

# ***TIME STANDS STILL***

***By Donald Margulies***

**PRODUCED AT THE PUBLIC THEATRE**

**IN MARCH, 2013**

## **A STUDY GUIDE**

**By Martin Andrucki**

**Dana Professor of Theater**

**Bates College**

**I THE PLAYWRIGHT.** Donald Margulies was born in New York in 1954, and grew up in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn. According to the *imagination* website, his father was a wallpaper salesman with a love for musical comedy. As a family treat, he would take his children to Broadway shows across the river in Manhattan, an expensive outing for a man with a fairly modest income. But his love of theater trumped his economic limitations, and clearly, he passed on his affection for the stage to his son.

Margulies' early creative interests were in drawing and draftsmanship, and he began his college education at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, a school whose curriculum emphasizes the visual arts. But, as he declared in an interview in *Bomb* magazine, "I started to itch to write and read; and [Pratt] wasn't the place to be if I had those inclinations." As a result, he transferred to the State University of New York at Purchase, a campus that offers courses in all the arts—verbal as well

as visual— thus allowing Margulies to satisfy his literary “itch.” There he majored in playwriting.

In 1984 *Found a Peanut* was staged at The Public Theater in New York, his first play to be produced Off-Broadway. Since then he has written numerous plays, including *Sight Unseen*, which won an Obie (short for “Off-Broadway”) Award for best new American play of 1992, and *Dinner with Friends*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in drama in 2000.

*Time Stands Still* first appeared at the Geffen Playhouse in 2009.

Donald Margulies also teaches playwriting at Yale University.

**II. THE SETTING.** The action of *Time Stands Still* takes place Sarah Goodwin’s converted loft in New York City—a living space she shares with her long-time boyfriend, James Dodd. According to the playwright, the space is “raw, unfinished, resourcefully furnished, with nothing slick about it. The décor reveals a good eye, wide travels, and limited budget. Shelves are crammed with books. . . .”

Lofts like this, located in Brooklyn, or in Manhattan’s old, downtown industrial districts, were originally large, open spaces intended for manufacturing or commerce. With the decline of this kind of economic activity, these lofts became vacant, and eventually were adopted by urban pioneers as cheap and unconventional housing or—since many of these early arrivals were artists—as studio space. Eventually, other settlers in more conventional professions—law, business, finance—followed the original homesteaders, bringing more money into these shabby old neighborhoods, and beginning a process—“gentrification”— which transformed them into desirable, upper-middle class enclaves.

Early in the play, one character tells James that she “loves [his] neighborhood,” to which he replies, with a touch of hauteur, “Oh, yeah? We were here way before it was cool.” What he actually means is that he and Sarah were there when it was still *really* cool—an edgy urban frontier beyond the ken of the well-heeled middle-class types who arrived later. Thus, James identifies himself and Sarah as adventurous people who operate outside the borders of ordinary social life as lived in the established—and establishmentarian—neighborhoods farther east and north.

The profusion of books and the low-budget good taste that mark the loft sharpen our sense of this identity. These are well-educated professionals working outside the high-paying worlds of midtown offices or Wall Street banks, who don’t waste their hard-earned money on material

possessions like furniture or fancy appliances. Instead, they spend what they make on books and travel, choices that tell us they value ideas and challenging experiences more than the conventional comforts of home.

**III. THE PLOT.** As the play opens, Sarah Goodwin, with the assistance of her boyfriend, James Dodd is returning to her loft after a long period of hospitalization for serious injuries she incurred while working as a photo-journalist in an unnamed Middle Eastern war zone. Walking on crutches and bearing extensive shrapnel wounds on her face and upper body, she finds the process of returning to everyday life psychologically difficult and physically draining. After reviewing her upcoming medical appointments, she and James fall into bed, exhausted.

In the middle of the night James wakes up, shocked into consciousness by a recurrent nightmare in which he helplessly witnesses the explosion that caused Sarah's injuries. We learn that James, also a journalist, had been with Sarah in the war zone, she photographing events, he writing about them. However, the stress and fear produced by the violence he faced every day brought on an emotional collapse, causing him to return home, and to leave Sarah by herself to cover the war. Plagued with guilt by this desertion, he now blames himself for Sarah's suffering, imagining irrationally that he could have prevented the explosion had he been present. Sarah tries to assure him that he bears no responsibility for her wounds, and the scene ends as she returns to sleep and James continues to brood over his act of abandonment.

