

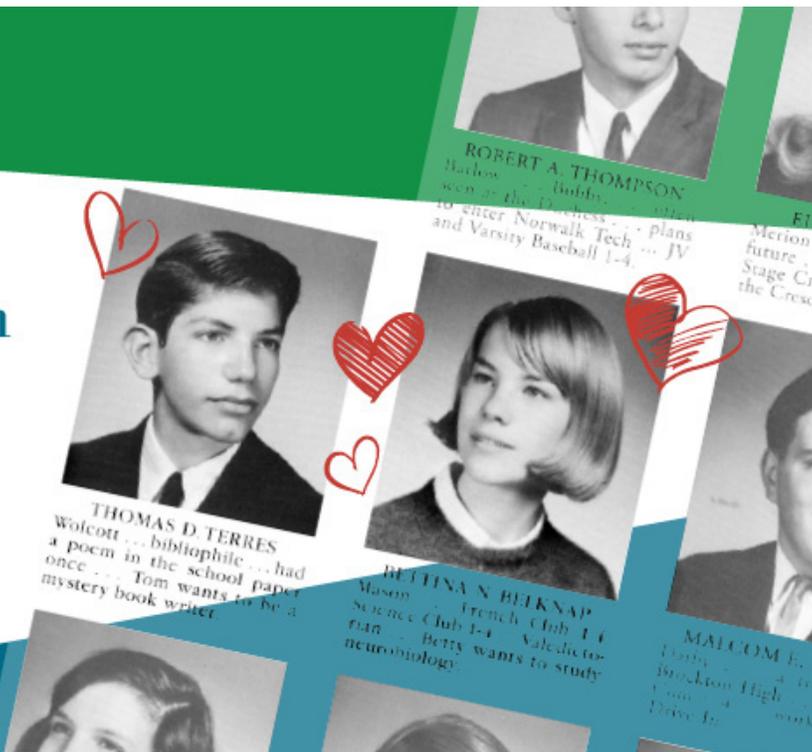


A Study Guide by Dr. Rachel Price Cooper  
Instructor of Theatre, University of Southern Maine

# The Midvale High School 50<sup>th</sup> Reunion

By Alan Brody

May 4 - 13



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# **Midvale High School Fiftieth Reunion**

## **By Alan Brody**

**PRODUCED BY THE PUBLIC THEATRE**  
**MAY 2018**

**A Study Guide by Dr. Rachel Price Cooper**  
**Instructor of Theatre, University of Southern Maine**

**THE PLAYWRIGHT.** Alan Brody (1937-) was born in Brooklyn to Leon Kauffman and Ruth (Parkoff) Brody. Although Brody is most known as a highly prolific, award winning playwright, he actually began as a novelist. He acted professionally after receiving his BFA from Columbia University in 1958, studied with legendary acting coach, Uta Hagen, and was an early member of the San Francisco Actor's workshop. After about five years working as an actor, he decided to pursue his PhD in Literature at Columbia where he had also received his MA in 1964.

His first novel, *Coming To* (1973) centers around a woman's recovery after an attempted suicide. This was followed by *Hey Lenny*, *Hey Jack* (1975) which takes the form of a long letter from Jack, a concert violinist, to his older brother Lenny, his former manager. The extended correspondence reminisces about their shared coming of age within Brooklyn's Jewish community in the 1940s. In rehashing their past, Jack hopes to uncover the true nature of their relationship.

Alan Brody describes returning to drama as a writer in 1976 after he was given the opportunity to help rebuild the theatre department whilst teaching literature at a liberal arts college.<sup>1</sup> He achieved tenure at Skidmore College before becoming Professor of Theatre at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1988. He served as MIT's Associate Provost for the Arts from 1995-2006.

His play, *Invention for Fathers and Sons*, was the inaugural winner of the Rosenthal Award at the Cincinnati Playhouse in 1989 and *The Company of Angels* won the Eisner Award Streisand Center for Jewish Culture in Los Angeles before its world premiered at the New Repertory Theatre in Massachusetts in 1993.

