

Roundabout Theatre Company



The Mineola Twins

The Chase Family Series Production Guide

The Mineola Twins

by Paula Vogel
directed by Joe Mantello

PRODUCTION GUIDE

WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

There's something about Mineola, there's something about the Long Island area that is similar to me to the Baltimore Washington corridor where I grew up that is from a time when we were planning communities in the Fifties. There was a suburban exodus in the Fifties, when we had this collision of architecture and styles, with the nineteenth century courthouse still there and all around it these growing malls. The more I thought about the play, I recalled that Mineola, because it's the seat of Nassau County, is where they had the trial for Colin Ferguson. At the time I started writing the play, Mineola was very much in the public mind. We had a sense of being in the Fifties suburbs where we retreated to get out of the city and then suddenly there is a Colin Ferguson who gets on the Long Island Railroad and we collide into the Nineties. And I thought, that's it, Mineola.

—Paula Vogel

The official, for-export image of the American people is of a folk who are hard-working, fair-playing, and generous-hearted. These Americans are the ones who come to the aid of their neighbors in times of flood and fire, who celebrate the underdog and make room in their community for the outcast. This is the image that we like to think most accurately reflects who we are. But, the American people have another image, one we don't like to talk about much because it is not a handsome one. This side of America's character is fearful and introverted, afraid that at any moment, all of its possessions will be stolen by a malevolent, outside force.

Over the years, it's fallen to American dramatists to examine these two images, these two faces of our country. In the Fifties, Arthur Miller explored the territory of our hidden fears. In the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties, it's been Edward Albee, John Guare and David Mamet. Lately, Paula Vogel, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, has been examining America's two faces -- specifically in her new play, *The Mineola Twins*. In it, she charts the conflicts of our warring national impulses from the 1950s through the late 1980s. By requiring that her two twins -- Myrna, the "good" twin and Myra, the "evil" one -- be played by one actress, Vogel suggests that the sisters are actually two sides of the same grand old flag.

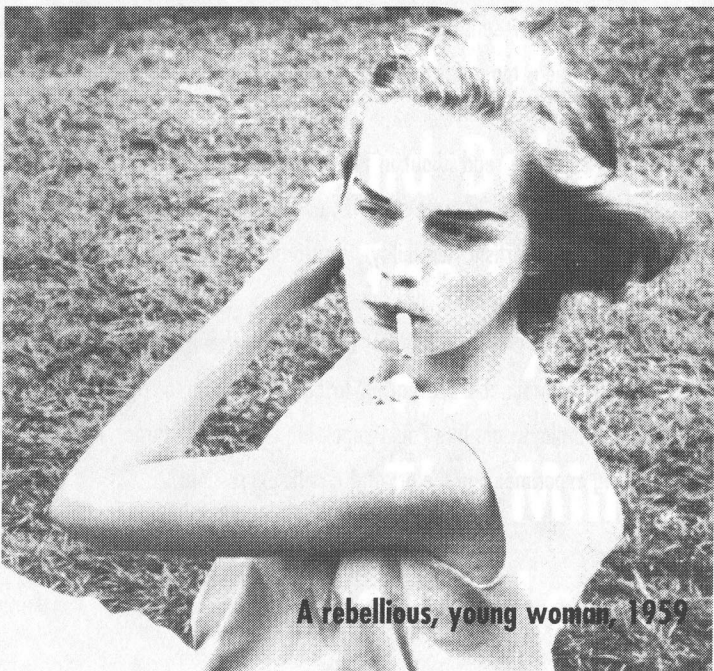
Myrna is everything the young American woman was once supposed to be: devoted wife and mother, winner of bake-offs, contented with her lot. In the Eighties, she morphs into a conservative radio talk show host, defending "family values" from commies, homos and healthcare reformers. Her twin, Myra, is the rebellious one, discovering sex at an early age, becoming a radical in the Sixties and a champion of a woman's right to choose in the Eighties. Myrna and Myra are not simply "good" and "evil," however. Just as each of us is a mixture of pure and questionable motives, so are the twins.