The next scene takes place on a Sunday afternoon, "a few days" after Sarah's return home, and introduces the play's second couple: Richard Ehrlich, an editor at a major magazine that publishes Sarah's photos and James's articles, and his new girlfriend, Mandy Bloom, a woman in her mid-twenties, half Richard's age. The remainder of the play explores the contrasts and conflicts that emerge as the relationships among these four people grow and develop.

First we notice what a cultural outsider Mandy is within the world defined by Richard, Sarah, and James. She arrives bearing Mylar balloons with "Welcome Home" and "Get Well Soon" printed on them—an embarrassing gaffe, since she offers this bad-taste gift totally without irony. Then she fails to get a reference to the movie *Brazil*, a film by Terry Gilliam that was a hipster touchstone in the mid-80s. Next, she browses through James's passport, exclaiming, "God, look at this, you guys have been everywhere. Sudan. . . Congo! . . ." But then she hits a snag: "What's this say?" she asks, requiring James to pronounce the name of the country she can't decipher: Kurdistan. Not only has she not been anywhere special, she is apparently a geographic semi-illiterate as well.

Her line of work further brands her as an outsider: she is an event planner, an occupation the sophisticates in the room look down on as being nothing but a professional party-giver. Sarah notes, mockingly, “I guess you can say I’m into events, too. . . . Wars, famines, genocides. . .”

Undeterred by the condescension (or, perhaps, just not noticing it), Mandy keeps peeling the onion, revealing layer after layer of cultural and intellectual naïveté, even informing Sarah that she prayed for her recovery—religious belief being the ultimate symptom of un-hipness. “Not that I believe in God or anything. ‘Cause I don’t. Not really. I don’t think,” she says, eager to establish her credentials as a non-believer, sort of.

When she visits the bathroom, Richard reproaches his friends for their snobbish attitudes toward Mandy. Despite their dismissal of her as “a lightweight,” he finds her, “guileless. Open. Full of life. . . . She delights me. . . . She’s light. I discovered I *like* those things.”

Later, when she’s alone with Sarah, Mandy reveals a surprising depth of self-awareness—and ardent feeling—about her relationship with Richard. “I come along and it’s like, ‘Who is *she*? Oh, she must be Richard’s mid-life crisis.’ Well I’m not. . . . This is not a passing ‘thing,’ okay? I love Richard. . . . So he’s a lot older than me. So what? . . . The only thing that matters to me is he takes care of me. . . . And one day when he’s old . . . I’ll take care of him. Gladly. ‘Cause he took care of me.”

Meanwhile, we have been learning about the other characters as well. We discover that James is writing an article about refugees in Syria and Jordan, and that Richard is promoting it at his magazine. We also learn that James took up the profession of free-lance journalist in a moment of revulsion at the future that lay in store for him as in his senior year at Stanford University. An economics major, he imagined himself selling bonds on Wall Street, and fled that possibility, ending up in the Middle East, where he met Sarah in a hotel lobby and fell in love.

Richard reveals that he wants Sarah and James to collaborate on a book about their war-zone experiences together, she providing the photographs, he writing the narrative. But when Sarah declares her intention of returning to the war zone, Richard berates her and James as “the Sid and Nancy of journalism,” a reference to a pair of dead, drug-addicted punk rockers. He calls his friends “war junkies always looking for the next adrenaline fix,” and refuses to recognize their obsession as a professional “calling. It’s no calling; it’s more like a death wish.”

Responding to Mandy’s question about the “friend” who was killed in the bombing that injured her, Sarah describes her interpreter, a local native named Tariq, as her “Fixer. That’s what we

call [them] over there: Fixers. Guides. Go-betweens. . . . They take care of everything for us.” Tariq, she explains, had been an engineering student before the war and had taught himself English by reading Hemingway. His wife and two daughters were killed in a mortar attack while he was at school, and he “never forgave himself.” In sum, she says, “He was a lovely, lovely man. . . . And he loved America.”