In a 2014 interview, Brody explains what keeps him coming back to the theatre:

I'm struck by the magic "what if." What if two men meet and they're both 48 years old and they're father and son and now they can talk to each other as men? (*Invention for Fathers and Sons*) What if a woman teaching a college course in a maximum security prison falls in love with one of her students? (*Five Scenes from Life*) Or I'm struck by the memory of someone whose unique energy I've always wanted to capture and share with an audience (*The Housewives of Mannheim*). Or someone tells a personal story that grabs me and I know instinctively there's a play in it (*The Dog with the Head of a Dragon*). Or someone's laugh on the subway reminds me of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://archive.is/20121203231354/http://crazybiswadip.blogspot.com/search/label/INTERVIEW-ALAN%20BRODY>, Accessed March 26, 2018.

someone I was in love with years before (the piece I'm working on now that has no name because I still don't know what it's about).<sup>2</sup>

Brody's work often draws from his own experiences. Some pieces focus on growing up as a member of the Jewish American Community in the 1940s and 50s. It also often explicitly delves into memory. Some pieces draw from his work with students in the STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) at MIT. For instance, in *Midvale High School Fiftieth Reunion* Bettina is a neuroscientist who specializes in memory. Memory also plays a large part in Brody's own dramaturgical process, both in the germination stage, as noted above, but also as a theme he continues to revisit.

In *Invention for Fathers and Sons*, a father and son miraculously meet when they are both forty-eight years old. Together, they trace through multiple generations of their Jewish-American family in the hopes of uncovering some kind of truth from the subjective recesses of individual and collective memory. This draws from the fact that Brody's own father died when he was forty-eight and the playwright was fifteen. The play, on some levels, acts upon Brody's fantasy that he could know his father as an adult. In another interview, Brody describes writing is a process of self-discovery.

The old, tiresome advice to young writers is "Write about what you know." What we neglect to tell them is that they know more than they think they do and that the way to find out what they really, deeply know is to write and to leave themselves open to surprise [...] That's why I write. I write from the clues of what I already know in order to find out what I didn't know I knew.<sup>3</sup>

We see this personally anchored dramaturgical process at work in *Midvale High School Fiftieth Reunion*. Not only does the play thematically deal with the concept of memory as mentioned above, but it is also set amongst Brody's contemporaries—people who came of age in the post-War era of the 1940s and 50s.

As will be discussed in more detail below, this was a period of great prosperity in the United States. It was also an era characterized by a sense of highly uniform social roles; men were expected to fulfill the American dream by working outside of the home whereas woman realized their societal destiny as mothers and domestic laborers. The conservative ethos and strict gender binaries of the 1950s would eventually give way to the counterculture of the 1960s. Although the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement, and second wave feminism placed pressure upon societal inequities, preconceived notions about gender have continued to retain a certain degree of cultural currency. Brody's play allows its characters to reflect upon their past choices. In doing so, they get a sense of when they acted out of a sense of personal desire and fulfillment and when they acted out of a sense of social obligation. Through this process of remembrance, they discover what they didn't know they knew.

**THE SETTING.** The core action of the play occurs in 2004. As indicated by the title, the audience finds itself at the fiftieth reunion for Midvale High School's graduating class of 1954, complete with white tablecloths, a dance floor, and a banner welcoming the prodigal alumni home after half a century out in the world. Beyond the central staging area, there are two distinct memory spaces where key moments from Tom and Bettina's separate pasts play out to bring us to their shared present as first-time reunion

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/4223>, Accessed March 26 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

attendees. These memories play out for the most part chronologically, beginning during their senior year of high school, through Bettina's fraught application to a male-dominated graduate program, and into flash point moments from Tom and Bettina's rocky romantic relationships. The exception to the chronological memory structure is disrupted by Tom's final memory, which occurs in high school and sparks a realization about why he actually came to this reunion in the first place. In some senses, the memories are cued or jarred by Tom and Bettina's conversations with their classmates in 2004.

