

Love/Sick

By John Cariani

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A STUDY GUIDE

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THE AUTHOR. Born and raised in Presque Isle, Maine, John Cariani graduated from Amherst College in 1991. He did his first work in theater in the public schools of Presque Isle; sang in the chorus of a community theater production of *Fiddler on the Roof* while working days as a landscaper in Aroostook County; saw his first non-musical play—*The Cherry Orchard*—at Portland Stage Company during his senior year in high school; played clarinet for the Amherst College production of *Sweeny Todd*; and premiered his first play, *Almost, Maine*, in the same place where he first saw a play, at Portland Stage Company.

Cariani majored in History at Amherst, but the lure of the theater overpowered his original plans for a teaching career. Following graduation, he spent three years as an acting intern at

StageWest in Springfield, Massachusetts. His next move took him to New York, where he snagged various roles in theater and television.

His major break as an actor came in 2004, when he was cast in the role of Motel in a Broadway revival of *Fiddler on the Roof*. This performance earned him a Tony nomination and won him the 2004 Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Featured Actor in a Musical. (The Outer Critics Circle is made up of reviewers who write for publications outside New York City.)

It was also in 2004 that *Almost, Maine* had its premiere production in Portland. Two years later, in January, 2006, the play moved to New York where it opened Off-Broadway to warmly welcoming reviews, with the *New York Times* noting “its whimsical approach to the joys and perils of romance.” In 2008, the play was again seen in Maine, at The Public Theatre. And in 2010 it headed the list of most-produced plays in America’s high schools, knocking Shakespeare off the top spot, a position he had occupied continuously since 1937.

Cariani’s second play, *Cul de Sac*, opened Off-Broadway in May of 2006. A darker work than *Almost, Maine*, it was described by *The Times* as “charming” and “witty,” but also, “macabre.” His next play, *Last Gas*, has been produced at Portland Stage Company and the Stonington Opera House.

Love/Sick has followed a similar production path, appearing at Portland Stage in the spring of 2013 before its current staging at The Public Theatre.

Cariani has also had a successful acting career in film and on television. He has performed with Robert DeNiro in *Showtime*, Christopher Walken in *Scotland, PA*, and Ed Asner in *Elephant Sighs*. On TV, he has been featured in the widely praised series, *Homeland*, and has made frequent appearances on *The Onion News Network*, and *Law and Order*.

THE SETTING. *Love/Sick*, as the author explains, “is a . . . ten-play cycle about love and loss . . .” Each of the ten plays takes place at “7:30 on a Friday night in an alternate suburban reality.” In other words, we are to imagine that the actions of the ten plays, which are performed sequentially, are in fact happening simultaneously in the same general location: somewhere in suburban America.

But why is this an “alternate . . . reality?” Probably because, as the playwright tells us, *Love/Sick*, “should feel like a realistic and naturalistic play—until it’s not. . . until everything is strange and surreal and absolutely not normal.” It presents an “alternate” version of suburban

life in that it depicts suburbia—often associated with blandness and uniformity—as a landscape convulsed by repeated explosions of bizarre behavior and intense emotion.

The author envisions the actions of eight of the ten plays as taking place in various rooms of a generic suburban house, one of those “Little boxes on the hillside / Little boxes all the same” conjured up by Pete Seeger. However, the condescension of that song is belied by the emotional intensity and variety that Cariani reveals behind those “ticky-tacky” walls. The sameness of the setting from play to play stands in sharp contrast to the diverse experiences and personalities we encounter in that cookie-cutter suburban house.

The social setting is also important. As Cariani tells us, “The people in *Love/Sick* dress well.” Which is to say they are not the rumples, blue-collar suburban types familiar from *Roseanne*, with their cheap dresses, t-shirts, and blue jeans. These are more upscale professional people, not only well-dressed, but also well educated and well employed. They have the high expectations of personal happiness that often come with affluence, and a ready access to the therapeutic vocabulary of emotional self-analysis .

THE PLOT. We are accustomed to having a play tell us a single long story, sometimes with sub-stories that are related to the main narrative. Last season at The Public Theatre we saw *Time Stands Still*, which tells the story of a failed relationship between two journalists, one obsessed with war in the Middle East, and the other committed to settling down to a peaceful life at home. We also saw *The Last Romance*, which tells the story of two people looking for love late in life—and almost finding it. Each of these plays focuses on one or two characters who pursue consistent objectives throughout the course of the action, beginning at a certain point, struggling against various obstacles in the middle, and reaching a clear outcome at the end.

Love/Sick doesn’t work like that. Instead, as we have noted above, it is composed of ten vignettes, each no more than ten or twelve minutes, all set in the same location, and all unfolding at the same time. In this way it closely resembles the last play by John Cariani produced at the Public Theatre, *Almost, Maine*—which comprised eight short plays, all set in the same Maine town, and all happening simultaneously on a Friday night.