Myra, who many of the liberal persuasion are likely to sympathize with, signs the papers that authorize electroshock treatments on her sister, while the conservative (indeed, reactionary) Myrna rescues her detested sibling in a perilous moment. In other words, these sisters are inextricably bound together by a mystic cord, which Vogel represents theatrically by use of a mysterious Voice, heard only by the twins.

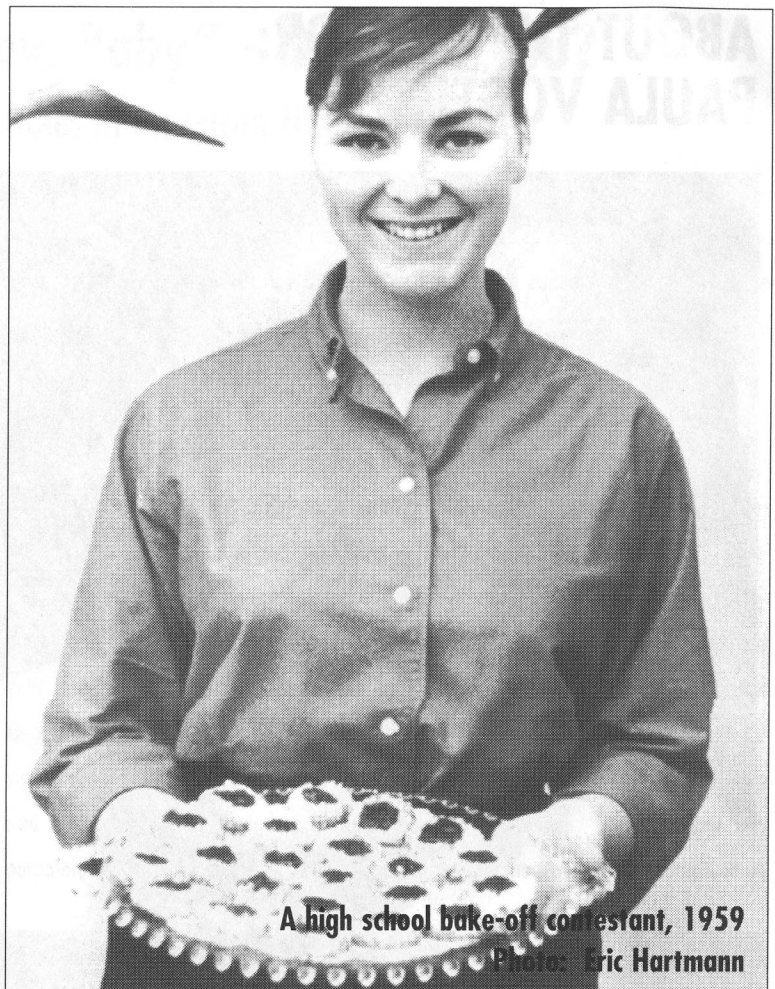
This tie that binds makes *The Mineola Twins*, for all its comedic horror, a hopeful play. "There was bad blood between them," warns the Voice in one climatic moment. "No one could clear up the bad blood." But it seems that by play's end, the Voice will be proven wrong. Bad blood or good, it is the same blood coursing through the sisters' veins, and the same, metaphorically, can be said for us as a nation. In many ways, we are as dysfunctional a family as can be imagined, but Paula Vogel pictures America as a family who will finally learn to get along.

I think the twin metaphor is a great metaphor for where we are right now in this country. Between the left and the right, between the democrats and the republicans we've actually reached this sense of stasis, of endless bickering and end fighting that we are entrapped in and can never get out of. And, I thought twin siblings were a good way of encompassing that as a metaphor. That was very much in my head and my heart, a kind of sickness and weariness at the fact that we are not talking to each other. I think as I'm reaching middle age I'm looking for reconciliation in some way and I think with all my plays that's starting to happen.

—Paula Vogel



A rebellious, young woman, 1959



A high school bake-off contestant, 1959

Photo: Eric Hartmann

WHO'S WHO

Myrna (played by Swoosie Kurtz), the "good" twin "stacked" in the "chestal area." She believes in traditional values, though her actions suggest otherwise.

Myra (played by Swoosie Kurtz), the "evil" twin. Identical to Myrna, except that she is flat chested. She is progressive and challenges many traditional values, but not always in a logical manner.

