




# A "love of hopeless comedy":

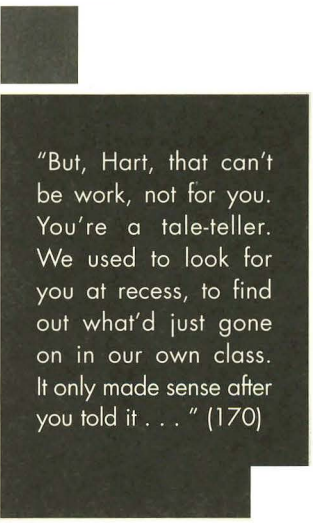
## The Humor of Personal and Cultural Crisis in Allan Gurganus's *Plays Well with Others*

by Gary Richards

Since their emergence in the mid-1980s, literary manifestations of the discourses surrounding HIV and AIDS have included, despite the sobering subject matter, a range of comic elements and expressions, and a number of outstanding works in this subgenre have emerged over the last quarter of a century: David Feinberg's *Eighty-Sixed*, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey*, and Poppy Z. Brite's *Exquisite Corpse*, to name but a noted few. Central to this set is also *Plays Well with Others*, Allan Gurganus's critically neglected 1997 novel that, through a sustained first-person narration, interrogates and ultimately champions the dynamics of friendship – and, to a lesser extent, family – by focusing on a quasi-autobiographical Southerner's negotiations of the onset of AIDS in New York City in the 1980s and his eventual return to small-town North Carolina. That Gurganus, even with such a somber topic, would turn to humor in this exploration is not surprising, since he perhaps remains best known for *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, his sprawling, raucous comic novel of 1989. With *Plays Well with Others*, he deploys the same structuring device of a vibrant, all-too-human narrator in order to unify a meandering episodic tale, but, instead of garrulous Lucy Marsden, it is Hartley Mims, Jr., a thirty-something-turned-forty-something gay writer who, after being initially eclipsed in the New York arts scene by his friends, composer Robert Gustafson and painter Angie "Alabama" Byrnes, struggles with their subsequent infections, illnesses, and deaths related to AIDS as he remains healthy and succeeds in his literary career. The novel offers numerous points of entry for analysis, but, as intimated, Gurganus's savvy deployment of humor demands particular attention. *Plays Well with Others* evinces a rhetorical

sophistication that manages to secure and retain readers' attention with countless comic moments, particularly in the first third of the narrative; to shift the humor subtly in the remainder of the novel so as, in part, to avoid accusations of trivializing the AIDS pandemic; and, finally, to recapture the text's early comic enthusiasm via a tellingly postmodern appendix, all done with sly self-referential assessments of the novel's comedic elements.

This humor begins immediately with the twenty-page prologue, aptly entitled "The Comedy of Friends," and at once takes readers into the farcical scenario that emerges when Hartley attempts to fulfill Robert's dying wishes. Rousing himself in the knowledge of his parents' pending arrival for his death, he gurgles from his hospital bed, "Kee po. Dee do. Gee ou. Fo com," translated by Hartley as "Kiddie porn. Dildoes. Get out, before The Folks come" (5). Robert's terse clarification, "Boo ca," prompts Hartley's sardonic assessment of the irony that foregrounds the comic structure of the subsequent scene: "And Robert, though hearing me, though gladdened that my translation proved correct, Robert was so asleep, we heard immediate snoring. Half comic. Half. We'd just received his final words. My friend, Robert Gustafson, composer of Symphony no. 1, his final words: 'Broom closet'" (6). The humor, of course, lies in the juxtaposition of what is expected and what occurs, and Robert's last words, fretting about a cache of sex toys, are as darkly absurd and antithetical to romanticized



"But, Hart, that can't be work, not for you. You're a tale-teller. We used to look for you at recess, to find out what'd just gone on in our own class. It only made sense after you told it . . ." (170)