Since he is interested in creating a book of Sarah’s photographs, Richard asks to look at the pictures she has brought back from the war-zone. Mandy joins him in viewing image after image of destruction and carnage on Sarah’s laptop. Eventually Mandy becomes upset by the pictures, telling Sarah that she finds them “hard to look at,” and asking if that’s what Sarah wants. She responds with an implicit challenge to Mandy’s insular life: “I want you to take pause, yes; and get outside your own head for a minute, and put aside all the bulls\*\*t little dramas we all create to fill our days, and see. . . . the real dramas.”

When a picture of a mother holding her wounded child pops up on the laptop, Mandy is shocked, and asks if the child died. “Not yet,” Sarah responds, “He died a few minutes later.” This sang-froid disturbs Mandy even more than the picture itself, and initiates a heated exchange about the morality of Sarah’s emotional detachment from the subjects of her pictures. Mandy can’t understand how Sarah can just snap pictures of dying people without making any attempt to save their lives, or even to offer comfort or assistance. Sarah’s response emphasizes her pure, professional disinterestedness: “The camera’s there to record life. Not change it. . . . I can’t let it get to me. If I let it get to me . . . I’d want to take away the guns and rescue all the children. . . . That’s not why I’m there. I’m there to take pictures.”

As the scene concludes, Mandy cries over the distressing pictures while Sarah declares her professional objectivity toward suffering.

The following scene begins immediately after Richard and Mandy end their visit. James tells Sarah that Richard and Mandy are planning to marry and have children. Sarah dismisses this decision as irresponsible and foolish for a man of Richard’s age, but James finds the idea unexpectedly appealing. Although they have been together for eight years, he and Sarah have never married an omission in their relationship that he now finds seriously troubling. He proposes that they follow in Richard and Mandy’s footsteps, stunning Sarah with this suggestion. Before giving her answer, she tells James that there is something important he needs to know. But James has anticipated this, because he has surmised correctly that, after he left the war-zone following his emotional collapse, Sarah had had an affair with her “fixer,” Tariq. Sarah, however, won’t let James console himself with the idea that this was just a sexual

fling, emotionally inconsequential. Instead, she asserts, she fell in love with Tariq, a far more troubling piece of information than the simple fact of her infidelity.

As they try to come to terms with these disturbing revelations, Sarah reveals her bitterness over James's departure from the war-zone, and suggests that this abandonment was the cause of her turn toward Tariq. James defends himself by referring to the emotional trauma that precipitated his return home: "Those women, those girls, blew up right there, right in front of me." To which Sarah's laconic reply is, "I know. . . . I counted on you!" This moment is a virtual replay of the immediately preceding scene in which terrible images of human suffering move Mandy to tears, while evoking only professional dispassion from Sarah.

When James terminates this painful conversation by leaving to take a shower, Sarah stumbles and falls. She calls out to James, who doesn't hear her and therefore doesn't respond immediately. In a panic over her own helplessness, she begins to sob, at which point James emerges from the bathroom to help her. "What's the matter," he asks. Her anguished response reveals the depth of her current emotional disorder: "I fell. . . . Who was I? I don't remember. Who was I?"

This moment of confusion and insecurity leads to a passage of intimacy between them. Sarah seems implicitly to have accepted James's proposal of marriage. But as James begins making love to her, but the stage directions inform us that, "We see her face: her mind is elsewhere."

The second act begins four months later, on the day of James and Sarah's wedding. Sarah, James, Mandy, and Richard are cleaning up after the guests have left the reception. James, having drunk deeply, rants about a play he and Sarah have recently seen featuring actors doing monologues based on the sufferings of people in Middle Eastern war zones, the kind of people he has written about from first-hand experience. He dismisses it as "Kitsch. . . . fake, sentimental s\*\*t that passes for truth. . . . People sit there, weeping at the injustice. . . . and go home feeling like they've actually *done* something, when in fact *all* they've done is assuaged their liberal guilt!"

Meanwhile, Sarah's father has headed back to the golf course, telling her in parting that "there was something 'unseemly' about a couple who have been living in sin for nine years throwing themselves a wedding."

