SOFTWARE & TECH

Six Degrees Of Separation Play

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Introduction: The Web That Connects Us All

In the vast tapestry of human connection, few ideas have captured the imagination quite like the concept that anyone on Earth is only six relationships away from anyone else. This notion, first popularized by Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy in 1929 and later validated by social psychologist Stanley Milgram in the 1960s, found its most dramatic and poignant expression in the 1990 play by American playwright John Guare. The **Six Degrees Of Separation Play**is not merely a theatrical work that borrows a catchy sociological theory; it is a profound meditation on class, race, art, identity, and the fragile threads that bind us together, as well as the chasms that keep us apart. More than three decades after its debut, this play remains a cornerstone of modern American theater, continuing to resonate with audiences precisely because the questions it raises about trust, authenticity, and human connection are more relevant now than ever before.

The Genesis of a Theatrical Masterpiece

From a True Story to a Stage Legend

The **Six Degrees Of Separation Play**is remarkable not only for its intellectual depth but also for its origins in a bizarre real-life incident. In the early 1980s, a young African American man named David Hampton successfully convinced several wealthy New York City families that he was the son of famed actor Sidney Poitier. Using charm, intelligence, and a remarkable ability to improvise, Hampton managed to dine with, befriend, and even stay overnight with prominent families before being discovered as an impostor. Guare, intrigued by the audacity of the con and the willingness of the victims to believe, began to craft a narrative that went far beyond a simple cautionary tale.

John Guare's Vision

John Guare, already an established playwright with works like *The House of Blue Leaves* under his belt, saw in this story a perfect vehicle to explore the anxieties of the urban elite in the late 20th century. The **Six Degrees Of Separation Play**premiered at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center in New York City in 1990, under the direction of Jerry Zaks. It was an instant critical and commercial success, transferring to Broadway's Vivian Beaumont Theater later that year. The play was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play, cementing its place in the theatrical canon.

Plot Structure: A Collision of Worlds

The Setup: A World of Privilege

The play centers on Ouisa and Flan Kittredge, an affluent art dealer couple living in a luxurious Fifth Avenue apartment. Their lives are comfortable, if somewhat hollow, revolving around social connections and the acquisition of valuable art. Specifically, they are attempting to sell a double-sided Kandinsky painting to a wealthy South African buyer, a transaction that represents both their livelihood and their status. Into this rarefied world steps a young man named Paul, an intelligent and charming African American who has been mugged in Central Park. Paul claims to be the son of Sidney Poitier, a friend of the Kittredge children at Harvard. He is also, he says, a fellow student of Flan's nephew.

The Con Unfolds

The bulk of the first act of the **Six Degrees Of Separation Play** is a masterclass in manipulation and vulnerability. Paul is invited into the Kittredge home, where he regales them with stories of his famous father. He cooks them dinner, he discusses the Kandinsky painting with surprising insight, and he seems to embody everything the Kittredges admire: intelligence, cultural awareness, and the glamour of celebrity. The audience, along with the Kittredges, is drawn into Paul's web. His performance is so flawless that it forces the audience to question their own prejudices. Would we doubt him simply because of his race? His class? The play cleverly uses Paul's "performance" to mirror the performances that the Kittredges themselves engage in daily to maintain their social standing.

The Unraveling

The turning point arrives when Paul is discovered. The Kittredges learn that Paul is not who he says he is. He is a drifter, a con artist who has infiltrated multiple wealthy households. The revelation is devastating, not because of any material loss, but because of the emotional and intellectual betrayal. Ouisa, in particular, is haunted by the encounter. While Flan is quick to dismiss Paul as a criminal and a menace, Ouisa cannot shake the feeling that their connection, though based on a lie, was somehow real. This internal conflict between the cynical dismissal of the con and the profound need for authentic connection forms the emotional core of the play.

Thematic Depths: Far More Than a Simple Con Game

Class and the Invisible Walls

One of the most powerful themes in the **Six Degrees Of Separation Play** is the critique of class privilege. The Kittredges and their friends live in a bubble of wealth and exclusivity. They believe themselves to be open-minded and liberal, yet their world is meticulously guarded. Paul gains entry not through brute force or clever hacking, but through the vocabulary of their world—the names of schools, the references to art, the stories of celebrity. Guare suggests that the "six degrees of separation" is not just a fun fact about human connectivity; it is also a network of privilege that actively excludes those who do not have the right passport. Paul's con exposes how thin the veneer of civility actually is and how easily the wealthy can be fooled when their own biases and desires are reflected back at them.

Race and the Politics of Perception

Race is inextricably woven into the fabric of the play. Paul's choice to impersonate the son of Sidney Poitier is deliberate. For the Kittredges' generation, Poitier represents a non-threatening, dignified, and acceptable form of Blackness. By claiming this lineage, Paul becomes "safe" and "acceptable." He does not represent the racial anxieties that simmer beneath the surface of their liberal politics. The play forces the audience to confront an uncomfortable truth: the Kittredges did not see Paul; they saw an idea of Paul that was created by their own cultural conditioning. When the truth emerges, their anger is tinged with a sense of racial betrayal that they are unable or unwilling to articulate fully.

