

The Last Romance

By Joe DiPietro

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE PLAYWRIGHT. Like two of the main characters in *The Last Romance*, Joe DiPietro, born in 1961, comes from an Italian-American family in New Jersey.

He graduated with a degree in English from Rutgers University in 1984, planning on attending law school at the University of California at Los Angeles. But, as he told *The New York Times* in 1998, fate intervened. Shortly before he was to leave for California, he was offered a job with the sports division of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in New York. He remained with CBS for a decade, rising to the position of advertising copywriter while also cultivating his interests in theater.

Meanwhile, he began to work on material for the stage, and at the suggestion of a friend, started writing comic sketches—very short dramatic scenes—for a theater company in New York. “Through sketch writing, I learned what was funny,” DiPietro told *The Times*. “I learned the ropes. I was getting better, and I still had a great day job.”

Writing comedy seemed the natural course to follow for a person who described himself as “the class clown.” “I wasn’t cool, I wasn’t the jock. I made them laugh, and that was always a way to get people to like me.”

His writing led eventually to his first New York success, the musical comedy revue, *I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change*, which opened off-Broadway in 1996 and ran for twelve years and more than 5,000 performances. DiPietro wrote the book—the spoken lines of the script—and the song lyrics for this show.

In an interview with *The Daily News* in 2000, the playwright defined his view of life as “mostly benign and unapologetically centrist,” a perspective rooted in his, “very stable, very nurturing middle-class kind of environment.”

He notes that, “some critics say my plays are very [middlebrow](#) or mainstream. Well, that's kind of where I'm from; and, that's kind of who my people are, kind of what I enjoy. I don't have huge things to rebel against.”

“For whatever reason, things of mine tend to strike a universal chord,” DiPietro told the *Daily News*. “I also write comedies, and much of the comedies that are produced by theaters nowadays are very dark comedies. And that's also the stuff that critics celebrate more often than not, for whatever reason. Dysfunctional families, yeah.” His characters, by contrast, are “real people, they’re functional people.”

THE SETTING The play is set in a public dog-run in Hoboken, New Jersey, a small city directly across the Hudson River from the towers of New York’s financial district. Like Brooklyn, The Bronx, and Queens, Hoboken is distinguished in large part by not being Manhattan. Instead, like those outer boroughs, it sits across a river from the wealth, sophistication, and hectic pace of Gotham.

While the face Manhattan presents to the world is an amalgam of Wall Street millionaires, Broadway celebrities, and Park Avenue socialites, these more humble provinces of the New York area evoke sharply different images. Brooklyn is forever associated with Ralph and Alice Kramden; The Bronx with Molly Goldberg; and Queens with Archie Bunker—all stalwart members of the ethnic working and lower-middle classes who live their lives amidst unfashionable furniture in cramped houses and apartments, surrounded by their blue-collar friends and modest families.

And what names or faces has Hoboken bestowed on the world? In the 1940s and 50s that small town (two square miles with a population a little bigger than Lewiston’s), was famous as

the hometown of Frank Sinatra, a native of Hoboken's large Italian-American community, and one of the greatest figures of mid-century popular culture.

It was also a town whose mean streets earned it a national reputation through Elia Kazan's gritty masterpiece, *On the Waterfront*. This film about labor corruption on the New Jersey docks, filmed in Hoboken, starred a dazzling young Marlon Brando. It was in Hoboken—fictionally, at least—that Brando sat in the back seat of a car and told Rod Steiger that he “couldda been a contender.”

In setting his play in this small city known for its Italian crooner and dockside thugs, for its cultural remoteness from the glittering metropolis across the river, and for its tightly knit ethnic communities, DiPietro is clearly tapping into ideas and images that support the themes of his drama.

The play is built around Ralph Bellini's pursuit of romance, his search for emotional escape from the constricting life he leads as a widower sharing a small apartment with a sister whose husband left her years ago. A frustrated opera singer, he yearns to bring into his daily life some of the grand passions he once imagined enacting on the stage. And he cherishes the memories of the performances he has attended at the Metropolitan Opera in Manhattan, a temple of romance lying just across the Hudson—a shrine where he could experience those passions vicariously.

But those trips to the opera with his late wife were few, and now lie long in the past. The present for Ralph is Hoboken and his Italian-American community—a world that both nurtures and constrains him. His dreams only come to life on the stage of the Met in Manhattan—which he can rarely afford to visit—but his reality is defined by the hemmed-in parks and stuffy apartments of his unglamorous home town.

