses his imaginative talents to persuade others to trust him and like him. With Rick and Elizabeth, Paul spins a story of being forsaken by his father, and the couple feel so badly for him that they invite him to stay with them. In a sense, they become a surrogate family, standing in for the Kittredge family that denies itself to Paul. He appeals to the Kittredges and their acquaintances by allying himself with theatre royalty and also by promising bit parts in the movie rendition of the Broadway hit *Cats*.

Paul shows his interest in imagination through his talk about *The Catcher in the Rye*. Later in the play, it becomes obvious that when Paul says, "I believe that imagination is the passport we create to take us into the real world," he is speaking literally. Paul has created a persona for himself to bring him into the upper-class world he wants to join. Paul's imagination makes him want to be a part of the Kittredges' family, and he comes up with a very imaginative plan to make his dreams come true.



## PREFACE BY JOHN GUARE, PLAYWRIGHT

**JOHN GUARE'S REVEALING INSIGHT INTO THE CRAFT OF PLAYWRITING HIGHLIGHTS ONE OF THE KEY THEMES OF SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION, AS ESPOUSED BY THE ENIGMATIC CHARACTER PAUL.**

The question actors get is, How did you learn all those lines?  
The question writers get is, How long did it take you to write this?  
How long did it take to write Six Degrees?

Let me backtrack.

In 1967, I wrote a play, finished except for one salient detail. I couldn't figure out a way to begin the damned thing. It began sort of on page ten in what was obviously the second scene and went along to its conclusion. But how to begin it?

I knew what the beginning needed to be, musically – sort of a poem. No, it had to be a declaration of sorts. No, it had to – what? what? I was dry.

My father had died the summer before. Going through boxes of his stuff, I found he had saved notebooks I'd sent him in lieu of letters, from school, from the Air Force. And one from 1965. Travelling. I began reading about events I had no memory of writing. They were simply acts of writing like memos dashed off. An entry marked Rome. In 1965, hitching from Paris to Egypt, I ducked off the main road out of Rome to escape a drenching rain. I stayed in this building that turned out to be the Etruscan Museum, stayed a few hours. The rain subsided; I went back out to the road and resumed my hitch. In my notebook during the squall I had written a long riff – 'If I could have been born anybody – my pick of a Kennedy or a Frank Sinatra or a Ford or the King of Greece – out of that whole hat of births I still would've picked to be an Etruscan.'



I put down the notebook. The section I had written two years before ended at exactly the point where my new unbeginnable play started. I joined the two sections together. You can't imagine the weirdness of seeing that join – of feeling the play which even had a name: Muzeeka – to see it suddenly exist and breathe. But what frightened me was that I had been writing this play unawares. Muzeeka did not require my waking participation to complete writing in New York what I had started in Rome two years before.

What alarmed me in addition to my lack of memory was my carelessness in not taking care. Suppose I hadn't found it or lost it? What would have happened to the play? This long monologue became the very reason for the play. What spooked luck drew me to finding what I needed when I needed it? I don't trust luck. Theolonius Monk says, 'There are mistakes and then there are good mistakes.' I realised if I was going to be a writer, I must first trust this unknown work process that goes on within and realise my job as a writer now becomes protecting it. Okay – I'll start by writing every day – overheard – dreams – fights – rages – jokes – laughter – events – then go over it – searching it out for patterns. If I have nothing to write, write down passages from books I'm reading. Don't throw anything you've written away – cut brutally when you're working but keep everything because this is the great fact. We are all strangers to ourselves. From palm readers to analysts, we try to find the way to decipher our dreams. Don't try to sort it out – make stones – make clay – a writer is a sculptor who has to make his own rock. I understand now why it's not playwright but playwright – wright as in wheelwright – boat wright – wright refers to the craft and the craft is the method we use to make a new map to the unconscious.