The Art of Storytelling and the Construction of Self

Central to the **Six Degrees Of Separation Play** is the idea that we are all storytellers, constantly constructing our own identities. Flan and Ouisa tell stories about their art, their children, and their friends. Paul tells the most elaborate story of all: himself. The play asks a deeply philosophical question: If a story is compelling, enlightening, and engaging, does it matter that it is technically a lie? Ouisa, in her most famous monologue, grapples with this concept. She realizes that Paul gave them a "map" of their lives, showing them their own emptiness and longing. The lie was the medium, but the truth of their connection was the message.

Character Analysis: The Souls Behind the Masks

Ouisa Kittredge: The Moral Compass

Ouisa is arguably the most complex character in the **Six Degrees Of Separation Play**. She is the one who is transformed by the encounter. While her husband Flan retreats into denial and anger, Ouisa moves toward a painful self-awareness. She admits that Paul gave them something real—a moment of vulnerability and connection that their carefully constructed lives otherwise lacked. Her journey from socialite to a woman grappling with existential loneliness is the emotional arc that anchors the play. She represents the possibility of growth and the profound need for human connection that transcends social boundaries.

Flan Kittredge: The Pragmatist in Denial

Flan represents the establishment. He is pragmatic, successful, and deeply committed to maintaining the status quo. For Flan, Paul is a criminal who disrupted his world. He wants to press charges, to move on, to forget. Flan embodies the uncomfortable reality of privilege: the ability to simply dismiss uncomfortable truths. He is not a villain; he is a man who has built his life on a certain set of rules, and Paul has broken them. His refusal to engage with the deeper meaning of the event highlights the emotional poverty that often accompanies material wealth.

Paul: The Catalyst and the Mirror

Paul is a challenging role, often referred to as the "Mephistopheles" of the play. He is the catalyst for the entire action, yet he remains an enigma. We see him through the eyes of the Kittredges, but we never truly know him. Is he a sociopath? A brilliant artist of the con? A desperate young man seeking a taste of a world that has excluded him? Guare deliberately leaves Paul ambiguous, preventing the audience from forming a simple judgment. Paul's function is not to be a fully realized character in the traditional sense, but to serve as a mirror, reflecting the hidden desires and fears of everyone he encounters.

Structure and Style: A Sparse and Powerful Stage

The **Six Degrees Of Separation Play**is notable for its minimalist staging. The set is sparse, often consisting only of a few props and a backdrop that suggests the Kittredges' apartment. The focus is entirely on the language and the actors. The play runs in real-time, with no intermission in its original form, creating a sense of mounting tension and claustrophobia. Guare's dialogue is sharp, witty, and deeply insightful. The famous "Ouisa's monologue" near the end of the play is considered one of the great pieces of dramatic writing in the late 20th century, a feverish and poetic attempt to articulate the ineffable nature of human connection.

Cultural Impact and Enduring Legacy

From Stage to Screen

The play was adapted into a film in 1993, directed by Fred Schepisi and starring Stockard Channing (reprising her Tony-nominated Broadway role), Donald Sutherland, and Will Smith in his first major dramatic role as Paul. The film brought the **Six Degrees Of Separation Play**to a wider audience, cementing its themes in the popular consciousness. The phrase "six degrees of separation" itself became a cultural shorthand, leading to games like "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon," which humorously applied the theory to the Hollywood film industry.

Relevance in the Digital Age

If anything, the themes of the play have only grown more urgent in the age of social media. We live in a world where we are constantly curating our identities, presenting carefully edited versions of ourselves to the world. The

"con" that Paul performs is now a daily practice online, where everyone is performing a version of their life. The **Six Degrees Of Separation Play**asks us to consider the cost of this performance. When everyone is playing a role, how do we find genuine connection? The play's exploration of authenticity, trust, and the stories we tell about ourselves is more relevant in our hyper-connected yet emotionally distant world than ever before.

Key Takeaways from the Play

- Connection is a double-edged sword: The theory of six degrees of separation suggests we are all close, but the play shows how that closeness can be both a source of profound connection and a tool for profound deception.
- We see what we want to see: The Kittredges fell for Paul's con because he confirmed their biases and validated their world view. The play is a powerful lesson in self-awareness.
- Art and the human experience: The Kandinsky painting serves as a symbol of the "outsider" perspective that the Kittredges lack. Paul, like the painting, is a work of art that they fail to truly appreciate until it is too late.
- Authenticity is rare and precious: In a world of social performance, the moments of true vulnerability and connection are the only things that truly matter. This is the central lesson that Ouisa learns.

Why the Play Matters Today

In a cultural landscape saturated with true crime stories and tales of elaborate scams, the **Six Degrees Of Separation Play**stands apart because it refuses to offer easy answers. It is not a "ripped from the headlines" cautionary tale about being fooled. It is a profound inquiry into why we are so willing to be fooled. It explores the loneliness of the wealthy, the desperation of the outsider,

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