Jim (played by Mo Gaffney), Myrna's fiance'. He's a virile young man who wants what virile young men always want.

Sarah (played by Mo Gaffney), Myra's life partner.

Kenny (played by Mandy Siegfried). Although he is Myrna's son, he has great admiration for his aunt, Myra.

Ben (played by Mandy Siegfried). Despite being Myra's son, he is more psychologically allied with his aunt, Myrna.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PAULA VOGEL



I think as I'm reaching middle age I'm looking for reconciliation in some way and I think with all my plays that's starting to happen. Obviously, I'm very much absorbing where we are right now in terms of genetic versus environmental debates in science. Is family, "family?" Is there something that is passed through the blood? What part does environment play?

— Paula Vogel

Paula Vogel wastes no time. Sitting in a hospital waiting room during her brother's illness, she wrote the transcendent *The Baltimore Waltz*. And while anyone else might find it difficult enough to write one good play at a time, Vogel had enough energy, imagination and daring to compose *The Mineola Twins* at the same time she was dreaming up *How I Learned to Drive*. Since *How I Learned to Drive* won the 1997 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and is becoming one of the most-often produced plays in America's theatres, other playwrights may adopt Vogel's tactics, and the day may come when the Pulitzer committee has to establish a new category: Best Play Written Simultaneously With Another.

Vogel, who is 47, got down to cases early, beginning her theatrical career as an actor in a suburban Maryland high school (there were few boys in her drama class; she got all the good male leads). By her senior year she was writing plays. She continued writing while earning a Ph.D. at Cornell, and in 1985, she became head of the graduate playwriting program at Brown University, where she's taught a generation of playwrights to find their own voices, at their own speeds.

Her plays exhibit the same interest in time efficiency. Not a moment is wasted on, say, exposition. The lights come up on a Vogel play and immediately we're plunged into the midst of a high-stakes conflict. At the outset of *The Baltimore Waltz*, a San Francisco librarian is fired for his political activism. In *The Mineola Twins*, it's a little nuclear air raid. Scenery is minimal, allowing for lightening transitions from scene to scene. Many Vogel characters exhibit a dynamic restlessness, an urge to explore, to seek out opportunities for change. Their enemy is stagnation and they challenge conventional thinking with experimentation. The conflict between this urge for growth and a desire for stability is one of the engines that makes *The Mineola Twins* run.

Vogel is quick to embrace hot-button social and political issues that some playwrights and many theatres prefer to avoid: AIDS (*The Baltimore Waltz*), pornography and domestic violence (*Hot 'N' Throbbing*), pedophilia (*How I Learned to Drive*), non-traditional families (*And Baby Makes Seven*) are a few of the topics that have found expression in her work. However, her plays are not political in the narrow sense of taking a stand on a certain issue and calling that stand a play: she is too much the artist to divide life into Right and Wrong, Good and Bad, Left and Right. If her plays are political in the sense that they revolve around the issues we read about in the papers and see on television, they are personal because Vogel interprets, thinks and dreams about those issues in the realm of her own artistic sensibility, transforming them from statements into complex human transactions difficult to label or pin down. Experience is quicksilver. Vogel's plays say, life slips quickly through our fingers and what once seemed a perfectly suitable approach to living may soon be too rigid to contain our desires. For a playwright like Paula Vogel, life is a moving target, and her plays are ongoing experiments in the art of dramatic expression.

"You've Come A Long Way, Baby" - Or Have You?

The Change of Women's Roles in American History

Since World War II, the place of women in American society has evolved tremendously. During the four decades depicted in *The Mineola Twins*, from the 1950s through the 1980s, American women went from being primarily limited to domestic duties to taking on significant roles in business and politics. This progress of women's roles has not been smooth, however, nor has it been embraced by everyone as positive change. In fact, the history of women's roles in the 20th Century involves a recurring conflict between the traditional and non-traditional, a clash of values that can be seen in each scene of *The Mineola Twins*.

