

# His Winning Play Was Pulled From Out of the Filing Cabinet

By Robert W. Butler  
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**G**EORGE Gurley's name isn't being whispered yet in the green-rooms and rehearsal halls of Broadway, but he has taken the first step toward a successful career as a playwright.

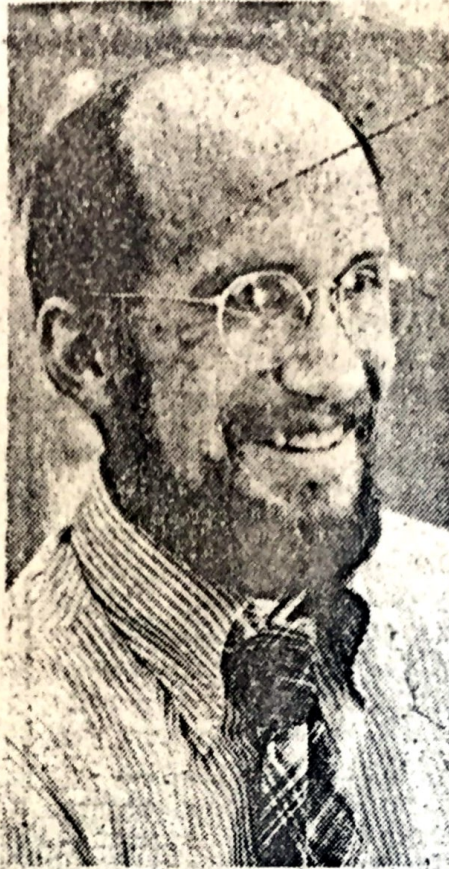
Early last month "Cures," a play by the 36-year-old Kansas City businessman, was awarded the \$5,000 first prize in the Missouri Arts Council's statewide playwrighting competition, beating out 90 other entries.

Gurley today recalls with a smile that he had another play he wanted to enter but couldn't finish it in time, so he "pulled 'Cures' out of a filing cabinet and sent it in."

Second choice or not, "Cures" so impressed one of the judges, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright/director Charles Gordone (for his 1970 "black black comedy," "No Place to Be Somebody"), that he demanded that he be allowed first crack at directing the new work. Gordone will get his chance late this spring when "Cures" is staged for the first time at Park College.

Gurley's play is a funny, savage piece of theater-of-the-absurd that takes place in a morgue/crematorium in a mortuary basement. "Cures" has only three characters: Percy, the new up-and-coming young executive who pops in one day to get the death business back on the right financial track; Clarence, the cynical old mortuary hand who alternately encourages and ridicules the newcomer; and the Boss, a God-like voice emanating from an intercom. The stage business includes a chute on which bodies slide down into the basement and a crematorium that belches flame.

The competition judges were lavish in their praise of "Cures." Irma Tucker, founder and director of the City Players in St. Louis, described it as "an excellent, sophisticated, satirical black comedy reflecting our computerized, mechanized mode of life as



**GEORGE GURLEY**

evidenced in contemporary business management. 'Cures' is a meaningful contribution to the theater. It is definitely good entertainment because it stimulates thought and feeling. The audience should leave dissatisfied with 'things as they are' and with a will to re-evaluate elements of our lifestyles."

"A funny, macabre, flip, irreverent play which I recommend most highly," said Arthur Ballet, vice chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts and professor of drama at the University of Minnesota. "... I suspect this is really a philosophical treatise, created by a sensitive, antic mind. Not only is the play well worth staging and restaging for a long time to come, but it is a play which will, I think, move audiences today. The playwright shatters conventional, lin-

ear progression in order to achieve the absurdity of man, caught in an uncomprehending but demanding order. Without hesitation, I recommend the play as a deeply religious metaphor. This is an important play . . ."

And Gordone said of "Cures": "Its characters and situations are deceptive, with a composition of insensibility which in the end proved not only thought-provoking but philosophically and dramatically sound. To me the theme of this piece is pure and simple: that death—in opposition to life with all the ramifications of good or bad—is a cure-all for man's ills and insanity. Indeed, the author has used a rather nihilistic approach, but at the same time makes this play engrossing, comedic and above all highly theatric. The author takes charge with all the deftness of a professional."

If Gurley's head has been turned by all that praise, it doesn't show. Tall, balding, bearded, encased by wireframes and corduroy, smiling softly (one is hard put to imagine him giving out a belly laugh), he certainly has that classic ascetic look. It's rather surprising, then, to learn that Gurley for years has operated a successful real estate company, Preferred Properties. And as far as the Bohemian life of the *artiste* is concerned, it's rather amusing to note that he's got all the credentials needed for local high society—his great-grandfather was August Meyer, the first Kansas City parks commissioner and namesake of Meyer Boulevard—though Gurley would be just as comfortable on a Missouri wild turkey hunt as at a country club soiree.