A pregnant Mandy declares that she will work "till the baby comes. . . . I'm going to take like a couple of months off." When she tries to engage Sarah in the prospect of also having a child, the photo-journalist declines to enter into the scenario, saying she is too old to become a

mother. And in any case, she explains, she intends to return to her “calling:” photographing horrendous events in the world’s trouble spots.

We learn that James is currently working on an article analyzing the cultural role of horror movies, while Richard invites Sarah to ease her way back to work by accepting an assignment to photograph the inmates of a women’s prison in nearby Westchester. The subject of work leads James to inquire about the status of his article on refugees, submitted weeks earlier to Richard’s magazine. Richard responds evasively, but it soon becomes apparent that his magazine will not be publishing the piece, a discovery that prompts James to accuse Richard of betraying their friendship.

Richard rejects that suggestion, saying that the decision was made over his head, and Mandy leaps to her husband’s defense, noting that he “agonized over this.” But, she observes, it’s really not a particularly important matter because that article wouldn’t “make any difference” to the suffering refugees. What, she asks, are ordinary people like her “supposed to do with this information . . . ? It’s not like I can *do* anything. . . . The people who are killing each other have *always* been killing each other . . . and terrible things are always going to happen.” Rather than focus relentlessly on the world’s irremediable and endless tragedies, she asserts, Sarah and James should “just let yourselves feel the joy. . . . You can’t heal the world. I wish you’d heal each other.” With that admonition, both the scene and John and Sarah’s wedding day end.

The second scene occurs “a few days later.” James is watching a horror movie when Sarah returns home from her day of photographing female prisoners. Over a drink, the couple discusses James’s ideas about horror movies. He sees their violence as a cathartic response to the horrors of the real world, though one which ultimately becomes desensitizing. Sarah mocks the apparent contradiction, and goes on to tell him about her day at the prison.

One particularly menacing inmate, she recalls, confronted her, demanding to know why she was there. At that moment, she tells James, she “was back in Mosul,” a city that was the scene of heavy fighting during much of the Iraq war. There she witnessed a horrific bombing that left human body parts strewn across the urban landscape. Instinctively, she began photographing the scene when, “this woman burst out from the smoke. . . Wild, covered in blood. . . . Screaming! ‘Go way, go way!’” The screaming woman was soon joined by several others, but, undeterred, Sarah kept on shooting. Stopping only to catch her breath and inspect her cameras, she discovered, “There was blood on my lens. . . . Their blood was smeared on my lens.” “I live off the suffering of strangers,” she declares, prompting James to observe that there is no need for them to spend the rest of their lives recording the horrors of war.

Picking up on Mandy's advice in the previous scene to "feel the joy," James discloses that in recent months he has come to appreciate the everyday satisfactions of a homebound life, and that he no longer craves adventure but instead wants "to be comfortable." In fact, he wants to "stay in one place long enough to take root," and to have a child with Sarah. "I won't know how to do it," she objects, "I'm scared." On this uncertain note, the scene ends.

The action resumes later the same night, as James continues to watch horror movies while Sarah sits in bed, absorbed in reading a manuscript on her husband's laptop, "quietly seething." It is the introduction to the book of photographs and essays that Richard is on the verge of publishing. When she finishes, she moves into the living room, in search of a cigarette. She soon begins to quarrel with James, ridiculing his work on trashy movies, and then sharply criticizing him for having written an introduction that she regards as dishonest and unfair to Tariq. The "fixer" should have been the hero of the story, she asserts, accusing James of minimizing his role in their work out of jealousy. This leads to further recriminations, and ends with Sarah asserting that their marriage has been a mistake, and that she can't settle into the child-rearing domesticity that James now longs for. The scene ends with Sarah recalling a "sublime" moment she spent with Tariq after James had left the war-zone, her memory summoning her back to her dangerous and thrilling life on the front lines and away from her relationship with James.

The play's final scene takes place four months later. Sarah, James, Richard, and Mandy are together again, looking over the book of photos and essays which has just been published. Mandy carries her infant in a sling and talks about how her baby has changed her life, making her "hyper-aware of everything," especially of the influence of beautiful and ugly experiences on her developing child. She has decided to forgo returning to work in order to care for the baby full-time: "Why would I do something like totally trivial when I could be home raising my child? I can't imagine anything more important."

