

Roundabout Theatre Company



Impossible Marriage

From Page To Stage Production Guide

Impossible Marriage

by *Beth Henley*
directed by *Steven Wadsworth*

PRODUCTION GUIDE

WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

WHICH MARRIAGE IS IMPOSSIBLE?

Audiences watching *Impossible Marriage* may be steered by the play's title to focus on relationships between characters. Since the play's setting is the wedding of Pandora Kingsley and Edvard Lunt, this might seem like an obvious focal point. The play includes other marriages, however, such as the one between Pandora's sister, Floral, and Jonsey. There are also the shadows of former marriages, represented by Kandall, a widow, and Sidney, Edvard's son from a previous marriage. We can also include Reverend Larence and the church, since a minister's relationship with the sacred institution is also often described as a marriage. The play's title takes on even richer meanings, however, when we look beyond the relationships between characters and exam the relationship of key concepts or forces in the play.

One of the major forces in *Impossible Marriage* are the characters' inner desires and longings. All of the characters have strong urges, but they have difficulty understanding or controlling them. As Floral tells her sister, Pandora, "There are cravings you cannot explain." Though Floral is referring to her voracious appetite for engagement cake due to her pregnancy, similar sentiments could be expressed by Sidney, who has an intense need to disrupt his father's second wedding, or by most of the play's other characters. In *Impossible Marriage*, unconscious hunger is a major drive that propels the characters.

Another important force in these characters' lives is that of stability and

social convention. These are the rules and regulations, some of which are unspoken, that keep society running smoothly, like "respect your elders," "extra marital affairs are wrong," and "don't speak with your mouth full." Some of the characters find these rules and conventions attractive. Kandall, for example, advocates for social rules by saying, "Traditions cements our sanity." Other characters in the play have a harder time fitting in society's expectations of proper behavior and decorum. As with their personal yearnings, each character has to deal with the powerful demands of the culture.

Because the characters' inner desires and the demands of social convention pull the characters in different directions, each character faces an intense conflict within himself or herself. Unfilled cravings can lead the characters to acts of desperation, such as leaving a spouse or threatening murder. During the course of the play's action, several characters step outside of social conventions and expectations to satisfy their deep yearnings desires and cravings, but they do not always achieve positive results. Because the different characters achieve different degrees of success, the play demonstrates that the relationship between internal desires and external social conventions is very difficult to manage. So when the audience leaves the theatre after the performance, they may feel that the play addresses several impossible marriages, both between characters and within them.

WHO'S WHO

Pandora Kingsley (played by *Gretchen Cleevely*): A young bride and the image of youthful exuberance. Her wish to marry battles with a need for freedoms of all kinds. She wants a beautiful romantic dream, but is surrounded by skeptics.

Kandall Kingsley (played by *Lois Smith*): The mother of the bride. She is a beautiful, elegantly coiffed woman. Although she spent many years in a marriage that did not inspire or even satisfy her, she is old-fashioned and her reflex for social conventions is strong.

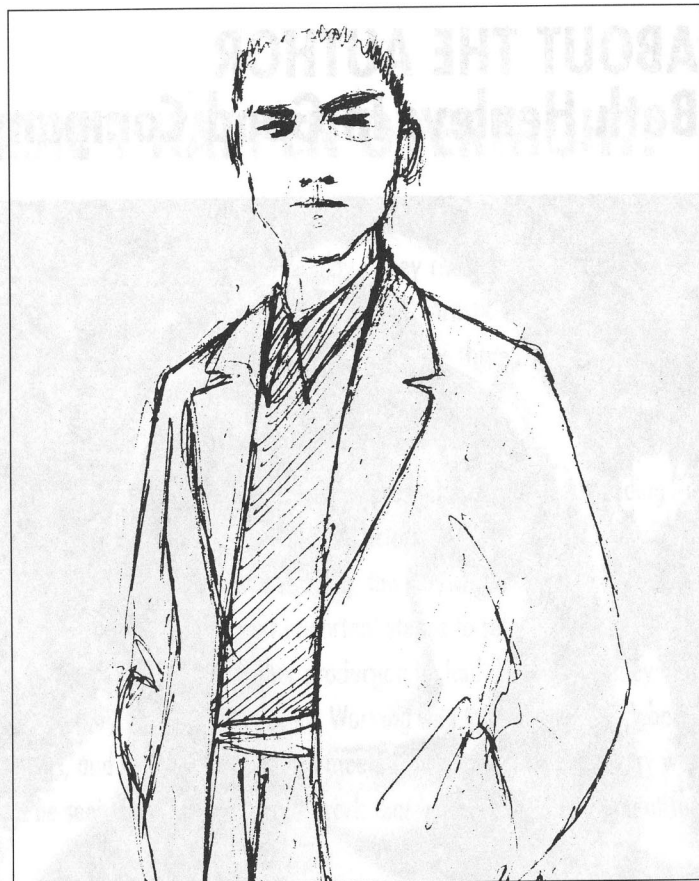
Floral Whitman (played by *Holly Hunter*): The older sister of the bride. She is acutely pregnant and severely distraught. As her biting wit rails against cravings which are both physical and emotional, she does what she can to save her sister from a bad marriage.