The 1950s was the era of powerful men, such as general-turned-president Dwight D. Eisenhower (nicknamed "Ike") and the dictatorial head of the F.B.I., J. Edgar Hoover. This was also the period when poodle skirts and Doris Day typified the common ideal of the "good girl." Women's roles were primarily defined by household work. Though millions of women had taken jobs outside the home during World War II (1941-1945), during the fifties they were expected to return to the kitchen. Although many individual women achieved success in the arts and

sciences, most women who had jobs outside the home worked as waitresses, nurses or secretaries. Women who didn't fit into the limited social roles offered in the 1950s were looked on with suspicion. A woman's morals could be called into question if she demonstrated some independence or chose a career path that was considered appropriate only for men.

When the 1960s rolled around, members of the Baby Boom generation were growing up and learning to take their place in society. While some young people held fast to conservative ideas of patriotism by serving in the Vietnam war as soldiers and nurses, many protested against the war and the administration of Richard Nixon (disparagingly nicknamed "Tricky Dick"). Some men avoided the draft by fleeing to Canada. To fill a void in which their voices weren't heard, women formed groups like the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.). During the sixties, fashions also changed significantly, often taking on political meanings. People started growing their hair long and wearing clothing that was looser and more revealing. Some clothing was purposefully androgynous, in order to blur the line between the sexes. Where some women

Paula Vogel - Principle Works

Desdemona 1977

The Oldest Profession 1981

And Baby Makes Seven 1984

The Baltimore Waltz 1992

Hot 'N' Throbbing 1994

The Mineola Twins 1996

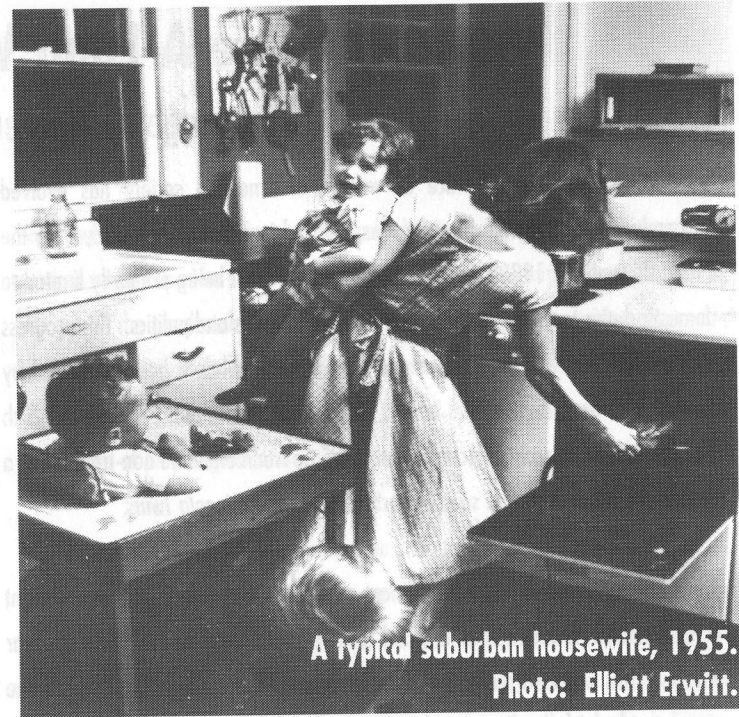
How I Learned to Drive 1997

maintained the traditional styles of femininity, and entered beauty pageants like the Miss America contest, others demonstrated against such contests by throwing bras, girdles, and wigs into the trash.

The Seventies continued several movements that began in the sixties. As the feminist movement gained momentum, "women's lib" (for women's liberation) and "Ms." joined the English language. Women's groups worked for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (E.R.A.), which was to be added to the constitution to prevent discrimination based on gender. Initially, the E.R.A. was approved by several state legislatures, but the ratification drive eventually lost power, especially after being attacked by people like Phyllis Schlafly, a woman whose conservative ideals led her to form an organization against E.R.A. called the Eagle Forum. However, in 1973, the feminists did win a victory when, in the historic decision of *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court ruled that states could not prevent women from obtaining an abortion.

The progress in women's roles throughout the 1970s even inspired an advertising campaign for Virginia Slims cigarettes, which presented an independent-looking woman wearing contemporary clothes with the slogan "You've come a long way, baby." Although this phrase was designed to symbolize women's progress, many considered its tone condescending and patronizing. Meanwhile, during this period, women who remained at home to raise children, often derided by career-oriented women, chose to call themselves "homemakers" to limit the negative stereotype of "housewife."

