

Introduction to Elizabeth Gray's *Wish I Had A Sylvia Plath*, by  
*Anthony Edwards*

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When a play about Sylvia Plath came to our literary town of Carmel, California, last Spring, I heard about it, from neighbors who heard about it from other neighbors who sit on our Cherry Center for the Arts theater board.

"There's a play about Sylvia Plath? Isn't she the one who killed herself?"

"Oh, I don't want to go, it's too depressing."

"I know--I don't even want to read her—and I don't want my daughters to, either."

This resistance is what someone is up against who wants to write a play about Sylvia Plath. The very reasons people know about her are the ones that would keep them away.

But I'm intrigued. A play about Plath. Well! It makes sense. She is a drama queen, one of the most theatrical of poets, a performer, sensationally putting the poet self on stage, her life literally and metaphorically on the line. I cancel my dinner engagement, and thinking that the play is at 8 pm, arrive at the theater at 7:40 pm, looking forward to a glass of wine and finding out just who, at this far western outpost of American culture, just settling into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is interested in—and not afraid of-- Sylvia Plath. I am alarmed that the lobby is deserted, but then I realize the play is already going on. It must have started at 7:30 pm. A man hovers outside the curtained door to the theater, listening and peeking--afraid, he whispers, to go in. I peer in. There on the stage is . . . this housewife. She's wearing an apron and high heels, and she's vamping for an imagined television cooking show audience. She winks at me. Her hand is on her hip and she has a knife, a long knife, in her hands, and a gleam in her eye, and she has a hugely false bright red lipstick smile, and pouts and croons and smirks through her witty patter and banter, as she chops, chops, chops, the cucumber before her, the pieces flying into the air and onto

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the floor. I slide into the seat next to the door, which is the first row. I haven't disrupted the play by my late entrance, in media res, because the audience is . . . laughing.

Throughout the play: laughing. Laughing. Laughing. Crying. Sort of the opposite of the structure of the original Greek drama festivals, where multiple tragedies are followed by a satyr play . . . comedy having the last word, more potent in its fractional time allotted than the triple tragedies that come before. After the tragic triptych, we cannot go home without a restorative sense of comic perspective. But perhaps the upside-down Plath play front ends laughter, lots of it, to help us bear the true horror of the ending. Having laughed with the Lucy Ricardo-ish housewife at her disarmingly domestic plight(s), we are somehow emotionally complicit with the heartbreaking end in her kitchen, as she kneels before the stove; laughter, hooting laughter that brings on tears throughout the show now mix with tears of respect and regret and sorrow for a life that is understood. For the first time, I am weeping for the real Plath, the person.

I am trying to work out the theatrical dynamics of my tears, the empathic humanity invoked, as I wait for the actress to come out, and when she does, I am surprised that she looks so young out of her costume and make-up. She had conjured up for me a middle-aged woman of universal proportions. "You—you—have brought out an essential Plath, as I understand her—you have illuminated aspects of her. . . who is this Anthony Edwards? I have not heard of him. Is he a Plath scholar? And a man to have these insights! Oh, I have so much to say to him, I have so many questions!" The actor Elisabeth Gray says to me: "I would love to hear what you have to say. I have a close relationship with the author, who is interested in feedback as he is developing this play, and I can let him know." I tell her that I have been writing and lecturing on Plath for almost 40 years . . . I am so excited to sit down and talk about the implications of this play for the scholarly world, whose extraordinary work on Plath only increases with each year, and for the reading public for whom she has been controversial, a kind of literary rock-star. By this time most of the audience has left, and Gray confesses that she herself is Anthony, the playwright. As an actress, she was an Oxford student of Professor Sally Bayley (Jesus College), commissioned and challenged to write a play for the Plath

Symposium. In time-honored tradition (George Eliot, George Sands) she wants to pluralize in the public's eye the presentation of a woman's life that is so powerful in our culture that people know who Plath is even though they may not have read her, or are afraid to read her: Plath's image is that potent. Elisabeth Gray, in taking on the *nom de plume* Anthony Edwards, is trying to diffuse some of that fear of revelation of a woman's life . . . and indeed, what I find in the next days and weeks and months of watching this play and its audience is that the theater, initially sparsely attended when the play opened, begins to fill each night by word of mouth, and it is filled equally with men and women. Women are bringing men, and men are bringing women, children their parents, parents their children, each saying, "You have to see this."