THE PLOT As the play begins, lights rise on The Young Man, a figure we will encounter repeatedly during the course of the action. “He wears a wool suit, inexpensive but meticulously cared for,” and sings a verse in Italian from the song, “Mattinata,” by Ruggero Leoncavallo, a composer best known for his opera, *Pagliacci*. In the English version of the song, The Young Man is asking his beloved to,

Put on your white dress too,
and open the door to your minstrel!
Where you are not, sunlight is missing;
where you are love dawns.

During the song, Ralph enters. The playwright describes him as an eighty-year-old man who is “vigorous and full of life.” Ralph reaches out to touch the singer, but never completes the gesture. Instead, he sits on a park bench as the lights fade on *The Young Man*. As the script tells us, “We are in a dusty dog run,” in a park in Hoboken. We hear the sound of barking, and then the play’s first lines, and exchange between Ralph and his sister, Rose Tagliatelle, a woman in her 70s:

ROSE. Ralph!

RALPH (startled). Oh, *Madonn!*

ROSE. Since when do you leave the house without telling me?

Spoken against the background of canine yelping, the lines suggest that Rose, too, is barking out her words, like a dog herding an errant sheep. Rose continues to nag Ralph about his violations of household protocol, informing him that he needs to get home at once because supper is soon to be served, scolding him for wearing his good shirt “to a filthy place like this,” and reminding him that a man without a dog has no business sitting in a dog run. Ralph waves off all of Rose’s admonitions, and simply declares that he is “waiting for someone” he refuses to identify. Rose ominously reminds him of the 25th of October, “the worst day of her life.” “When I saw you went out without telling me that’s what I thought happened—the 25th of October all over again.” We, however, are left in the dark as to the actual events of that day.

When Ralph promises to return home within twenty minutes, Rose relents, and leaves him to enjoy his outing. As Rose exits, Carol Reynolds, another woman in her 70s enters. “Attractive, proper, and very well dressed,” Carol, notably, does not have an Italian last name, a significant fact in a community as conscious of ethnicity as Hoboken.

Ralph immediately begins flirting with Carol—who is, obviously, the someone he has been waiting for—telling her that he has been retired from the railroad for 25 years, and that he once auditioned for the Metropolitan Opera Company.

Carol knows nothing about opera, and despite Ralph’s offer to teach her about it, she evinces no interest in learning. Ralph teases her about her dog, “a Chihuahua mix,” which he compares to “a rat that can bark.” When she queries him about his—non-existent—dog, he randomly identifies someone else’s terrier as his own.

When she accuses Ralph of “coming on” to her, he initially pretends indignation, but then delightedly pleads guilty, declaring that, “when you say ‘come on to me’ I find that very sexy.”

The flirtation proceeds, with Ralph and Carol exchanging information about their families. She has two children she rarely sees, and is initially reluctant to describe her marital situation. Ralph, a widower for twelve years, had one child who died “a few years back.” So now he is alone in the world, except for his sister, Rose.

Carol, we learn, spent 35 years as an executive secretary, and looks back nostalgically to the days when men wore ties, and people didn’t walk the streets “looking like they just got out of bed.” Ralph confesses that he spotted Carol the previous day when he deviated from the established route of his regular walk. He decided on the spot to return in the hope of meeting her again and getting to know her because it’s been twelve years since he has touched a woman, and because she is “the most beautiful woman I’ve seen in twenty years.” With that declaration—and a tentative agreement to meet again on the following day—the first scene comes to an end.

The second scene begins with the reappearance of The Young Man, again singing, this time an aria from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*—an opera about the famous seducer, Don Juan. In the aria Don Juan plots his next conquest at a drunken revel he intends to arrange:

When they’ve drunk some wine and are hot-headed,
We’ll throw a great party.
If you find some girl in the piazza,
try to make her come here with you.
Let the dancing be wild,
You shall lead them all—a minuet, a folia,
and an allemande.

As The Young Man sings, he dresses Ralph in a jacket and tie, after which Ralph looks at him “and both men simultaneously comb back their hair, as if they are a mirror image of one another.” We now understand that The Young Man is Ralph’s younger self. Then the lights come up again on the dog run, and Ralph resumes his place on the bench.

And just as in the previous scene, the first word is spoken by Rose, who is again tailing Ralph, trying to herd him back onto the long trodden paths of his life: the familiar route of the daily walk, the firmly established destination, the undeviating meal times. And once again, she evokes the ominous memory of October 25th.