A writer learns his or her life as a writer is entrusted to work being done in a room, a studio, an atelier not at the top of a stair but hidden somewhere within the mind. Why the hell is the place that is most truly us the place that is most inaccessible? And a writer grows to hate that room and its gnawing presence and its inaccessibility. A writer's life becomes a history of the trek of how he or she returns to that room down a path as trustworthy as mercury. The writer strews the path with booze or drugs or lies and resentments and fear of abandonment and despair and jealousy and self-loathing and hatred that we have lost the way to that path which is most us. Because the inhabitants of that room demand attention when they are ready or else they will drive us mad. You didn't try hard enough to find me. You didn't structure your life in the right way to hear us when we called. But you have to go on living. This is not Dostoevsky. This is not Byron.

I heard about an event in 1983. Read about it in the papers. Forgot the event. Or thought so. Six years later in 1989 I was breaking my back trying to solve a play and also working on a film script that I liked but that would also pull double duty of paying to support my playwrighting habit. Overwhelmed? My plate was very filled.

And of course that's when the knocking started. *Six Degrees of Separation* – title and all – announced it was ready and must be collected and everything else put aside. Now! The workshop had spent the past six years collecting data, reworking, inventing, finding a style of narrative. Luckily the call didn't come during an appendectomy or wartime invasion or a loved one's emergency or a parachute jump. It came when I was in proximity to my pen.

Which I picked up. Because you cannot say to that knocking: Later. Or not right now. It's perverse, that unconscious. It only shows up at the most inappropriate time, when it's not been asked for. I wrote the play. I showed it to the people at Lincoln Center. It went into production.

So this preface is some sort of homage to the unconscious. *Six Degrees* is done. Back to conscious living. Back to writing everyday, trying to charm my way back down that mercury path, find the map to that room once more. And keeping the hope alive that it will exist once more. The search drives you crazy. The waiting. The trust. Plays and novels about writers never work. How do you watch somebody do this? Now about actors.

No, the people are right. How do actors learn all those lines?

How long did it take to write *Six Degrees*?

The actual writing happened quickly.

But how long did it take to write?

51 years.



## INTERVIEW WITH DAVID GRINDLEY, DIRECTOR

**This is the first major London revival of John Guare's Olivier Award-winning play in almost 18 years. What drew you to the work?**

What has always captivated me is the play's electric quality. Its large cast conveys a compelling narrative that tackles such diverse issues as race, the commercialization of art, the iconography of celebrity, social status and the transformative power of the imagination. Throughout it is thought-provoking, witty and at times profoundly moving.

**So, what role will the set design and actors play in bringing the story to life?**

The set will help to create an environment in which the audience believes they are in an upmarket New York apartment but will also give them free rein to imagine they are in Central Park, Boston or anywhere else the action takes place. In the play, the characters directly address the audience, so we have to make sure that the actors are best placed to do that.

**The play was written just after the 1980s boom when the world was on the verge of recession. How will it resonate today?**

We meet Ouisa and Flan Kittredge, two wealthy New York art dealers, as they are trying to secure US\$2 million to purchase a Cézanne and sell it on to the Japanese for profit. If the deal doesn't come off, it will threaten their immediate existence because they are more indebted than they let on. In this present recession where credit is much less readily available, access to cash to fund ventures like these has become a real issue. So I think the play will strike a chord with a contemporary audience. I also see comparisons between Sidney Poitier, a black American icon who is referenced in the play, and Barack Obama today. It is interesting that both men had stints of growing up outside mainland America because I think this has allowed them to transcend race as an issue. They weren't brought up in places where slavery has cast its shadow so they have avoided being indelibly marked by its legacy. By not legitimising it as a problem for themselves, they have in turn denied others the potential of exploiting perceived racial differences, making themselves tremendously appealing as a result. The way the characters talk about Poitier resonates with perceptions of Obama today.

**We see that the deal has become more important to Ouisa and Flan than the art itself. Would the play work if it had been set in any other world than art dealing?**

It could work in any environment where the intrinsic artistic worth of something is believed to be more important than its commercial potential. What is vital is an understanding that despite their honest enthusiasm for art, Flan and Ouisa have been seduced by the enormous financial rewards of the industry in the 1980s to become cynical mercenaries. They aren't looking for the best home for the work they sell, but the highest bidder to guarantee a fat commission for themselves. Paul's entrance into their lives is a test of their convictions.