We do: we have to see this. Because for me the play is most of all a tribute to Plath scholars, artists, and educators who keep the meaning of her life and work alive and vital and increasingly important, who keep pushing at the edges and enlarging the field. The public will love this play, even those who don't know Sylvia Plath and for whom any biographical truths, fully created out of the cultural ethos, and on which it is based, are irrelevant. It could be called "Thus Sprake Oven", or "Me and My Oven", or "Diary of a I'm- Mad- and- I'm- Not -Going -to- Take -It -Anymore -Housewife", and never mention Plath, and still succeed as a vivid portrait of an artist's struggle for universal truths about creativity and humanity. But the more that you know about Plath – and the scholars in the audience here at Oxford tonight know more about Plath than almost any person on this planet – the more that this play (which after all was generated here in Oxford, out of the historic engagement of Oxford students and faculty) is alive with meaning and nuance which we can savor and mull as we celebrate Plath's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Any dramatic evocation of Plath is understood in the context of the lingering conviction and cloud through which the public sees Sylvia Plath's life and work, as something tragically stunted and flawed because of her suicide, her work both frightful and frightening, her smile a palimpsest of a gleaming open-mouthed skull. And, in the way of Halloween witchery, in the mutuality of scaring oneself and others. This understanding recognizes Plath's "terror play" which became her final fate. Plath ripened still green. But

to see her as stunted and depressed, I believe, is to seriously misread her comedy, *and* tragedy—and thus the totality and significance of her literary achievement. The play, *Wish I Had A Sylvia Plath*, by showing us an upset and aggrieved housewife/mother/poet with an aggravatingly charming poet-husband who leaves her for another woman with equanimity and even élan, assured of his genius prerogatives, has us identify and sympathize with a tale as old as the myths which gave rise to Greek tragedy. We see the girl-next-door turned into Medea – yet her destructive rage implodes as she kills the mother of her own children. Gray’s play shows the final despair of this housewife, reviewing her life in the last minute as she kneels before the symbolic oven – Plath’s imagery, not Gray’s. But the trajectory of the play’s sorrow is not so much for Plath herself, the manic inspired poet whom the Muse adores, but for the mother who essentially orphans her children.

How can such a life possibly produce comedy? Looking at Plath’s art through the lens of her actions, her literature is commonly read as an extended suicide note. The poems speak of suicide and death, “Lady Lazarus” predicts her death, and The Bell Jar, although fiction, describes a suicide attempt that actually took place in much the same way as the novel describes. Yet, the poems also stand free as dramatically witty, full of vitality and comedy, low, bawdy, high, formal, slapstick, classic. They beg to be *performed*. They are bursting with life. The Bell Jar, upon which Gray’s play builds, is a comedy. *Wish I Had A Sylvia Plath* is the sequel: the fictional comic and wise-cracking heroine Esther Greenwood is married to Ned Pughes (playing with Ted Hughes, the husband of Plath), making the connection between Gray’s vision of Plath’s comedy and The Bell Jar explicit. I found myself thinking of Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn as a useful lens through which to read The Bell Jar and, it seems to me, Plath’s role as a writer. The comparison emphasizes the social satire, in which an American boyhood and girlhood are respectively portrayed in opposition to a demoralizing adult world. Huck suffers an abusive parent, surveys an adult world he does not want to join, stages his death, undertakes escape plots to freedom, and finally decides to leave civilization altogether by “lighting out” for the “territories.” We leave him poised on the brink of a new life. Esther suffers a smothering parent and culture, as oppressive to her own freedom of spirit as

Huck (and Jim) found southern American pre-Civil War culture. After numerous escape plots and a death attempt, she recovers sufficiently to decide to re-enter the fray. She too is poised on the brink of a new life as the novel ends. Her future, like Huck's, indeterminate. We know from the book's beginning that the narrator has actually become a mother and is writing this autobiographical book, just as Huck purports to be writing his autobiography culminating in his renunciation, a decision to live life on his own terms, or not at all. So they both have survived with their morality and integrity intact. The ending of the novels is happy for the protagonists' souls, and the optimism about their futures seems to lie in the fact that each has become a writer. Each will be immortal.

Gray's play builds on the comedy of The Bell Jar through the character of Esther Greenwood, whose wit is sharp and poignant and often hilarious. In *Wish I Had A Sylvia Plath*, Esther Greenwood is spunky, feisty, spirited—her artistic self is in control. It is this artist who prevails in Gray's play, fusing the mother/housewife poet identity. The last moments of her life become a narrative satire on marriage and domesticity. The way the mother and wife and daughter struggle to integrate the role of great immortal poet is refreshingly, charmingly funny, in a heroically doomed way. We know from the start where it will end, because the play opens with a woman poised before her oven, inserting her head. Then the oven begins to speak to her, like Starwars' R2D2, and the startled woman, realizing that she is not "done yet," engages with the oven (Olsen) to explain what she is about to do. Therefore, apart from any knowledge of Plath's biography, the audience as with an ancient Greek play knows at the outset how it will end; the tension is in seeing it unfold. Thus it is all the more remarkable that the audience, forewarned, is drawn into its comedy. The play's interest and meaning is in the interpretation that our heroine gives to her death as part of her self-creation as an artist.