The author tells us that each play shows us a

couple at a crossroads in their relationship. But they work together as a whole. The relationships progress with each play. Each couple we meet is a bit more mature than the previous couple, and each relationship is at a slightly more advanced stage. As a result, there’s a cumulative effect. A larger arc and a sense of forward progression take

over as the parts come together to create a satisfying whole, one that chronicles the life cycle of a typical relationship. . . .

Nine of the ten vignettes in *Love/Sick* are limited to two characters—while the tenth gives us a fleeting glimpse of two others. The characters in nine of the ten short plays are couples romantically linked to one another, the exception featuring a woman waiting to hear from her boyfriend and a singing telegram man who delivers a message from him. Thus, in ten short scenes we are introduced to twenty different characters, with each of whom we spend only a few minutes. With one exception, we never see the same characters twice because these vignettes are all happening at the same time—and nobody can be in two places at once. The exception occurs when the characters we meet in the first scene cross paths with the two we meet in the final scene—in the same place at the same time.

So this is not the kind of continuous story with a logically connected train of incidents and extensively developed characters that we most often encounter in the theater. Instead, what holds *Love/Sick* together—apart from the fact that all the plays take place in the same suburban location at the same moment—is the fact that each of these short scenes is about the hazards we encounter in the pursuit of love. What gives the plot its unity, in other words, is the structural principle of theme and variations. Every scene is about love, and especially about love's power to make you sick—not only heartsick, but sometimes physically ill. But every scene looks at a different aspect of this focal subject. And every scene embeds the pain in rueful laughter.

For example, in the first short play, titled “Obsessive Impulsive,” a young man and a young woman, both nameless, “*catch sight of each other*” while shopping in a big box store at the mall, “*and take each other's breath away. It's electric. From out of nowhere, they kiss—a big, long, impetuous, sloppy, aggressive long . . . kiss.*”

Uh, oh. Love at first sight, and all that, but isn't this a bit extreme? The answer is: yes. What's driving this couple into one another's arms isn't conventional boy-meets-girl attraction, but a psychological disorder that afflicts both: “obsessive impulsive behavior.” This semi-fictional disease (it doesn't appear in the official manual of mental illnesses, though various impulsive forms of sexual behavior do) leads its victims to act immediately on any idea or desire that pops into their heads. The passionate embrace in the middle of the mall is not like the poetic ardor of Dante's Paolo and Francesca—an all consuming love enacted eternally, even in the darkness of Inferno. Instead, as might be said of all passion, it's a symptom of an illness.

A sickness is a disorder that attacks its victims. Nobody seeks out an illness; instead, the disease finds its target and attacks. Passion is analogous. The word “passion” is related to the word “passive,” both deriving from the same Latin root meaning “to suffer,” or to be “subject to.” We speak of Christ’s Passion, not because He eagerly sought out His crucifixion and death, but because they were imposed on Him by sinful humanity.

Both passionate partners in the shopping-mall have been struggling against their illness, engaging in therapy whose goal is to reduce the ratio of things they actually do to the “things that you think of to do, that you just . . . wanna do.” The more “wanna-do’s” resisted, the better the ratio. But for the therapy to be successful, they must engage in the constant repression of their impulses. Performing any impulsive act is like an alcoholic having the fatal drink: it weakens the resolve to resist, and leads to more of the same. As he (M) tells her (W):

M: But you know what? You’re kind of messing things up for me right now.

W: Yeah. You are too.

M: Because I’m getting better.

W: So am I. . . .

M: You’re making me worse!

W: Yeah! So are you!

Despite this realization, they resume kissing—again and again. But knowing that this behavior is only trapping them more hopelessly in the obsessive-impulsive vortex, they resolve to tear themselves away from each other, heading off in opposite directions. But they don’t get very far. They stop, turn, and simultaneously declare, “I love you.” But is it love, or just the disease? Or is there any difference? As the scene ends, *“They turn and part. They stop. They turn to each other, and the moment they start walking toward each other: Blackout.”* Will this emotional pendulum swing forever?

In many ways, this first playlet provides a template for the nine that follow: in each, love’s promise of joy and fulfillment turns into pain, a sickness of the heart which may or may not ever be healed.

In “The Singing Telegram” a woman expecting a creative marriage proposal instead receives a sadistic musical rejection.

In “What?!” a declaration of love makes a man deaf, tongue-tied, and numb.

In “The Answer” a woman, on the day of her wedding, realizes that she never actually responded to her fiance’s proposal of marriage. So, she makes him pop the question again, and—devastatingly for him—the answer is “no.”

In “Uh-Oh” a woman claiming to be murderously bored with her marriage pulls a gun on her husband, threatening to kill him. But it’s only a water pistol, and she laughs herself silly at the success of her practical joke. Nothing to worry about—probably. But, as the scene ends, she appears in the kitchen doorway holding an enormous carving knife.