Ralph, it turns out, has been sitting on the bench for two hours, waiting for Carol to show up while Rose has been making veal scaloppini for his dinner. She wants him to come home and eat, and he wants to stay and wait.

A moment later Carol arrives, Ralph tries to pick up where he left off with her, and Rose exits in a huff. Carol has arrived late because, she explains, she was hoping that Ralph would have left, their previous encounter—with all its emotional implications—having upset her.

Ralph tries to learn more about Carol. What is her marital status? Why is she so evasive on the subject? What does she think about opera?

When Carol confesses to total ignorance on that subject, Ralph declares that he will take her to a performance, a proposal she greets with reluctance. “What if we go out on a date and you die?” she asks—revealing her anxieties about developing new attachments so late in life.

The subject shifts back to opera, as Ralph explains that he attends performances at the local high school:

. . . they ain't bad. But me and my Anna—we used to save up every year and go to the Met. That's the greatest place to see an opera. Except, of course, for La Scala, in Italy Never been there. We always talked about going, but—it was too expensive, too much trouble—we'd do it when we have time, we said, when we got older. Funny, huh? You think you've all the time in the world, and then before you know it, time's up.

Ralph confesses that his greatest fear is facing the world alone. Carol then asks him to hold her hand, and they begin to tell each other about losing their spouses. Ralph's Anna died of a sudden heart attack; Carol's Jerry, without warning, suffered a stroke. As they exchange confidences, their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Rose—as ever, in pursuit of Ralph.

He begs for two more minutes to finish his visit with Carol, and proceeds—with the assistance of The Young Man, who returns to the stage—to tell the story of his audition for the Metropolitan Opera in 1946:

And once I started, it was as if the music just floated out of my mouth—like it belonged there. And I was singing good that day; I knew I was singing good.

The Young Man—young Ralph, in other words—then delivers an aria from Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci*, which tells the story of a clown with a cheating wife who must force himself to make others laugh despite his broken heart. The aria performed by Ralph, however, was that of Silvio, the man who seduces the clown’s wife:

Why, if you must leave me without pity,
why then, sorceress, have you ensnared me?
Why then did you kiss me
in the abandon of your close embrace?
If you forget those fleeting hours,
I cannot do so: I desire still
that warm abandon and that flaming kiss
that kindled such a fire in my blood!

Ralph tells Carol that the man running the audition praised his performance, and asked him to leave his phone number in case they wanted to call him back for another audition, or even to offer him a role in an opera. When Anna asks if the call ever came, Ralph responds ruefully that, “Someone—one of my brothers, I think—answered the phone and—and he forgot to tell me or something. I never got the call.”

Following this revelation, Carol tells Ralph that she will be back again tomorrow, and asks him to be sure to come too. This moment of budding intimacy, however, is disrupted, not by Rose, but by Carol’s discovery that her dog, Peaches, is nowhere to be seen, having apparently run off through a hole in the fence. With Carol in distress over the fate of her missing pet, Ralph promises to find the dog, and the two hug, bringing the first act to an end.

As the second act begins—two days later— we find Carol sitting on the park bench, making cell-phone calls to people who might have information about her missing dog. Meanwhile, The Young Man is again singing, this time an excerpt from *Herodiade*, an opera about Herod, Salome, and John the Baptist by the French composer, Massenet. The Young Man sings Herod’s aria expressing his longing for Salome:

O, vision. Ever fleeing; ever pursued.
Ah! It is you I long to see,
O my love!
O my hope!
You have taken possession of my life.

Rose shows up with news about Ralph's efforts to find Peaches, but she soon steers the conversation to the relationship between Carol and her brother. From there it moves to Rose's personal life, which, she says, she has spent taking "care of men." Her husband deserted her 22 years ago and is now living with another woman in Brooklyn. Childless, her only remaining human connection is with Ralph. She asks Carol to stop spending time with him, and again mentions October 25th, though leaving it to Ralph to explain the significance of that date.

Carol declares that she also knows what it means to be "half-married and half-not," explaining that her husband lived a long time after a stroke that "completely incapacitated him." To which Rose responds,

My husband disappeared in the middle of the night. He didn't say a word to me, he just left a note in the bathroom. So you don't understand nothin'.

At which point Ralph arrives having found Peaches, and asks Carol to reward him for his accomplishment by accompanying him to the opera. Carol agrees, and gives Ralph a quick kiss on the lips, a gesture that brings the scene to a close.

