

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

Oliver Hailey's *Who's Happy Now?* is an autobiographical work belonging to that honored dramatic genre that takes us where Thomas Wolfe told us we can never go: home again, to the horrible, magical jungle called childhood. Most of us never quite escape it; in our heads most of us are playwrights with our pasts, forever casting and recasting the roles, revising the lines, reordering the scenes — and that greatest of luxuries, changing the ending.

That internal playwright in us all takes the shape of Richard in *Who's Happy Now?* — the adult Richard, struggling to encompass and transform the pathos of the past in the play he has written as a birthday gift to his mother. But in the boy Richard, the character in his own play, we see the origins of that artistic instinct to arrange and harmonize experience. We recognize the playwright-in-the-making in young Richard's desperate desire to make everyone happy, to untangle and choreograph the hopelessly embroiled lives of the three people he loves most: his butcher father, who approaches feelings and human relations as he approaches meat — with a cleaver; his tough, wiley, long-suffering mother, Mary; and his father's lover, the wondrously warm and woozy and peculiarly wise Faye Precious. Between Richard's yearning to revise and their own practical determination to act the script as life has written it for them lies part of the tension of the play.

But this is also a play about growing up, in which we glimpse Richard at three critical moments in his coming of age. At all these points he is straining toward and against his powerful parents. The painfully taut relationship between Richard and Horse, his aptly named father, is another enactment of the ancient, tragicomic ritual of father and son, as bloody as Horse's apron, as ludicrously Freudian as a barful of wieners and Horse's flying cleaver. Hungry for his father's approval, Richard lays at Horse's feet offerings this father could never understand: the music that Mary nourishes in him, his ticket to the world beyond Sunray, Texas. Hating his father's brutality and his own inadequacy, he constantly thrusts himself into the position of sexual rival for the two women in Horse's life. Meanwhile, as it runs out, Horse is laboring in the shadow of his own father, to whom he believes he owes a death. And both father and son, dissimilar as they are, wrestle with the potent figures of their mothers. Horse's mother's consummate betrayal in remarrying burned into his mind the difference between "women" and "mothers" which he now acts out in his rigidly bifurcated love life. His "mother" woman is his wife, the indomitable Mary, who is also the abiding inspiration in Richard's life. The "woman" woman in Horse's own little drama is played by the resilient Faye Precious, Mary's adversary by role, her sister-in-arms by choice. And she too is a kind of mother to Richard, teacher and protector saving him from his father's literal and metaphoric cleavers as Mary does.

It is all only a little bloodier, perhaps, than most families. And Richard is only a little more energetic than the child playwright in most of us, trying frantically for a happy ending. But his mother, canny warrior that she is, tells him, "You worry too much about people being happy." Oddly, ironically, Richard succeeds in rendering everybody happy in the final scene, but like all good heroes, what he has learned is his own ignorance, in defining others' happiness for them. He tries to give this motley trio what they want, but Faye Precious demands, "And what in the world do we want? Would you tell me that one?" They take love and happiness, those great ephemera, where they find them, as they can make them out of the West Texas dust. This is the bittersweetness edging the comedy in Richard's play. Here, as in his delicious birthday song for Horse, Richard tries for levity, but as Faye Precious remarks, "Sadness just has a way of creeping into your work, Sonny." Wild comedy roaring around a core of sadness — that is family, for many of us, and that is *Who's Happy Now?*

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