Gurley's history is, to say the least, diverse. He attended Pembroke-Country Day School, winning the high and low hurdles at the 1959 state track meet. He then went on to Princeton, later teaching English in Beirut. Today he still is working on his master's degree in English at the University of

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Missouri-Kansas City, picking up a few more credits every year.

The Raindust Press in 1975 published a book of Gurley's poems, "Home Movies," and his poetry has appeared in numerous literary magazines, including Kansas Quarterly, Seattle Review, Nimrod, Dakotah Territory, New Letters and the Chouteau Review. He also writes book reviews for The Star.

"Cures"—or its antecedents—has been kicking around Gurley's head and across his typewriter for some time. The first draft was completed nearly four years ago for a drama class he was taking at UMKC and submitted instead of a term paper. Gurley's professor, James McKinley, a familiar name to readers of The Star's book pages and such national publications as Playboy, saw the script's potential and helped Gurley through several rewrites.

"Jim McKinley gave me some encouragement when I needed it and I worked up the courage to submit it to several persons," Gurley said. "I even had the nerve to send it to Joe Papp in New York and to a couple of playwrighting contests, including one by the UMKC theater department."

No luck, but Gurley kept trying. He finally scored with the Missouri Arts Council competition.

"When this contest came up I had two plays and I could have submitted either one. But the deadline was coming up and while the other play was my preference, I knew I wouldn't have time to finish it, so I pulled 'Cures' out of a filing cabinet at the last minute and sent it in.

"I suppose what 'Cures' is all about is someone made impotent by being out of his element. It's about how tenuous everybody's confidence is. Originally I wrote it about two janitors working in an executive suite. The president of the company arrives late at night and is trapped in the basement with the two janitors, where his three-piece suit and authority don't mean a thing."

Gurley said he has been long impressed by the peculiar mix of civility and antagonism that gives "Cures" and other examples of the theater-of-the-absurd much of their force. "I identify with that. I find myself presenting this really polite facade to the world but inside saying really outrageous things to myself. Outside I'm calm, inside I'm insulting, devastating."

"I sort of assembled 'Cures' out of bits and snatches of these catchy phrases and insults that I thought up over a long period of time. At first the dialogue had little to do with a specific situation. I ended up piecing these appealing bits of dialogue together—it took me a long time to give a shape and direction to the play. There's wasn't an initial concept."

The play went through several title changes. At one point it was called "Empty Chairs" and had an emphasis on prevailing pop psychological techniques. Up until the time he submitted it to the Missouri Arts Council competition, Gurley called his work "Diseases," a rather bitter title that reflected the angst of the play but belied its humor.

"At the last minute I changed it to 'Cures' because I liked that ironic twist. Besides, it has double meaning: the curing of disease or curing like the tanning of hides of dead animals. It was just an afterthought, but it worked well, considering the play takes place in a mortuary."

"Cures," of course, was never meant to be taken as a realistic dra-

ma, Gurley said. "It's an obviously outrageous situation, but I would like for someone in the audience to find themselves momentarily accepting it as normal and to find themselves laughing at disturbing things. My idea behind this situation is to have the audience undergo emotional reactions without understanding why—to create a lingering sense of puzzlement."

Despite his new status as a prize-winning playwright, Gurley said he recognizes he has much to learn. "I see 'Cures' as more than just a series of jokes, but it's not a sacred thing with me, either. I'm a theatrical novice—I'm not even that big a theatergoer. My knowledge of the theater is strictly from a literary point of view. Some of 'Cures' makes very good reading but poses serious stage problems."

Currently Gurley is awaiting word on yet another play he has entered in competition, a work "about Indians, based very loosely on an incident at

Wounded Knee in which a chief was tricked into shooting a general and then betrayed by his own people. Needless to say, it's not historically valid. I think it's more natural for me to weed out anything that gives a play a historic or regional validity. I think it's more attractive to make something utterly abstract, like 'Waiting for Godot,' where we can't place the time or location but it seems natural.

"The dramatic situations that attract me are ones presenting a moral choice within a situation where the choice is impossible. I like situations where to do the right thing brings disastrous results, but were a person evilly motivated may produce good results. That's the function of the theater—to trick the audience into accepting situations that force them to recognize the ambiguity of their lives. I seem to see these situations everywhere—games, trials, hospitals, bars and insane asylums are great settings in which to bring up those questions."