SOFTWARE & TECH

John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation

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Introduction: The Man, The Play, and the Enduring Idea

Few works of modern theatre have managed to capture the zeitgeist of their era while simultaneously introducing a phrase that would become a permanent fixture in our cultural lexicon. **John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation** is not merely the title of a celebrated play; it is a landmark piece of art that gave a name and a narrative to a theory about human connection. Premiering in 1990, the play arrived at a moment of transition, as the world stood on the brink of a digital age that would eventually make the "small world" phenomenon feel tangible and immediate. Yet, Guare's genius was in grounding this grand, global theory in an intimate, chaotic, and deeply human story set in a Manhattan apartment. The play explores the fragility of identity, the seductiveness of storytelling, and the yearning for meaning in a world that feels simultaneously overcrowded and desperately lonely. To examine **John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation**is to explore how fiction can illuminate the invisible threads that tie us all together, whether we like it or not.

What is "Six Degrees of Separation"? The Theory Behind the Title

Before delving into the play itself, it is essential to understand the concept that gives the work its name. The phrase "six degrees of separation" posits that any person on Earth can be connected to any other person through a chain of acquaintances that has no more than five intermediaries. This idea has a rich history, stretching back to a 1929 short story by Frigyes Karinthy called "Chains," and was later popularized by social psychologist Stanley Milgram's "small-world experiment" in the 1960s. However, it was **John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation**that permanently embedded the phrase in the public consciousness. In the play, the character Ouisa Kittredge articulates the concept with a sense of wonder and fear:

This speech is the philosophical heart of the play. Guare took a mathematical and sociological hypothesis and infused it with emotional weight, making it a metaphor for the illusion of proximity and the shocking reality of distance. The title itself is a thesis statement: we live in a world of potential connection, yet we often fail to truly see one another.

The Plot: A Con Game That Unravels a World

Understanding the plot is crucial to appreciating **John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation**. The story centers on Flan and Ouisa Kittredge, a wealthy, cultured, and ultimately shallow Upper East Side couple. Their comfortable, art-filled world is disrupted late one night by the arrival of a young, well-spoken Black man named Paul, who claims to be the son of Sidney Poitier. He also claims to be a friend of their children at Harvard and says he was mugged in Central Park.

The Seduction of a Story

Paul is charming, articulate, and erudite. He weaves a captivating tale about his "father" and discusses art, specifically a double-sided painting by the colonial artist Erastus Salisbury Field. The Kittredges are completely taken in. They offer him food, comfort, and a place to stay. Paul becomes, for a few hours, the perfect son they never had. The audience watches as these sophisticated adults are utterly seduced not just by the young man, but by the story he tells. Guare masterfully shows that the desire for a narrative—a good story that affirms one's own

world view—can be more powerful than reality.

The Collapse of Connection

The illusion shatters when Paul invites a hustler to the apartment. The Kittredges discover them the next morning, and the police are called. The entire foundation of the evening is revealed as a lie. Paul is not the son of a movie star, but a drifter who has pulled this con on multiple families. The play then follows the fallout. The Kittredges discover that Paul had also conned their friends, the Talbots, and that his "mugging" story was a calculated performance. The betrayal is not just financial or social; it is existential. They are forced to confront the fact that their connection to this charismatic young man was a fabrication, yet the feelings he stirred in them were real. This paradox is the central conflict of **John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation**.

Major Themes in John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation

The play is a dense, multi-layered work that tackles several profound themes with a blend of sharp comedy and devastating tragedy.

Identity and the Performance of Self

Paul is the ultimate postmodern man. He has no fixed identity; he creates himself anew for each audience. He is a Black man who must perform whiteness to gain entry into the Kittredges' world, speaking with the cadence of their class. Guare forces the audience to question the nature of identity itself. Are the Kittredges any more "real" than Paul? Ouisa and Flan perform the roles of "patrons" and "parents" as much as Paul performs "son" and "student." The play suggests that identity is a construct, a story we tell ourselves and sell to others. Paul's crime is not that he performs a role, but that he performs it too well, exposing the artificiality of the Kittredges' own lives.

Class, Race, and the Illusion of Meritocracy

Guare does not shy away from the uncomfortable intersection of race and class. Paul's race is a key part of his con. The Kittredges, and their friends, are so blinded by their own liberal guilt and desire to be seen as open-minded that they cannot conceive of a Black man being capable of such an intellectual and artistic con. They want to believe in Sidney Poitier's son because it fits their narrative of racial progress and cultural sophistication. The play indicts a liberal elite that values the "idea" of connection and diversity but remains fundamentally isolated from the reality of life outside their gilded bubble. The famous "out the window" speech, where Ouisa describes seeing a man on the street and realizing the profound, impenetrable distance between them despite the theoretical "six degrees," is a brutal critique of their insulated existence.