Jonsey Whitman (played by *Jon Tenney*): An almost embarrassingly handsome man from an old, aristocratic Southern family. Educated and cultivated, he is ever the fine-mannered gentleman.

Edvard Lunt (played by *Christopher McCann*): The groom. A European gentleman, extremely appealing, though decadent looking, he is a somewhat self-absorbed intellectual who does not connect fluidly with other people. He is well over twice Pandora's age.

Sidney Lunt (played by *Daniel London*): The son of the groom. Sensitive and highly intelligent, he attempts to mask his confusions with affectations. He is a searching, passionate and sad young man.

Reverend Jonathan Larence (played by *Alan Mandell*): The reverend called to perform the marriage. He is a strange looking man with an innocent aura which can be alternately interpreted as idiotic and wise.



Costume sketches for the characters of Edvard and Pandora.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Beth Henley: In Good Company



"I wanted to be a writer for a long time, but I thought I wasn't intelligent enough to be a writer or didn't have enough to say. I think at some point you have to come to a compromise and say, 'I want to write.'"

—Beth Henley

Though she was hesitant to be a writer, Beth Henley's career as a playwright began with a bang. Her first full-length play, *Crimes of the Heart*, was very popular in regional theatres before it moved on to Broadway and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981. Since then, she has written many more plays and screenplays.

Henley's experience of living in the South had an impact on her writing

and her sense of theatre. Growing up in Jackson, Mississippi, as one of four daughters, Henley was exposed to theatre by her mother, an actress in local community theatre productions. When she attended Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Henley was part of a group of students who went on to become accomplished performers and theatre artists, including Kathy Bates, Powers Boothe, and Dana Ivey. While in college, Henley wrote her first one-act play, *Am I Blue*. Though she now lives in Hollywood, CA, the South remains a central part of Henley's writing, providing the locales and characters that fill her plays.

During several of her projects, Henley has worked with the actress Holly Hunter. Hunter, who made her Broadway debut in *Crimes of the Heart*, later appeared in Henley's *The Miss Firecracker Contest* (both the play and the movie versions), and *The Wake of Jamey Foster*. Perhaps it is not a surprise that Henley describes Hunter as her favorite actress. When she wrote *Control Freaks*, Henley wrote a part specifically for Hunter, and for the character of Floral in *Impossible Marriage*, Henley never thought of any other actress.

One element of Henley's writing that many critics and authors have noted is her use of strong characterization. Because her plays provide a selection of people who are unique and well-drawn, Henley has been compared to Anton Chekhov, the Russian playwright. Henley doesn't stop at interesting characters, though. She also feels it's important to have a strong plot, and most of her plays are constructed around a problem that the characters must solve. By solving difficult tasks, Henley is able to show us her characters in crucial and revealing situations.

For *Impossible Marriage*, Henley was inspired by several sources, including her friendship with Holly Hunter. Henley served as the matron of honor at Hunter's wedding, and was several months pregnant at the time. The idea of a large, pregnant woman at a wedding appealed to Henley's sense as a writer and is a central image of the play. Henley also looked to classic plays while writing *Impossible Marriage*, especially those by Oscar Wilde. Wilde's plays, especially *The Importance of Being Earnest*, provided Henley with a sense of high style. For someone who once felt she wasn't smart enough to be a writer, Henley has found herself in good company with classic writers and accomplished performers.

DEVELOPING A NEW PLAY: IT DOESN'T HAPPEN OVERNIGHT!