**You have said that the power of the imagination lies at the heart of *Six Degrees*. Can you explain why?**

The central character of Paul uses his limited resources in the world in an extraordinary way. He reinvents himself from a US\$50 Boston hustler into a Harvard undergraduate who can pass as Sidney Poitier's son among affluent Manhattan society. Paul's lust for life means he won't let his personal circumstances restrict him. And he does this through sheer feat of imagination. By showing how superficial and shallow contemporary life has become for Ouisa and Flan, John Guare's play argues forcibly that the notion of imagination has become devalued.



**Paul is a fascinating character. What is revealed through his interaction with Ouisa and Flan?**

Inspired by a real-life con artist who took on the guise of Poitier's son to famously defraud wealthy New Yorkers, I think Paul as a character in the play is more of an ambivalent figure. He doesn't actually steal from Ouisa and Flan although he is fraudulent. What he does have is the Midas touch in terms of allowing others to reconnect with their humanity and their potential to celebrate experience. Flan temporarily rediscovers his genuine love of art through interacting with Paul but then returns to business as usual. Ouisa, on the other hand, has a transformative connection with Paul. After Paul is revealed as a con man, she questions the value of her life.

**How does the Six Degrees concept fit in?**

It feels very American; the idea of so much being invested in people connecting. The idea you are only a handful of links away to Kevin Bacon or the Queen. Walking down New York's Fifth Avenue in rush hour can leave you feeling anonymous so I think there is a craving in America for individual significance. Paul offers Ouisa and Flan a part in a movie version of Cats that his father is supposedly directing. The fact they have the chance to appear on the silver screen and then potentially talk about this connection to Poitier gives them significance and credibility.

**If the focus is on New York, where is the relevance for London audiences?**

I think the relevance for a UK audience is that we stand between America and Europe ideologically as well as geographically. So, hopefully, Six Degrees will fascinate people here as they assess the resonances and divergences in the play to their own experience in London.

**Finally, were you at all tempted to update the era or setting of Six Degrees?**

No I prefer to keep the play located in its period. When you get it right, you take audiences on a dual journey. First there's the one of discovery as they witness the environment and particular characteristics of a different era that appear so different from their own, then the double whammy of recognition that so many aspects of human behaviour haven't really changed.

## QUICK GUIDE TO...

### **Sidney Poitier**

During a decade when African-Americans continued to endure the enforced status of being separate and unequal, Sidney Poitier became an inspirational movie star. Sidney Poitier was born on 27 February 1927. A native of Cat Island, The Bahamas, (though born in Miami during a mainland visit by his parents), Poitier grew up in poverty as the son of a farmer. He had little formal education and at the age of 15 was sent to Miami to live with his brother. He later joined the US Army and upon his release from duty, he moved to New York, where he was accepted into the American Negro Theatre.

Poitier made his Broadway debut in 1946, in an all-black production of *Lysistrata*, and moved into films four years later, with *No Way Out*. He earned his first Academy Award nomination, in Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones*. The film's focus on racial politics, as well as his increasing popularity, made Poitier a key figure in the civil rights movement. For 1963's *The Lilies of the Field*, he made history as the first African-American actor to win an Oscar in a leading role. Later as an actor, director, and producer, he altered the racial perceptions held by both film audiences and executives, rising to superstar status in an industry dominated on both sides of the camera by white people, while becoming the first African-American ever to take home an Oscar for Best Actor.

### **The Upper East Side**

The Upper East Side is a neighborhood in the borough of Manhattan in New York City, between Central Park and the East River. The Upper East Side is within an area bounded by 59th Street, 96th Street, Central Park and the East River. Once known as the 'Silk Stocking District', it has in recent times been known as the most affluent area of New York City and today has some of the most expensive property in the United States.

The neighbourhood is host to many famous landmarks, including the Museum of the City of New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum and the Jewish Museum of New York. The Upper East Side's luxurious property and lifestyle has attracted numerous blockbuster American films, most famously *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. The price and exclusivity of the Upper East Side's property is reflected in its high-profile residents, who have included Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese.