Problem Child
by George F. Walker

Director
Scenic Designer
Lighting Designer
Costume Designer
Sound Designer

Mitchell Hébert
Pegi Marshall
Yi-Hui Muriel Lee
Debra K. Sivigny
David White

February 15–23, 2002
Robert and Arlene Kogod Theatre
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center
University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland

Please turn off all cellular telephones and pagers during the performance.
laughing and squirming

Elizabeth A. Osborne, Ph.D. student, Department of Theatre, University of Maryland, College Park

Canadian playwright George Walker was driving a taxi when he came upon a lamppost bill soliciting original scripts for Toronto's then fledgling Factory Theatre Laboratory. He has since served as playwright-in-residence at such notable locales as the New York Shakespeare Festival, and his work has been translated, published and performed worldwide. In a writing career that spans more than three decades he has earned many Canadian honors, including Governor General's Literary Awards (Nothing Sacred, Criminals in Love), Chalmers Canadian Play Awards (Escape from Happiness, Zastrozzi, Problem Child), and Dora Mavor Moore Awards for Outstanding Play (the Canadian equivalent of a Tony Award; Escape from Happiness, Love and Anger, Nothing Sacred).

Problem Child debuted in New York City at Theatre Off Park on May 13, 1997, one piece of a six-play cycle entitled Suburban Motel. While each piece stands independently, they are connected thematically through character crossovers and because all six one-acts take place at the same "slightly run-down motel on the outskirts of a large city." Like many of Walker's plays, the cycle deals with serious social issues. These people have problems—alcohol, drugs, prostitution, poverty, and violence. Marginalized by much of society, the actions of these types of people are often seen in disturbing newspaper headlines or earn them places on daytime talk shows; they are simply unable to conform to the rules of civilized society. As the social worker in Problem Child says, "I remembered all my training and everything I've been taught about people like you, and I decided that you just don't know any better."

It quickly becomes clear, however, that these social issues take a distant second to the actual characters in the play. In many plays this type of character brings little more than a bit of excitement or comedy to the story; rarely do they become main characters, and rarer still are they protagonists. Yet, through the plays of Walker, the formerly invisible or stereotyped characters move from the fringes of society to center stage, becoming tremendously rich and alive. Lost and bereft of options, Walker's characters may have fallen from the sight of refined society, but they can't quite bring themselves to surrender to death. Driven by desperation and placed at the heights of extraordinary conflict, they are each passionate, articulate, forceful, and even brilliant in their own ways.

It is this ability—to tap into the humanity of his characters—that has established Walker as one of Canada's most popular and, arguably, best English-language playwrights. His love of dark humor, raw language, and unconventional perspective serve only to enhance the power of his work, drawing audiences worldwide, often leaving them both laughing and squirming in their seats.