2005 has certainly been a notable New York theater year. How often do you find Vanessa Redgrave (at the Brooklyn Academy of Music), Denzel Washington, Jessica Lange, James Earl Jones, Kathleen Turner, Alan Alda, to name a few, plying their wares on Broadway? When do you have the opportunity to see plays like *Hecuba, Julius Caesar, The Glass Menagerie, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf, On Golden Pond, Glengarry Glen Ross,* and others in a relatively small geographical area? Good for living theater, we say, finding in this creative outburst hope for genuine quality in the midst of the ballyhoo and noise of much contemporary drama and film.

All of the above might almost make you overlook two plays with strong religious overtones. Even if you are not a dedicated theatergoer, you certainly know a little about one—a play by John Patrick Shanley which won not only a Tony Award for Best Play, but also a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The other play, by Donald Margulies, an important American playwright and also a Pulitzer Prize winner for his 2000 play *Dinner with Friends,* was *Brooklyn Boy.*

How to describe the religious dimensions in the plays is a challenge. Certainly the settings and characters are different. And the texture of one is very Jewish, of the other very Roman Catholic. Yet at the same time the central issues in each seem to transcend the general subject of religion and to probe larger and more thoroughly human problems. The play’s the thing in both cases, and in each superior acting and impressive plotting make for great entertainment. As an added bonus, both plays leave viewers—and readers, since both are now in attractive paperback editions—in doubt, of two or more minds, eager to talk about their puzzling conclusions—certainly the stuff of genuine artistic excellence.

As *Brooklyn Boy* opens, we meet a fortyish Jewish novelist Eric (known to his family and friends as Ricky) Weiss—ably played by Adam Arkin—visiting his ailing father Manny at Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn. He
has made a name for himself and gained a good deal of praise for his latest novel (*Brooklyn Boy*) and is on a book tour to publicize it. It seems clear from the outset that the father-son relationship is at best distant. After Manny receives his copy of the new novel, he’s not terribly impressed. Why haven’t he and his late wife made an appearance in it? Why is the central character named Kenny Fleischman instead of Eric Weiss? Eric’s response that the novel is not a documentary, that it’s “like us,” that the characters were “inspired by us,” isn’t very persuasive.

Frustrated as he is by the lack of real communication, Eric can’t leave the room without asking his father whether he’s been thinking any “Big Thoughts,” “like God?” or “The Meaning of Life?” Manny’s best answer is not philosophical or theological, but brutally honest. He won’t be leaving the hospital; “This is it this time.” Noting an attractive Shelley Winters on his television screen, he remarks on how beautiful she is: “I tell ya Ricky, time is the worst damn thing in the world.” Ricky looks on sadly.

Leaving the hospital Eric meets a boyhood friend Ira Zimmer. They have clearly had different lives, Eric with career success, but childless, in the midst of a divorce, and long since having abandoned his Jewish religious background; and Ira, the devout Jew, married to Mindy Goldberg, with four children, and “one on the way,” and with only his late father’s delicatessen to point to as his career. He has read all of Eric’s work, and describes *Brooklyn Boy* as “the story of my life!”, finding a picture of himself in the Seth Bernstein of the novel. He sees in Ricky everything that he might have been, bemoaning the fact that “Nobody ever told me that I could ever aspire to anything!” Ira would have them pray together—for Eric’s mother and his own father, but Eric refuses, saying that “the last time I was in temple was the day of our bar mitzvah,” and then pulling away.

Eric’s attempt to save his marriage fails. And his book tour to California only provides further occasions for disillusionment—one a failed tryst with a young groupie film student, and the other finding out that the producer overseeing the filming of his novel is slowly dismantling the heart of the book, leaving him with only the money he received for selling the rights.

Back in Brooklyn—he missed his father’s funeral and his aunt is “sitting shiva”—Eric seems genuinely alone and sad. Ira comes to his apartment to express sympathy. “Say Kaddish with me,” he says, only to be met by Eric’s reply that Judaism doesn’t mean much to him, and he chose to escape from it. “I’ve always found it sorrowful, guilt-provoking,” he says. Ira wonders just what Eric believes, and Eric says it is “survival.” But, says Ira, “Kaddish isn’t about death.” “It’s about reaffirming life.”