

# SUBSCRIBER ENRICHMENT PACKET

## A THOUSAND CLOWNS

by Herb Gardner

directed by Kyle Fabel

*“A Thousand Clowns is [Herb Gardner’s] masterpiece. It is a real human comedy of poignancy and laughter, with all of humanity’s foibles and eccentricities. There is a great depth of love and understanding for all in this play...For Herb Gardner to have written this play in his early twenties is a miracle.”*

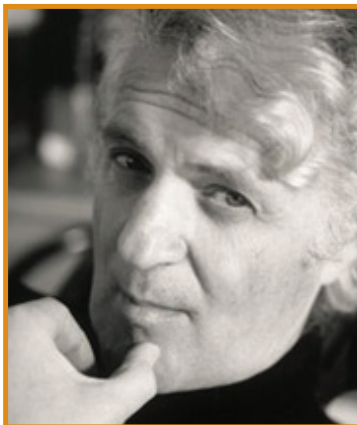
—Jason Robards Jr., original Murray Burns

## About the PLAYWRIGHT

**H**erb Gardner was not only one of America’s most produced playwrights, but possessed one of the most distinctive authorial voices in the American theatre. The work of the *A Thousand Clowns* playwright has been praised for its intelligence, humanity, infectious energy, and comic brilliance—attributes which could just as easily describe the man himself. Indeed, this great character-writer was quite the character himself.

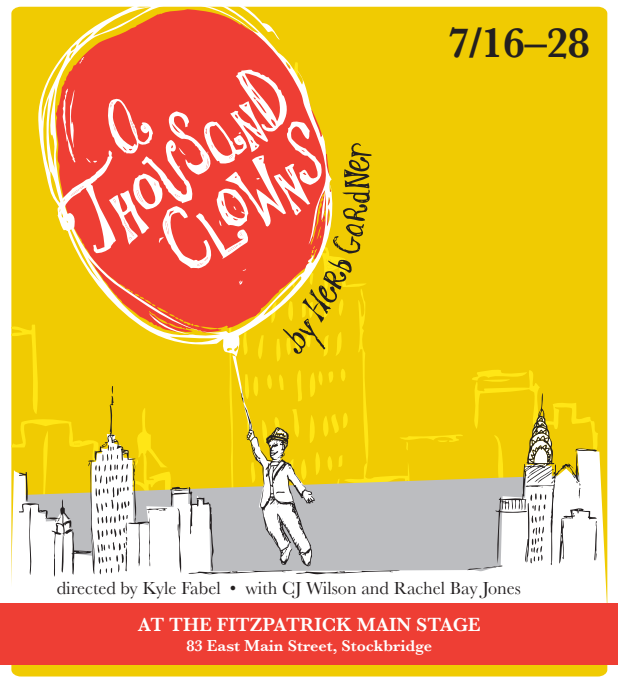
Born in Brooklyn in 1934, in his youth Gardner spent time in local Jewish delis and in his father’s Lower East Side bar, picking up on speech patterns and eccentric personalities of memorable patrons and local characters. He explained, “I grew up with people

who lived at the top of their voices.” Indeed, Gardner’s community and background had an immense influence on his written works, which are characterized by his signature blend of quirky and intriguing characters, distinct New York humor and absurd comic situations.



Herb Gardner

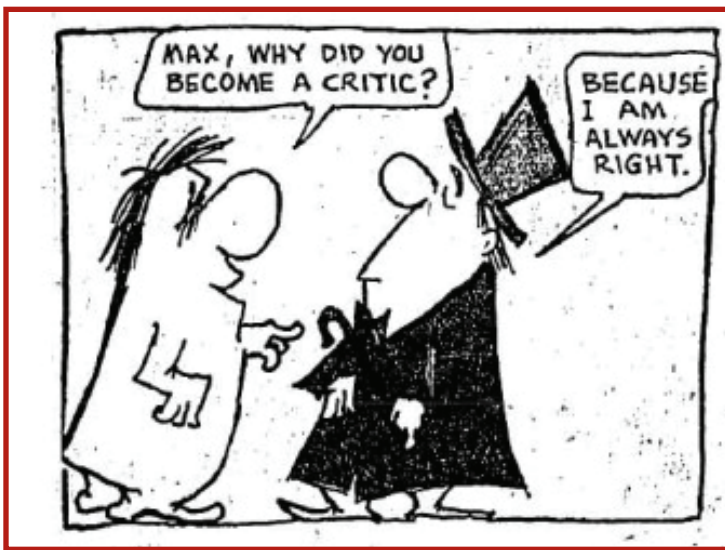
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Although best known as a playwright, Gardner first tasted success as a cartoonist. At the young age of nineteen he created the nationally syndicated hit comic strip, *The Nebbishes*. Though the strip was a major financial success and merchandizing bonanza, Gardner gave it up to pursue playwriting exclusively, an unorthodox decision for which he initially garnered criticism. He reported that, “people thought I’d gone crazy.”

## DID YOU KNOW?

- Gardner also penned the 1965 film adaption of *A Thousand Clowns*, for which he received an Oscar nomination for best-adapted screenplay.
- To pay for his education, Gardner took a job sculpting dolls, walruses and nativity scenes for the Bliss Display Company. He was fired for carving cross-eyed wise men.