“Lunch and Dinner” introduces us to a couple unwinding after their long day at work. Things move along routinely until Kelly, answering Mark’s question about what she had for lunch, answers, “sex.” The cat is now out of the bag, and it proceeds to tear up the furniture. He then informs her that he has recently had the same dish for dinner. Each has been “eating out” because as far as sex is concerned, no home-cooking has been available. They try to fix that with amorous advances, but find themselves instinctively recoiling from one another. Not the recipe for connubial success. And so they sit side-by-side as the scene ends, realizing they are in deep marital trouble.

“Chicken” shows us a man who wants a divorce because things in his marriage aren’t like they used to be: the thrill is gone. He even blames his wife for introducing herself to him in the first place, thus beginning their relationship, and thereby imposing the inevitable disappointments of reality on what would have been the eternal promise of fantasy. She denounces him for being an existential coward and walks out the door. But she comes back a moment later. Will they reconcile? Or is he too much of a chicken? Whatever the case, their lives are going to be forever different from the way things were in the halcyon days of their past because she has news for him: she’s pregnant. Joy erupts—for the moment.

In “Where Was I” Abbie is rummaging through her garage looking for something she’s lost: herself. She’s joined by her partner, Liz. As they search, what they discover is that the domestic arrangements they have made for sharing responsibilities for child care and work outside the home have actually divided them from each other and from themselves. In fact they have come to hate each other—sometimes, anyway. But as the search continues, Abbie rediscovers herself in Liz’s eyes, and with that discovery she realizes that she’s still in love. “We’ll figure this out, right?” she says, questioningly. For the moment, it seems as if they might.

What's forgotten in "Forgot" is having a baby. On her 39th birthday, it dawns on Jill with painful clarity that the target date she had set for her and Roger to have a child has arrived, but the baby hasn't. This stirs a kind of panic in her: she really wants to have that kid. Having a child is her version of the pursuit of happiness, and she feels absolutely entitled to fulfillment. Roger, on the other hand, responds tepidly to the idea of becoming a father. Suddenly she sees her husband as an obstacle to her right to happiness and heads for the door. *"Does she stay or does she go? We'll never know . . . because the lights fade. Or maybe we catch a glimpse of her leaving."*

"Destiny," the final play in *Love/Sick*, brings us back to the big-box store of the first scene and shows us another chance meeting there of star-crossed—or, better, double-crossed—lovers. Jake and Emily have been divorced for some time, have remarried, and are both detached from their second spouses. He has divorced again; her husband, whom she was about to divorce, has died in an automobile accident. Instantly they're re-attracted to one another. Maybe this accidental meeting is their destiny, an opportunity helpfully provided by fate for them to start over again, to get things right the second time around. Is it or isn't it? Is this encounter Kismet, or dumb luck? Would starting over be a romantic leap into the arms of happiness, or an idiotic plunge back into the same emotional swamp they fled from years ago? The latter, they eventually decide. But just as they reach that conclusion, they spot the impulsive couple from the first play, M. and W., whose paths have yet to cross. Would a fresh start with a third partner be the happy destiny both Jake and Emily seek? Maybe. So, rather than hook back up with each other, they decide to make a play for the Impulsives, Emily for M. and Jake for W. But before they can make their moves, M. and W. spot each other for the first time and, as we recall, are immediately off and running, deeply breathing the toxic fumes of love.

THE CHARACTERS. There are twenty characters in *Love/Sick*, all different, but all sharing some common traits. In fact, one passage of dialogue from the last play, "Destiny," captures many of the objectives and attributes of the inhabitants of Cariani's "alternate suburban reality."

EMILY: Jake: you could hardly hear it the first time I said I loved you!

JAKE: Well . . . you're the one who got cold feet!

EMILY: Just for a second, just for a second! But I went through with it.

JAKE: Well maybe you shouldn't have. It's not your thing.

EMILY: What?

JAKE: Marriage. It bores you. I bored you. You said.

EMILY: Well . . . it wasn't fun. You weren't fun. I wanted more.

JAKE: Yeah, I guess you did, because you went out and got more, didn't you. . . .

EMILY: Yeah.

JAKE: Real classy.

EMILY: Well, only because you went out and got more, first! And you're the one who said you wanted out.

JAKE: Yeah, because we were not at all what I thought we'd be!

EMILY: Yeah, because you weren't good for me. I lost myself when I was with you, lost track of who I was. . . . And let's face it: We just didn't see eye-to-eye on some really important stuff. I mean, you didn't want kids and I did—

This passage is a virtual anthology of the problems encountered by the would-be lovers and dissatisfied spouses of the preceding nine plays: love-deafness, cold feet, boredom, disappointment, infidelity, disagreement about having children, loss of self. And the fact that Jake and Emily are seized by an impulsive desire to jump into the sack together within moments of their initial re-meeting repeats the experience of the first impulsive couple we meet at the mall.