The next scene shows us Rose alone on stage, reading from the letter her husband left behind on the night he deserted her. Its concluding lines cause her to catch her breath: "I know you think I'm a bad person . . . but I'm not. I'm just trying to be happy. And you don't make me happy no more. I hope you will forgive me. I forgive you." This sad revelation ends the scene.

The third scene brings The Young Man back on stage, this time singing the "Diamond Song" from Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, based on three fantastic short stories by the German author, E.T.A. Hoffmann.

Ah! Sparkle, diamond.
Mirror of the nightingale.
Sparkle, diamond
Lure her, lure her

When the lights come up, we are no longer in the dog run, but in Ralph's home, where he and Carol are seated in an arm chair kissing. Once again, Rose breaks in on the couple, returning unexpectedly from a bingo game. She decides that things have gone too far, and that Ralph now must tell Carol about October 25th.

I was home watching Judge Judy and next thing I know I'm in an ambulance. I guess I had wandered out of the house and into the park and I collapsed. Everything went black. And I got no memory of none of it. . . . So that's what you'd be in for with me, all right? . . . You can leave now if you want.

Carol considers as she absorbs this information, and despite its implications forges ahead with the plans she has laid for her future with Ralph. In accord with their agreement from the earlier scene, she has bought opera tickets, to *Pagliacci* as it turns out. But not at the high school, and not at the Met. Instead, she has arranged for them to attend a performance at La Scala, the legendary opera house in Milan. Ralph is overwhelmed, exclaiming, "I never thought I'd see it before I died—never in a million years . . ."

At the beginning of the following scene, The Young Man enters, carrying Ralph's jacket and his suitcase, packed for his trip to Milan. This time, he is singing an aria from Mozart's *Così fan Tutte*, a comic opera about faithless lovers. Commenting on the fickleness of women, Guglielmo proclaims,

Ladies, you treat so many thus
That, if I must speak the truth,
I begin to sympathize
When your lovers complain.

Ralph dons the jacket and takes the suitcase as Rose enters. He tells her that he expects to propose to Carol when they are in Italy, an idea that Rose immediately vetoes. She has discovered that Carol's husband, though bed-ridden and comatose from his stroke, is still alive. She claims she wants to save Ralph from the emotional folly of his relationship with Carol, and from the danger to his health of a taxing trip to Italy. "October 25th" she intones repeatedly, reminding him of his precarious condition. Ralph furiously rejects her attempt to thwart his desires, but when Rose challenges his selfish treatment of her, he seems to waver:

Tell me, Ralph, tell me when was the last time you took me to the opera? . . . Or even a movie? When? When? I cook for you and clean your house and wash your dirty clothes. . . . But when was the last time you took me anywhere? . . . She treats her dog better than you treat me. Ralph, if you go on that trip with her—then what am I? What am I?

With this plaintive question, we move into the next scene, introduced by The Young Man's version of an Aria from Verdi's *Falstaff*, an opera based on Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of*

Windsor, whose comic protagonist plots multiple seductions. One of the aggrieved husbands sings,

The appointment is made,
the fraud is arranged.
You're cheated and defrauded!
And you said that a jealous
husband is senseless!

We are now in the lobby of Carol's apartment building where she and Ralph are to meet before heading to the airport on the first leg of their trip to Italy. As soon as he arrives, Ralph asks Carol if her husband is still alive, and she affirms that he is. Ralph accuses her of dishonesty, and informs her that he will not take their trip to La Scala. Carol pleads with him to change his mind, telling him that this journey is "the last romance I'll ever have." But Ralph has taken to heart Rose's demand that he honor her feelings, and he refuses to change his mind. Carol then decides that she will take the trip on her own, and she heads for the airport, urging Ralph to meet her again at the dog run when she returns.

The Young Man comes back again, this time to join Ralph in singing a famous Neapolitan song in which a lover begs his beloved not to leave him: "Return to Sorrento; do not make me die."

We then find ourselves back in the dog run, where Ralph has been sitting by himself for several hours as Carol flies over the Atlantic. Once again Rose tracks him down, surprised to find that he has not left for Italy. Ralph asks his sister to go to the movies with him, and Rose raises the possibility of their getting a dog, each entering new emotional territory as they attempt to humanize their relationship with each other.

Rose wonders whether Ralph has been angry at her all his life: "I should've given you that message, when that Metropolitan Opera place called. . . . Mama told me not to." So we learn the role that Rose played in the snuffing out of Ralph's dream of a career in opera. But Ralph dismisses her concern, saying, "It happened sixty years ago. You think I'm still mad at something that happened sixty years ago? . . . You're my family, Rose. You're my home. I could never hate you."