The Commodification of Art and Experience

The Kittredges are art dealers. They see the world in terms of value, ownership, and investment. The double-sided Kandinsky painting they are trying to sell for two million dollars is a central symbol. It represents their desire to possess beauty and meaning. Paul, however, understands its true value. He can see both sides of the canvas, enjoying the abstract and the figurative simultaneously. He represents a way of seeing that is holistic and authentic, in stark contrast to the Kittredges' transactional view of art and relationships. In the end, they are left with a broken deal and a shattered sense of self, while Paul has taken from them something far more valuable than money: a glimpse of their own emptiness.

Character Analysis: The Heart of the Play

Ouisa Kittredge: The Moral Center

Ouisa is the character who undergoes the most profound transformation. Initially, she is as shallow and

performative as her husband. But Paul's presence cracks her shell. She is the one who listens to his "six degrees" speech with genuine awe. She is the one who, after the betrayal, is haunted not by the money or the embarrassment, but by the loss of possibility. She says, "I am filled with... a sense of... what is the word?... Possibility!" Ouisa becomes the audience's surrogate. She moves from seeing Paul as an intruder, to a son, to a con artist, and finally, to a lost soul. Her final, solitary speech is one of the most powerful moments in modern drama, as she grapples with the realization that she may have failed to save a soul who was standing right in front of her.

Paul: The Catalyst and the Mirror

Paul is a master of improvisation, a brilliant performer who has read every book, listened to every album, and learned every social cue necessary to infiltrate high society. But he is also a tragic figure. He is desperately looking for a family, for a place to belong. He has been rejected by his own parents because of his sexuality. He comes to the Kittredges not just for money, but for validation. His tragedy is that he can imitate connection perfectly, but he cannot find it. He is the ultimate outsider who knows everything about the insiders except how to be loved. The character is a tour de force, requiring an actor who can be magnetic, terrifying, and heartbreakingly vulnerable, often in the same scene.

Flan and the Supporting Cast

Flan represents the old guard, the man who believes in the power of money and social standing. His refusal to truly engage with Paul's story or his pain is his moral failure. The other couples—the Talbots and the Potters—serve as a Greek chorus, representing the larger society. Their desire to "help" Paul is always tinged with self-interest and a desire to feel good about themselves. They expose the collective hollowness of their social circle.

Structure and Style: A Modern Tragedy in Two Acts

Guare wrote the play as a "comedy of manners" that spirals into tragedy. The dialogue is electric, witty, and rapid-fire, reminiscent of his mentor, Anton Chekhov, and his contemporary, Tom Stoppard. The scenes are fluid, moving seamlessly from the Kittredges' apartment to other locations, using minimal set changes. This fluidity mirrors the global connection the play discusses; scenes are linked by a chain of association, much like the degrees of separation.

The use of direct address, particularly by Ouisa, breaks the fourth wall and invites the audience into her consciousness. This technique makes the audience complicit in the story. We are not just watching; we are being asked to judge and to feel. The play's structure is a spiral, starting with a specific event (the arrival of Paul) and expanding outward to examine the entire social ecosystem of the characters.

Legacy and Impact: From Stage to Screen to Global Idea

The impact of **John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation**has been monumental. It was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1991 and won the Olivier Award for Best Play. It ran for nearly 500 performances on Broadway.

The Film Adaptation

In 1993, Guare adapted his play into a film directed by Fred Schepisi, starring Stockard Channing, Donald Sutherland, and a young Will Smith in his first major dramatic role. The film is a faithful adaptation that captures the play's intellectual energy and emotional depth. Channing, who had originated the role of Ouisa on stage, was nominated for an Academy Award for her performance. The film brought the concept of the "six degrees" to a global audience, far beyond the theatre-going public. It cemented the phrase in popular culture, leading to everything from

the "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" game to modern social network theory.

The Phrase in Popular Culture

It is almost impossible to hear the phrase "six degrees of separation" today without thinking of Guare's play. The playwright did not invent the sociological concept, but he invented the language and the emotional framework through which we understand it. The play is a permanent part of the cultural vocabulary. It is a testament to Guare's skill that a specific play about New York high society in the 1990s has become a universal metaphor for human interconnection in the 21st century.

Why John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation Remains Relevant

In an age of social media, where we are connected to thousands of "friends" and yet report record levels of loneliness, the play feels eerily prophetic. The Kittredges and their friends live in a gilded cage of their own making, surrounded by expensive art but starved of authentic contact. Paul arrives as a wildfire, burning through their pretenses and leaving them to see the ashes of their lives.

The play asks a question that is more urgent than ever: **What does it mean to actually *know* another person?** In a world where connections are often superficial and transactional, **John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation** challenges us to look beyond the surface, to value genuine encounter over social performance. It reminds us that the "door" between us and another person is not just a theoretical path to be traversed through intermediaries, but a real, fragile, and precious opportunity for human contact. The tragedy of the play is that the characters fail to walk through that door. The challenge it presents to the audience is to do better.

Conclusion: The Door Remains Open

Over thirty years after its debut, **John Guare Six Degrees Of Separation** endures as a

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