So what do we notice about Jake and Emily, and about their fellow characters in the other plays? Maybe most conspicuous is the way these people view their relationships—in or outside of marriage—as sources of “fun,” as vehicles of self-fulfillment, and as safeguards against boredom. And any marriage or love affair that fails to deliver on these expectations seems pretty easily disposable. There will be some pain or regret, of course, but not enough of either to stand in the way of everyone's pursuit of unblemished happiness.

But there's a paradox in the room: the pursuit of happiness tends, most of the time, to lead to the “sickness” named in the play's title. There's a touch of Tantalus about all these characters: the more urgently they reach for the golden fruit just above their heads, the farther it moves from their outstretched hands.

THE THEMES. Let's define “love-sickness” as any combination of emotional, psychological, or physical derangements provoked by people's erotic attachments to one another—whether consummated or not.

Which makes love-sickness perhaps the most pervasive theme in western art and literature. Starting with the rape of Helen and its epic consequences, love-sickness has wound its way through Greek drama—think Medea; medieval adventure—Lancelot and Guinevere; Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies—take your pick; Spanish literature—Don Quixote and Dulcinea; and on and on. In the modern world we meet love-sickness in the plays of Strindberg, where characters simultaneously love and hate each other; in Hollywood's romantic comedies,

where heartbreak almost always turns to happiness; and on television, where love-sickness is the fundamental material of nearly all soap operas and many situation comedies.

In its earlier manifestations, love-sickness was usually played out within a cultural context where marriage loomed as a sacred and inviolable bond. In comedies, lovers typically healed their love-sickness through matrimony: see *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In tragedies, husbands or wives seeking erotic satisfaction outside the bonds of matrimony might face dire consequences. In *Othello*, for example, a man murders his wife on the mere suspicion that she has been unfaithful to him.

In the nineteenth century, as marriage was subjected to skeptical demystification by playwrights like Ibsen and Strindberg, the institution nonetheless continued to exert an awesome emotional power over men and women. In *A Doll House*, Nora walks out the door leaving husband, children, and a fraudulent marriage behind her, but she must first work her way through an agonizing inner struggle to come to that decision.

The author tells us that his play, taken as a whole, “chronicles the life cycle of a typical relationship, from meeting through divorce. . . .” It is striking that the underlying assumption of *Love/Sick* is that “typical” relationships end in divorce. This is a universe far distant from the past matrimonial worlds we surveyed above, where the expectations for a “typical” relationship were expressed in the vows of the traditional wedding ceremony, in which couples promised to persist in love and faithfulness toward each other, regardless of life’s ups and downs, so long as they both should live.

By contrast, the relationships in *Love/Sick* seem, by and large, provisional and transient, subject to annulment on any grounds, however slight. We often hear it said that recent generations are the products of a world of shortened attention spans, where the perpetual need for stimulation results in a heightened susceptibility to boredom and distraction.

The playwright, in fact, informs us that his characters are riding a perpetual emotional roller-coaster: “When they feel joy, they are as joyous as can be, so that when they crash, it is devastating. . . . When they get sad, they are as sad as can be, so that when they bounce back to joy, it is a wonderful ride. . . .”

Either soaring up in happiness, or nose-diving into dismay, these characters are in a state of constant emotional volatility—a condition that tends to work against enduring and stable personal attachments. Hence the recurrent break-ups, or near break-ups, or unresolved possible break-ups, of the ten plays.

Love-sickness is an old disease; this play shows us a vivid set of modern variations on the theme, suggesting that the emotional maladies depicted in its ten scenes are the disturbing products of the world of instant gratification and disposable relationships we now inhabit.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. Why is the play called *Love/Sick*? What is the significance of the slash in the middle of the title?
2. Why does the playwright describe the location of the play as an “alternate suburban reality?” What’s “alternate” about it?
3. A number of the scenes end without resolving whether the couple portrayed will stay together. Why does the playwright repeat this device several times?
4. What do you infer about the character of the person who sent the singing telegram?
5. What do you think of the decision made by the bride-to-be in “The Answer?”
6. What will the woman do with the knife at the end of “Uh-Oh?”
7. In “Lunch and Dinner” Kelly inadvertently admits to having an affair. Why does she do that? Have you—or has anyone you know—ever made an embarrassing admission by mistake?
8. In “Where Was I” Abby says that she has “lost” herself. In the context of the play, what do you think that means?
9. Two of the short plays take place in a big-box store in a shopping mall—a place like Walmart or BJ’s. Why does the playwright choose this location? Is a shopping-mall a likely spot for beginning a romantic relationship?
10. Does the play leave you feeling optimistic or pessimistic about people’s chances of finding and maintaining long-lasting attachments?