Rose exits, leaving Ralph alone at the dog run. A spotlight comes up on Carol, who reads from a letter she is writing to him from Italy telling about her experience at the opera. She describes one of the singers, who "looked as I imagine you looked when you were young. . . . When he sang, I closed my eyes and I imagined it was you up there—singing to me, singing just to me."

She renews her invitation to meet again at the dog run, and The Young Man has the last word in the play, singing “T’amo” –I love you.

IV. THE CHARACTERS. Ralph’s life is bracketed by two major disappointments: his failure at age 20 to realize his dream of becoming an opera singer, and his failure at age 80 to consummate his romantic adventure with Carol. In the intervening 60 years he worked doggedly for the railroad, while suffering the deaths of his wife and his only child. When we first meet him, he has been living in retirement, his daily activities rigidly supervised by his younger sister.

Given this melancholy biography, we might expect to find in Ralph a rather dispirited character, low-spirited, down-hearted, a man who sings the blues. Instead, we find a man who—in his heart at least—sings the great passionate arias of Italian opera. And far from bemoaning his losses, he calls himself “a kidder”—a description his behavior affirms. The dictionary tells us that to kid is “To mock playfully; tease.” Teasing, in turn, denotes a somewhat less agreeable activity: “To annoy or pester; vex.” So a “kidder” is a person who pursues a twofold objective in dealing with others: on the one hand, he offers playful engagement; on the other he irritates.

Why does Ralph adopt this approach to other people? Possibly because kidding is also a strategy for defending oneself from rejection or disappointment. If I don’t really mean what I say to another—“I love you . . . ha, ha, just kidding!”—then obviously nothing emotionally important is at stake. However, if I **do** mean “I love you,” but say it as if I don’t, then I have created a situation where, if my declaration is rejected, I can hide behind the camouflage of a joke: “You can’t hurt me. Don’t you get it? I was just kidding.”

Then there is the annoying aspect of kidding. In vexing the other person, I also have the advantage of knocking her off balance, like a boxer who fakes a left and throws a right. I have rendered her less capable of making an effective or painful rejoinder to whatever I have said. So we can imagine Ralph kidding his way through life as a strategy for defending against rejection, for minimizing the pain of loss, or for keeping potential emotional troublemakers at bay.

Thus in their first meeting, Carol claims that Ralph is “coming on” to her. He responds by turning on the pathos:

How could you. This is the one day I’ve felt well enough to go out. And I see you . . . and I think maybe. . . . she’d want meet a new friend and . . . make me feel like I’m something more than some old person who sits home all day, wishing someone nice would talk to him. And then you go and accuse me of . . .—of that.

An embarrassed Carolyn then apologizes for her mistake, only to have Ralph respond, “Ha, ha, fooled ya! I’m totally coming on to you.” Surprised and thrown off balance by this reply, Carol can’t defend herself from Ralph’s ensuing fusillade of jokes and leg-pulling, but rather than leave in a huff—as she threatens to do—she sticks around for more. Ralph apologizes for his teasing, explaining that he comes “from a family of seven brothers and four sisters and no money. You gotta have a sense of humor to get through that, right?”

So joking is one of his primary defenses against the hardships of life. But inside the kidder there still lives his 20-year-old, passionate, opera-singing self. Pagliacci, the clown with a broken heart, discloses his most painful feelings, not to the other characters in the opera, but to the audience when he is alone on stage singing his famous aria. Similarly, Ralph reveals his deepest feelings, not to Carol or Rose, but to the audience through the voice of his younger self—singing in Italian, which throws another screen over his emotions.

It’s only near the end of the play, when he decides that loyalty to his sister will not allow him to take the trip to Italy, that the serious Ralph fully emerges from behind the façade of the joker, speaking now in his own voice rather than expressing himself vicariously through the young man he once was. But in the play’s final moment, the dichotomy returns. Addressing Carol, it is Ralph who says simply “Ciao”—“goodbye”—while it is The Young Man who says “T’amo”—“I love you.”

If Ralph charges into the action with a blast of comic energy, **Carol** begins her progress through the play holding up a “No Trespassing” sign and aiming it directly at Ralph. But it’s not until the end that we fully understand the reasons for her emotional reserve. She still has a husband—albeit a man totally cut off from the world as the result of a stroke. So she is both married and not-married; or at least not married in any practical or tangible way. Legally—even sacramentally—she is still a wife. But in everyday terms, she is a widow.