The process of creating a new play is a complex one, and goes through different phases of development. For *Impossible Marriage*, the first step began at the Roundabout, when the artistic director and his staff decided to commission a playwright to write a new play. They chose Beth Henley because they liked her previous scripts and thought her style of writing was appropriate to the type of plays Roundabout produces. Artistic commissions usually are offered with some parameters or limitations, such as the play cannot take place in more than two settings, or it must have three roles for actresses. The only parameters the artistic staff at Roundabout established were that Henley should write a full-length play in one year.

Following the writing of the play, *Impossible Marriage* went through a few more steps of development. First, it was presented in a staged reading, in which the performers read the play in character before a live audience. A staged reading offers the author, the actors, and the theatre's staff the opportunity to hear how the play sounds and to get an impression of the audience's reaction. Often after a reading, the playwright will revise the play based on input from the other people involved. When the play is designated for a full production, the next important step is to select a director. Beth Henley felt Stephen Wadsworth would be a good director for *Impossible Marriage*, since she had seen another production he had directed. Henley and Wadsworth then had several discussions about the central issues of the play and how the play should be produced. Working with the staff at Roundabout, they found actors to perform in the play and designers to create the scenery, costumes, and lighting. After more meetings and rehearsals, the play was ready for opening night. So when audiences attend *Impossible Marriage*, they will be seeing the culmination of work that has been in development for more than two years.

Beth Henley - Principle Works

Crimes of the Heart, 1979

The Miss Firecracker Contest, 1980

The Wake of Jamey Foster, 1982

The Debutante Ball, 1985

The Lucky Spot, 1986

Crimes of the Heart (screenplay), 1986

True Stories (screenplay), 1986

Nobody's Fool (screenplay), 1986

The Miss Firecracker Contest (screenplay), 1988

Abundance, 1989

Control Freaks, 1993

Signature, 1995

L-Play, 1997

Impossible Marriage, 1998

THE CHARACTER OF SOUTHERN WRITING

Many of Beth Henley's plays are set in the South. *Impossible Marriage* is set in Georgia, *The Lucky Spot* takes place in Louisiana, and *Crimes of the Heart*, *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, and *The Wake of Jamey Foster* are all set in Mississippi. But it is more than her choice of locales that makes Henley a Southern writer. It is her use of family-based stories with unusual, rebellious characters, and a sense of language that puts Henley in the tradition of Southern writing.

According to Patricia Evans, the importance of the family is one of the key traits of Southern writing, and Beth Henley's plays often are centered around families. *Crimes of the Heart*, for example, focuses on three sisters who come together for a family crisis. *The Wake of Jamey Foster* gathers members of the Foster family, and in *Impossible Marriage*, both members of the bride's family and the groom's family are in attendance. By basing her plays around families, Henley can draw on the rich and complicated relationships that naturally develop between family members.

The members of Henley's assorted fictional families are rarely run-of-the-mill. In fact, they're often quite odd, which is another Southern tradition. Southern writers, especially Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and Tennessee Williams, are known for their unique range of characters. In their stories and plays you will find the eccentric, the different, the shunned. Henley provides ridiculous but sympathetic characters. Lenny McGrath in *Crimes of the Heart*, for example, tries to throw a mini-birthday party for herself by placing a candle on a cookie, but the cookie crumbles. Henley's characters are considered by some critics as a presentation of people who are neither better nor worse than the people we might encounter in our own lives.

Another trait common to characters in Southern writing is the role of the rebellious character. Because the South has a deeply rooted code of honor

and etiquette, one can easily fall into the role of a non-conformist or a rebel. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these non-conformist characters appear in the writing by Southern women. Living in a male-dominated, strictly organized society, independent Southern women would have had first-hand experience of being in conflict with social rules. The tradition of women writers in full rebellion against the mores of their day goes back at least as far as Kate Chopin (1851-1904), the novelist and story writer who shocked readers with her tales of desire that was not only illicit but illegal. *Impossible Marriage* contains more than one rebellious character who threatens to stop the wedding. The use of a rebel character is a Southern tradition that Henley also uses to create a conflict within her plays.



