But I have been an agent for a long time now and I intend to continue for as long as my sense of humor stays with me.¹

By the 1960–1961 Broadway season, Audrey Wood had been a successful agent for almost 25 years. Her morning routine rarely varied. Whether she was traveling from her house in Westport or from the Royalton Hotel on West Forty-fourth Street, she arrived at her office at MCA where she put down her briefcase filled with scripts that she had read the previous evening. She returned “urgent” calls, read letters and contracts demanding her “immediate” attention, and noted “requests” for meetings during the day. The most time-consuming of these routines were the contracts that required careful study. She read and initialed each page and promptly returned them to the agency’s legal department. Then she turned her attention to her clients’ productions that were in various stages of preparation for Broadway.

Following the disappointments of The Square Root of Wonderful, A Loss of Roses, and Period of Adjustment, the new decade held great promise for Audrey’s new and continuing clients. In addition to negotiations for film and television contracts for The Dark at the Top of the Stairs, Summer and Smoke, West Side Story, Silent Night, Lonely Night, Period of Adjustment, and Splendor in the Grass (Inge won the Academy Award for best original screenplay), Audrey also represented another Broadway-bound play by Tennessee Williams—The Night of the Iguana. Unknown to Audrey at the time, a new playwright was waiting in the wings.

A SERIOUS MAN

Twenty years earlier, a lanky Harvard engineering graduate by the name of Arthur Kopit had appeared in Audrey’s office at the urging of producer Roger Stevens. Born Arthur Lee Koenig, the young boy received
his stepfather’s name when his divorced mother Maxine was remarried to George Kopit and the family lived in an affluent suburb of Long Island.

Arthur Kopit began a playwriting career as an undergraduate with short plays staged at Harvard’s Dunster House by his college dramatic group. His talent won him a postgraduate fellowship to travel in Europe during the summer of 1959. He finished a long one-act in Scandinavia and submitted the script to a playwriting contest sponsored by Harvard’s Adams House. Directed by his classmate Michael Ritchie (later a successful film director) while Kopit was far away in Spain, *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama’s Hung You in the Closet and I’m Feelin’ So Sad* was given a production at the Agassiz Theatre in Cambridge. Critics pronounced the play with the longest title ever to grace a theater marquee in Boston the best play of the season and Roger Stevens, hearing absurdist echoes of Eugène Ionesco in Kopit’s bizarre title and madcap surrealism, decided it might be a good bet for Broadway. The producer contacted Kopit’s parents to option the rights to their son’s play as soon as he returned from Europe and urged them to encourage him to secure an agent to protect his interests. Stevens suggested Audrey Wood, saying, “You must have her because she’s hell with producers, but great for playwrights.”

Of all the words written about Audrey by her clients, Arthur Kopit captured the play agent’s strategies and verbal endearments (some called them irritants) in dialogue written for *End of the World* about the threat of the nuclear arms race to humankind. As a secondary thread, he wove into the play his concern for the survival of serious playwrights on Broadway. In an early scene, Audrey West (aka Audrey Wood) dispenses advice to her client Michael Trent (aka Arthur Kopit):

*Audrey:* Dear, I checked him [the producer] out. He’s legitimate, he has the money. So I’d say you’ve got a deal.

*Trent:* Audrey, his idea is terrible!

*Audrey:* Then don’t take it.

*Trent:* How can I not take a deal like this? This is a definitional sweetheart deal, this is the deal of a lifetime!

*Audrey:* Dear, what do you want me to do?

*Trent:* ADVISE me!

*Audrey:* Take the deal.  

When Kopit recreated his agent as a dramatic character, he captured Audrey’s astute business sense exercised on her client’s behalf, her mannered way of talking with “dear” and “darling” sprinkled throughout her