She and Richard leave, and Sarah resumes packing for her trip back to the Middle East. The time has arrived for her and James to say good-bye to each other. Sarah is returning to her true love, the life of a photo journalist, while James has found someone new to spend his life with, a divorced woman with a twelve-year-old son—an "instant family," as Sarah observes. There is no bitterness in their parting. Instead, they wish each other "happy trails," bringing their relationship of nine years to an end with a rueful reference to the signature song of Roy Rogers and Dale Evans—television sweethearts from an earlier era who remained married to each other for more than half a century.

**IV THE CHARACTERS.** As in any well-constructed play, the characters in *Time Stands Still* embody sharp contrasts which lead to conflicting ideas and objectives.

**Sarah.** The play's title—*Time Stands Still*— alerts us to the fact that the action takes place during an existential hiatus in the life of one of its main characters, Sarah. Accustomed to constant travel from one violent trouble spot to another, answerable only to the vagaries of contemporary history and the inclinations of her own will, she finds herself as the action begins physically confined by her injuries. No longer the footloose adventurer, she has come to a stand-still, and she is now dependent on James for almost every necessity of daily existence. Then, eight months later, at the play's end, she has fully recovered, and is once again on her way to the danger zones of the Middle East, the clock of her life again running at full speed. Exactly half-way through this time-out—four months after the first scene, four months before the last—she marries James, seemingly embracing his vision of settled domesticity, a life founded on the everyday joys of home and family, including the joys of parenthood.

But Sarah soon realizes that marriage was a mistake, her breakup with James occurring only “a few days” after her wedding. Lulled by her state of suspended animation, she betrayed her deepest inclinations and attempted to become conventionally human. But Sarah can't successfully play the roles of wife and mother because, in some ways, she isn't human at all.

Mandy perceives this when she recoils from Sarah's cold-bloodedness in the face of the human misery she constantly photographs. And Sarah recognizes that her relation to her suffering subjects is notable for its emotional indifference. Her reaction to horrible events, she says, is “automatic. . . . And once I look through the viewfinder. . . . all I see . . . is the picture.” That is to say, she stops seeing the people or their pain, and is aware only of the photograph as an aesthetic object disconnected from what it represents. She also says that in the act of pointing the camera and shooting the picture, “Time. . . stops.” But unlike the standing-still of her eight months of convalescence—a frustrating gap in her life—the moment when she points the camera and shoots the picture is an instant of timeless professional bliss, the secular version of a saint's rapture.

Not that she is unaware of the morally problematic nature of this behavior. She recalls the moment in Mosul when she realized there was blood on the lens of her camera, an image that captures her dependence on human misery for her success as a photographer:

There I was, like a, like some kind of *ghoul* with a camera shooting away. No wonder they wanted to kill me; I would've wanted to kill me, too. . . . I live off the suffering of

strangers. I built a career . . . on the sorrows of people I don't know and will never see again.

Nevertheless, she returns to that career as soon as possible, evidently prepared to accept her self-attributed ghoulishness.

If character is determined by what people do to get what they want, then Sarah becomes most fully herself when she rejects James's plea to settle down and have a family, choosing instead to resume a life punctuated by those timeless moments behind a camera. In a sense, she is choosing Tariq, who is now only a sublime memory standing outside time, over James, the man who tried to capture her in the trap of everyday life.

**James** travels in the opposite direction. Fleeing from the war zone because he was emotionally devastated by the endless carnage he witnessed, he has decided that he will now focus on the ordinary joys of daily life. His problem is that Sarah is unwilling to adopt this new perspective. Given his guilt about abandoning Sarah, he feels the need to remain unquestioningly loyal to her, both as an act of love and an act of contrition.

Like Sarah, who has momentary doubts about the ethics of her career, James also calls into question the nature and value of his work.

We go to these . . . hellholes. . . put our lives on the line. . . For what? Stories that nobody wants? . . . What am I trying to prove? . . . I don't need to dodge bullets to feel alive anymore. Or step over mutilated corpses. Or watch children die. I want to watch children grow.

But unlike Sarah, who ultimately dismisses her doubts and goes back to the "hellholes," James makes a fundamental change in his life. We don't see him make the decisions which lead to this change. Rather it is Sarah who brings their marriage to an end, and it is off-stage that James establishes his "instant family"—telling moves by the playwright, who clearly wants to keep the focus on Sarah and her choices.