Thomas Lynch's set model for *Impossible Marriage*

Southern authors are perhaps more aware of the sound of language, of its music and rhythms, than other American writers. Scholars Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway characterize this language as notable for its "concrete, sensual detail, sly humor, and vivid, dramatic images." Hearing a Henley play, one becomes aware that she loves language. In *Impossible Marriage*, Floral uses a strong sense of poetic rhythm when complimenting her sister, Pandora: "You have such brave gaiety, romantic notions, youthful daring and translucent beauty." With characters that speak in these ways, Henley is taking the speech of her characters beyond the everyday to an elevated plane of communication.

In many ways, Beth Henley has strong connections with the Southern writers who have preceded her. She is part of a tradition that includes such well-known authors as James Agee, Kate Chopin, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, Alice Walker, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty and Tennessee Williams. As we have seen, her use of family-based drama, eccentric and rebellious characters, and elevated language styles, also helps to create stronger, more interesting plays. It is because Beth Henley uses traditional elements in a fresh way that she is an important American dramatist.

ACTIVITIES:

Before the Play: Creating a Fictional Wedding

People's expectations of weddings and marriage are a central issue in this play. Think about what your expectations of weddings are, remembering any you've attended or seen on television or in movies. Write a story, draw a picture, or create a comic strip that depicts how a perfect wedding would appear. After you've completed that, think about what events or people could change your fictional wedding into a imperfect wedding. Create a second version of your story, drawing, or comic strip in which things do not go as planned, and compare the two versions.

- Is the second version funnier, or more tragic?
- Do your sympathies for the characters change from the first version to the second?
- In which version do the characters seem to reveal their true personalities?

As you watch the play: Analyzing Couples

The structure of *Impossible Marriage* contains many two-person scenes, and during the course of the play, several different pairs of characters are formed. As you watch these different pairs on stage, think about how each pair is unique. Some questions to keep in mind are:

- How are the two characters on stage similar to each other? How are they different?
- Does one character seem to have a greater power over another? How can you tell?
- What are the important determining factors of their relationship?
- Does the relationship between these two characters resemble the relationship of other couples in the play?

After the Play: Writing to Reveal Character

"I love poetry. I love words. I love that they can be either specific or mysterious. I think I try to get at these characters' sensibility to create the language that they would particularly use and don't really think about if it is poetic or not. I just try to go for what they are feeling and sensing." —Beth Henley

Choose a character, either from *Impossible Marriage* or your own fictional wedding (from the "before the play" activity) and write a monologue or a poem from the point of view of that character. Using Beth Henley's statement as a guide, try to:

- Use language that is alternatively mysterious and specific.
- Convey the characters' feelings and sensibility through the language.
- Reveal what is easy for the character to discuss, and what is difficult.

Send your finished poem or monologue to Roundabout, and we'll share it with people who are involved in the production of *Impossible Marriage*! Send it to the attention of:

Margaret Salvante, Education Director, Roundabout Theatre Company, 1530 Broadway, New York, NY 10036
or send an E-MAIL to: Margies@www.roundabouttheatre.org

WEBSITE: <http://www.roundabouttheatre.org>

Be sure to check out Roundabout's website for more information on this production, the rest of our season and all of Roundabout's activities.

SOURCES:

Patricia Evans, "Southern Literature: Women Writers," URL:<http://raven.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/southwomen.htm>

Scot Haller, "Her First Play, Her First Pulitzer Prize," *Saturday Review*, November 1981, pp. 40,42, 44.

Beth Henley: *Four Plays*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992.

Beth Henley, *Crimes of the Heart*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1982.

Beth Henley, *The Debutante Ball*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1997.

Beth Henley, *Am I Blue*, New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1982.

Beth Henley: *The Mississippi Writer and Musicians Project of Starkville High School*, URL:

<http://www.tristatenet.org/cpb/MSWritersAndMusicians/writers/Henley.html>

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Margaret Salvante, Education Director

Philip A. Alexander, Education Assistant

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WHEN YOU GET TO THE THEATRE

What To Look For

The upper lobby of the Roundabout Theatre has a number of resources for your convenience. There is a refreshment counter where you can buy soda or a snack, but please remember that you will not be permitted to take these items into the theatre with you. Student discounts are available to those who show a student ID card. Roundabout's lobby is also an art gallery, so you might want to have a look at the paintings we have on display. Also, take the time to review the display about the show.

Ticket Policy

As a student participant in *From Page To Stage* or *Theatre Access*, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

Audience Etiquette

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.

*Thank You For Your Cooperation
And Enjoy The Show!*

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