Watching the play opens us to a heightened consciousness of Plath's prose and poetry as satire and comedy in the classical senses, and aligns Plath with heartbreaking comic American commentators, including Twain and Ralph Ellison. But the humor with which Esther Greenwood confronts her dismissive mother and remorseless husband is humanizing in its universality, beyond literary genres of formal comedy. The most

poignant and ultimate comic element of the play brings together the formal classic comedy of social criticism and an antic comedy of manners, a rout of our family romance. The housewife artist, still in apron, writing down new lines and ideas as she goes, realizes that her engagement with the characters in her life, as she replays humiliating and demoralizing key moments in her memory, can be served by art. Reversing Emily Dickinson's "Nature is a haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be Haunted," Grey has her poet use her artistic powers to imagine a happy outcome for her life: her husband apologizes to her, pledges loyalty hereafter; her mother respects her, tells her that she is a good cook and competent "with the babies," able to handle things well; her rival apologizes to her and retreats in remorse. The decision to commit suicide is seen in the context of this power to recreate one's own life as art, with an artistic resolution, the twin symbolism of being "done" and "done in" by Holocaust ovens and the domestic stove as nemesis of the woman as artist.

From my journal. *The play fresh in my mind, I am reading Sylvia Plath's poems. I find myself breathless: breathless from responsive gasps at the power of the word play-- I must be astonished—open-mouthed, forgetting to breathe; and as I read along, all of a sudden I look up in this coffee house and people are looking at me, what, have I been speaking aloud? In some body form I am reading these poems which are spoken, spoken to us: look at them: they are live, kinetic, wiggly with question marks—we are being addressed. A question makes you alert, brings you out of your passivity as a reader. All of a sudden you're in the front row, something is called for on your part. Her style is both rhetorically-rich in questions to herself and questions to us, her reader, her audience, her adversary, her confidante whom she addresses and trusts and feels doomed by . . . think of her exclamation points, the energy: the rhythm is dynamic, the imagery is compressed, it is a cold fusion, explosive in your mind; it is freeze-dried, and your mind fills in the oxygen and it ignites.*

*Reading her poems as a piece, you see she is a poet of exuberant vitality. You are breathing hard, and you realize her lines are all about energy. They are so life-filled, so lively, live-ly. She may be our most lively poet. Her poetry is . . . rousing. . . stirring . . .*

*she is Elizabeth on a white horse before the troops as the Armada approaches . . . with this sense of life what comes through is a comic sensibility: the ability to extract from, and finally celebrate in a witty response and reconstruction, the sorrow, the anger, the rage. The opposite of depression is this enormously energized agonized making of art: Truth and Beauty--and in the process, something to be so grateful for. Who can regret the impossibly painful events and moments when they can result in what Emily Dickinson calls "the food that does not perisheth," an artistic triumph that will make you immortal, "somebody," "somebody important." This was Plath's fervent wish expressed in her journals. The last rush of poems, the torrent coming in the weeks, days, and hours before her death, reveals a blurring between conceptual moments of consciousness, problem-solving, the processing of one's emotions into thoughts, feeling and art, as if the process of assessing where she is, what is possible, what is happening and is going to happen, what it all means, is experienced itself as a poem, as art. She—her conscious being—is the art. There is no translation. It seems that way: and yet the artistic control that releases the energy shows us how the artistic process itself is a way of coping, and finally triumphing, making lemonade out of lemons. As in "Lady Lazarus," she shows herself doing this: she takes us backstage, she shows us herself coming before us as the star. She is the star-maker.*

Elisabeth Gray's play helps us understand that Plath experiences life as drama. Once Plath sees herself on stage, every action by someone in her life a tragic villain of both sexes and all ages a silent chorus. All become part of the play; and we see from her own poems and journals that she herself comes to realize that she is not only the leading actress, and author of the play, but the producer. She may in fact consider that her life is the production of such drama. And from this point of view, we can see that even her decision to end her life early and dramatically and iconically, to choreograph it, to infuse it with symbolic import connecting her life and experience from the domestic housewife of all centuries and worlds to the holocaust's gas ovens, as producer in which her life itself is the art, the drama, and artistically, the happy ending. The comedy and the tragedy.