This neither/nor condition has turned her life into something like a state of suspended animation—except for the lavish affection she pours out on her dog, Peaches. But this one slight filament of love leads her to the dog run, and the dog run brings her into Ralph’s mighty gravitational field. A first few tentative steps in the direction of a new human bond develop steadily into ever longer strides leading to romance.

As she follows this path of increasing emotional commitment she also travels toward a growing appreciation of opera. Ralph’s first words to her are, “Do you like opera?” to which she responds, “No.” As we know from Ralph’s enthusiasm for opera, it represents emotional

grandeur and passion, the deep and authentic currents of feeling. Not to like opera, then, is to be in some measure emotionally stunted or blocked.

But by the time the play ends, Carol has submitted herself to the terror of flying in order to attend a performance at La Scala where, she writes to Ralph, “I imagined that it was you up there—singing to me, singing just to me.” And in the final scene, it is Carol who, under the spell of opera, implores Ralph to meet her again back at their old rendezvous in Hoboken.

Rose has preserved the farewell letter her husband left for her on the night he deserted her 22 years ago, evidently rereading it frequently, thereby reminding herself of the source of her continuing emotional pain. “You always seem to be most content when you were taking care of someone,” her husband wrote, “but I sometimes felt like I had to do everything your way. Like . . . there was no room left for me. . . . And you don’t make me happy no more.”

According to the letter, then, Rose is a woman whose love suffocates other people, driving them away from her. She now focuses her caretaking energies on Ralph, a man whose wife died twelve years ago. But her husband left her 10 years before that event, which means that, before the death of Ralph’s wife, she spent a decade with nobody too look after—a stretch of years that must have been emotional purgatory for Rose.

Her life during that time having been completely empty, she is determined that it will not become empty again. Since Ralph is all she has to fill the void, she devotes her energy exclusively to keeping him within the circle of her controlling care and away from the clutches of Carol. Many of the scenes in the play show us Rose trying to coax Ralph back into the house, away from the dog run and Carol. Rose interrupts Ralph and Carol as they are kissing; and Rose breaks the news to Ralph that Carol’s husband, though comatose and bedridden, is still alive, all but killing his last chance at romance. In the end, she manages to remind Ralph of his obligations to her, pulling him back to his family responsibilities and away from the self-fulfillment of Pagliacci at La Scala.

V THE THEMES Like the previous play by Joe Di Pietro produced at the Public Theatre, *Over the River and through the Woods*, *The Last Romance* shows us characters struggling with the conflicts created by the competing claims of family responsibility and self fulfillment.

Ralph’s life has been shaped by this tension, most crucially by his mother’s decision not to tell him about the phone call from the Metropolitan Opera that might have led to an artistically fulfilling life as a singer. Instead she decided that he was “gonna have a wife to support,” and

that opera was no “way to make a living.” So instead of performing at the Met, Ralph has spent his life singing his heart out in the theater of his mind.

Sixty years later, Rose’s claims on Ralph’s sense of family duty and loyalty divert him from his romantic adventure in Italy with Carol, and redirect him instead to a neighborhood movie with his sister.

Carol’s opportunity for romance is also thwarted by a family connection, in her case the fact of her continuing marriage to a stroke victim. When Ralph learns of this ongoing bond, he decides that he can’t overlook her dishonesty, and that he can’t allow himself to treat Rose as if she too were just a lifeless burden.

However, romance is not completely thwarted by the everyday demands of family obligation. Ralph at eighty has the resilience of spirit and the physical and emotional energy pursue Carol, and to come very close to the romantic adventure of a lifetime. Love and joy remain within our grasp, the play seems to say, even as we approach the end of the road. And perhaps the joy that Ralph and Rose will find in a more loving bond as brother and sister has rewards that rival those of romance.

VI QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why does Rose follow Ralph around all the time?
2. Why does Ralph constantly “kid” people?
3. Why is Carol so attached to her dog?
4. Have you ever listened to opera? Do you understand why Ralph loves it so ardently?
5. Why does the playwright tell us that Carol is extremely afraid of flying?
6. Who is the Young Man? What is the dramatic purpose of his singing?
7. Why does Carol decide to go to Milan without Ralph?
8. Why does Ralph decide not to go to Milan?
9. Will Ralph and Carol meet again at the dog-run?

10. Will Ralph end up blaming and resenting Rose for her role in his decision not to travel to Italy with Carol?