By the 1980s, more and more women were involved in positions of power. Sandra Day O'Connor was the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court. Despite her position as a powerful role model, however, O'Connor was often criticized by women's groups when she took positions that were considered out of date or harmful to women. Those women who did not



A typical suburban housewife, 1955.

Photo: Elliott Erwitt.

go to work were now called "stay-at-home moms" or women who "work at home" as a way to validate the importance of raising a family and maintaining a secure home life.

When George Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court, the confirmation hearings reinforced the conflict surrounding women's place in American society. Anita Hill, a law professor, testified that Thomas had harassed her when she worked for him several years earlier. Though many found Hill's testimony credible, Thomas was confirmed by a majority of Senators to take a seat on the Supreme Court. Everyone had something to contribute to this controversy, whether it was the liberals who took up the banner of sexual harassment, or the conservatives, who attacked Hill on every possible ground.

By the nineties, Hillary Rodham Clinton found herself at the center of the debate of a woman's proper place in America. As a lawyer, she was proud of her career. Yet, the press often focused on issues related to her appearance, such as the style of her hair and clothing. After she referred to the fact that she did not stay home to bake cookies, she felt obligated to provide women's magazines with a cookie recipe and alleviate some of the criticism from conservative commentators.

From the Fifties to the Nineties, American women have seen their roles and their lives changed dramatically. Though many women feel the greater freedoms and responsibility now offered to women are long overdue, many also believe that change has gone too far. We can find in the current political debates among conservatives and liberals, even after all these years, that women's roles are still caught in the pull between traditional and progressive ideals. It is this tension between two extremes that has given modern women such a complicated and contradictory identity in American society.



An image of the Ideal Career Woman, 1976.

Photo: MBA Magazine

ACTIVITIES

Before the Play: Investigating Women's Lives From a Historical Perspective

Investigate the lives of the women in your family, and try to find out how things have changed since they were young. Ask your mother, aunt, or grandmother to find a photograph from many years ago. Ask her to tell you about her home life, her job, her friends and neighbors. Here are some sample questions you might want to ask:

- Do you think things are better now for women? Why or why not?
- What do you think is the biggest change in women's lives from when you were a girl to now?
- Did you belong to any organizations designed for women?
- Can you identify one or two things that have changed how you think about women's roles in American society?

As you watch the Play: Analyzing Characters

As you watch the play, look carefully at the characters of Myra and Myrna. There are several differences between them, both physical and psychological—how many do you notice? There are also many similarities. You may notice similarities not only in how they act or what they say, but in the other people in their lives. For example, how are the sons of Myra and Myrna similar?

After the Play: Writing to Reveal Character

Many authors, Paula Vogel included, have written plays about twins. Try writing a play or short story about a set of twins. You may choose to make them almost completely alike, or totally different. Which way do you think would be more interesting? Think about whether you'd like to write a comedy, or a tragedy. Usually playwrights use twins in comical plays, to utilize the device of mistaken identity (when characters mistakenly believe one twin is the other).

When you're finished, send your play or story to Roundabout, and we'll share it with people who work on *The Mineola Twins*.

Send it to: Margaret Salvante, Education Director
Roundabout Theatre Company
1530 Broadway, New York, NY 10036

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:

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New York: Da Capo Press, 1998.
The Fifties, New York: Pantheon Books, 1989.
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New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994.
Stanley Hochman and Eleanor Hochman, *The Penguin Dictionary of Contemporary American History*. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

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Production Guide**

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Welcome to The Chase Family Series at Roundabout!

The Mineola Twins January 30, 1999

Show begins at 2:30pm

Preshow reception begins at 1:30pm

Your family subscription includes:

- a production guide for you to review as a family before coming to the theatre;
- admittance to our pre-show reception for family subscribers only, scheduled to take place before the show in the lobby;
- participation in a post-performance discussion with members of the cast.

Remember to come early **Saturday, January 30th** to enjoy refreshments and participate in a discussion with our Education Director before seeing the show. Please note that all discussions are reserved for young subscribers and their adult guests.

The Roundabout Theatre Company gratefully acknowledges

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