Herb Gardner's comic strip, *The Nebbishes*

Instead of letting naysayers discourage him, Gardner channeled this experience into his first major playwriting attempt saying, "I wrote about what it felt like to start another life—and it became *A Thousand Clowns*." One can imagine that the playwright's critics bit their tongues when *Clowns*, Gardner's first three-act play, opened on Broadway in 1962.

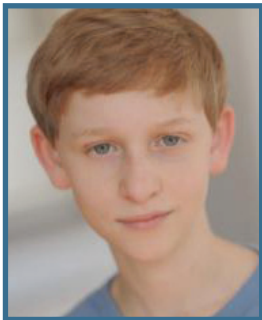
Set in Gardner's beloved New York City, this wonderfully witty piece tells the story of the eccentric

Murray Burns, a larger-than-life dreamer, who risks losing custody of his precocious young nephew, Nick, after he walks off his job as a joke writer for a children's television program. The play is filled with laughter, warmth, sweetness, and inspired madness, yet, seriously explores the universal struggle between the call of responsibility and the desire for freedom—conformity and rebellion.

*A Thousand Clowns* charmed New York audiences, running for 428 performances and earning Gardner a Tony nomination for Best Play as well as the New York Drama Critics "Best New Playwright" honor. Gardner's star was, indeed, on the rise. However, never one to follow the conventional path, Gardner only wrote a handful of plays over the next 37 years of his life. Despite the small amount of scripts he produced, nearly all of Gardner's subsequent works went on to enjoy long Broadway runs and garner critical praise.

Gardner passed away in 2003, leaving behind a canon of great American plays, which not only make us laugh, but challenge us to think. Berkshire Theatre Group is proud to present Herb Gardner's *A Thousand Clowns* as the first production at the Fitzpatrick Main Stage this summer season. We hope to see you there!

## *A Few Words with* Russell Posner, Nick Burns



What has it been like to work with CJ Wilson and the rest of the cast during this process? Could you describe your dynamic?

*CJ Wilson and the whole cast of **A Thousand Clowns** are a blast to work with! We have become a family. Even as the only kid in the cast they always treat me as an adult. Our dynamic is constant*

*hilarity while working well together.*

How do you relate to your character, Nick Burns? In what ways do you differ?

*Nick Burns makes many "wisecracks," as do I. He is also very sarcastic at times, something I am familiar with myself. However, I am very much a kid and Nick is forced to be the "adult" in his living situation with his uncle Murray.*

Is there anybody in your own life who reminds you of Nick's free-spirited Uncle Murray?

*I do have a cousin Steve who totally reminds me of Murray in the sense that he is an overgrown child! He's also fun to have around.*

What sort of preparation or research did you do for this role? What is it like to play a kid living in the 1960's?

*The preparation I did for this role was to explore Nick's personality. I did this by reading the script and trying to make Nick my own. As for playing a kid in the 60's, in my last role I was a kid in the 40's. I enjoy learning what life was like in other times. Seeing the changes through the decades is fascinating.*

Your character, Nick, has the unique freedom to change his own name at will. If you had the ability to change your name, what name would you choose?

*If I could change my name I would like people to refer to me as "Master!" It would be pretty awesome to have that clout!*

What excites you most about working on this production? Are there any inherent challenges?

***A Thousand Clowns** is a brilliant comedy. The biggest challenge for me is doing justice the character that IS Nick Burns. I am most excited to see the show come together with such a great cast.*

# An Interview with CJ Wilson, Murray Burns



**How do you relate to your character, Murray Burns? In what ways do you differ?**

I relate strongly to [Murray's] artistic standards, the love he has for his nephew, his dry sense of humor, his being a collector and his love for things humorous in every day life. I differ in that I haven't had to raise a kid for six years and haven't had a brother for an agent. That would be nice, I think.

**If you could describe Murray in three words, what would they be?**

PASSIONATE  
HUMOROUS  
INTELLIGENT

**What is the major theme of the play?**

Growing up and taking responsibility for your loved ones is the theme that hits me the hardest.

**What excites you about this project?**

What excites me is the amount of work you can squeeze into a three week rehearsal schedule, being on board the same sailing vessel as everybody else, and trying to make it coast in a beautiful chaotic symphony.

**What has it been like to work with Russell Posner and the rest of the cast during this process? How would you describe your dynamic?**

Russell has been amazing to work with, talented and the consummate professional. It's been great to work and laugh with him. It's a great cast and it's an honor to work with everybody.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- While writing plays, Gardner reportedly wrote in loose-leaf notebooks so as to pretend he was just a student doing homework. Otherwise, he said, he would be paralyzed by fear.
- The character of Murray Burns was based on Gardner's friend, humorist Jean Shepherd.

- Gardner's biggest commercial success was the 1985 play *I'm Not Rappaport*, which ran for two years, won the Tony Award for Best Play and became a 1996 movie.
- Gardner was nominated for a 1992 Pulitzer Prize for his play, *Conversations With My Father*.