**Richard**, like James, decides it is time for him to settle into the dependable satisfactions of straightforward love and domesticity. He has had a long and edgy relationship with a woman named Astrid, who was "brilliant," but difficult. And now he is sick of brilliance:

I've done brilliant. I'm sick of analyzing every goddamn thing to death. Deciding where to go out to eat was like arbitration. Maybe I got off on it once. Not anymore. Too much work. I want something *simple* for a change.

And that something is Mandy, who brings "sunlight" to his life. Meeting her, he says, "Was like being in East Berlin when the wall came down! Like going from black and white to color!"

So Richard's major choice has already been made when the play starts, and in his progress through the plot, he continuously expands on it. He decides to marry Mandy, and to have a child with her, providing the example of the kind of new life that James tries to achieve.

This constitutes a reversal in his relationship with James and Sarah. As he says in his toast at their wedding, "I've lived vicariously through you for years; I got to see the world without jet lag." They have been exemplars of a life he never dared to embrace; now he has become an exemplar for James.

**"Mandy,"** says the playwright, "surprises because people think they know exactly who she is from the moment she appears (Sarah and James certainly have her pegged). Gradually, they begin to appreciate that this guileless young woman is much more formidable than they had given her credit for. Mandy becomes the inadvertent catalyst for the subtle shifts that occur in the play. She is a completely different kind of woman than Sarah so she provides a delicious contrast."

In other words, Mandy is Sarah's foil, an individual whose presence sets-off and emphasizes the contrasting qualities of another character. Unlike Sarah, Mandy is unsophisticated, impulsively emotional, and warmly responsive to other people. We see this in her reaction to Sarah's photographs, which move her to tears. She can't understand how someone could dispassionately snap pictures while a child was dying, and when she herself has a daughter, she becomes vehemently protective of her. She even tries to shield her from,

people shouting ugly words. . . . language that never offended me before but all of a sudden I was imagining these toxins . . . entering her little ears and winding through her pink and new auditory canal and into a brain that's never heard such sounds. . . .

Even more emphatically than her decision to have a child, her choice to forgo a career differentiates her from Sarah. As the latter heads off to another hotspot, Mandy heads for home, her baby—rather than a camera—hung around her neck in a sling.

**V. THEMES.** The play explores a number of important questions about the relationship between real life and its various representations in words, pictures, and plays. As the playwright says in an interview with Ariel Ramchandani, “It questions, among many other things, how we represent and digest unimaginable events, whether in photography, in writing, or in popular culture.”

Thus, James rails against a play that presents monologues about suffering people in the Middle East without bringing about any change in a horrible situation. He also questions the value of his work as a writer, producing reportage about the plight of refugees that never gets published. What good do his efforts do?

Mandy questions the value of Sarah’s pictures, asking what she is “supposed to do with this information. . . . It’s not like I can do anything.” On the other hand, Sarah imagines she is administering a moral tonic to her viewers by getting them to pay attention to disagreeable realities outside their spheres of experience.

*Time Stands Still* is also, as Margulies notes, “a domestic love story—a relationship drama” which is “very much about the choices and compromises we all make—in love, in work, and . . . in war.” However, the author is quick to point out that this is “not a political play, or at least not intentionally.” Neither is it “an Iraq play,” even though there “are references to things associated with the war in Iraq.”

## **VI. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.**

1. Where do you think Sarah was when she received her injuries?
2. Have you ever seen a photograph in a newspaper or on television that changed your opinion about something, or that made you take action of some kind?
3. Should Sarah have tried to help the people she was photographing?
4. Are journalists supposed to become involved in what they report on, or just observe people and events objectively?
5. Do you think new stories in the press or on radio or television are mostly objective, or are they mostly biased in some way?

6. Why does Sarah insist on returning to the Middle East despite the dangers she will face and the injuries she has already suffered there?
7. Do you sympathize more with James or with Sarah? Why?
8. Does your opinion of Mandy change during the course of the play? If so, how?
9. Does your opinion of other characters change as well? If so, which characters and how?
10. Why does Sarah go through with her marriage to James?