The rest of the reunion participants are invisible, but we glean much from a sampling of Tom and Bettina's ones-sided dialogue with their unseen classmates as they progressively back towards one another at the onset of the action. The soundscape of the unseen "Class of 2005 Rainbow Dance Band," the scattered applause, and the disembodied voices of the event's joint Masters of Ceremonies help to create the sense of a busy event whilst preserving the fact that the audience is specifically experiencing this reunion through the intimate lens of the play's main characters.

As noted above, the play depicts several flashbacks into pivotal moments from Tom and Bettina's separate lives. The first occurs in a high school science lab that is empty aside from Bettina who is completing a frog dissection assignment some time during her senior year. The second occurs in what Tom's soon-to-be-ex-wife describes as "a musty bookstore in Maine" during the 1970s. The third occurs in an academic officer's office at a competitive research University. We briefly return to Tom's bookstore in the 1980s before traveling to Bettina's home with her husband Carl, shortly before his death eight years ago. The final flashback is the only one to break the chronological pattern. Tom accesses the much more remote memory of when Elinor DeHaviland attempted to engage with him in study hall. She mentions that people think he's peculiar, and possibly even a gay communist because he doesn't care about being popular. Each of these episodes will be discussed in further detail below in regards to plot.

**THEMES.** At their core, homecomings are confrontations between the past and the present. The premise of return and shared remembrance is also rife with potential conflict. Old wounds surface, divergent experiences call personal myths into question, possibilities assumed lost can be returned. If we take David Ball's popular argument that all dramatic action arises from conflict to heart, then it is unsurprising that Alan Brody chooses to situate his play amidst a milestone reunion.

Memory, or rather the unreliability of memory, comes up conversationally between Bettina and Tom throughout. The concept of memory also asserts itself in the very structure of the play, which jumps back and forth between the present reunion and flashbacks. Even as those memories play out, their reliability is called into question. Just after we witness Tom and Ellen's breakup, Tom mentions that he is sure that similar conversations had occurred throughout their doomed ten-year marriage, but that they had all fused together into one pivotal moment in his mind to mark the end of his and Ellen's life together.

There is also the benefit of hindsight to consider. Although Tom was unsuccessful in his marriage, and unmoved by a young employee's declaration of love for him whilst he was in his forties, his ability to recollect allows him to be open to a relationship with Bettina, a woman who was entirely out of his league in high school. Even though Bettina was the popular valedictorian and Tom had yet to come into his own, they are both anomalies amongst their more conventional classmates. Bettina, a neuroscientist, and Tom, a successful mystery writer and independent bookstore owner, stand out in a sea of insurance

salesmen, many of whom have already retired to Florida. Both Tom and Bettina have also been more successful professionally than romantically. As the flashbacks proceed, we learn that both Bettina and Tom tried to fulfill the marital expectations of their generation with varying degrees of success. Bettina realizes that her career was always her first love, causing repercussions with her husband and children, just as Tom's true affection was centered on literature and his bookstore rather than the women in his life.

The theme of conformity pops up throughout the play. Early on, Tom makes an observation, "We were all conformists in 1954, even the ones who wore sneakers and thought they weren't." Though Tom's comment is intended as a lighthearted quip to get Bettina to open up about her work, the highly structured social expectations of 1950s America permeate the play. The United States entered into a time of great prosperity following WWII (1938-1945). Not only did the United States emerge on the victorious side of the war, but it had not suffered the onsite destruction experienced by its European allies. A sense of inevitable success permeated the middle class American Dream. As Tom notes, "One of the things I always remembered was how we were all golden—that the class of '54 was going to conquer the world because we were the best ever." The can-do mentality of white, middle-class American was near its height when Tom and Bettina graduated from high school.

At the conclusion of WWII, the standard family model was reinstated with a vengeance. The overwhelming cultural assumption was that women would be homemakers and men would be breadwinners. During the war, gender roles were briefly jostled when women entered the workforce to occupy jobs vacated by men in the armed forces. The ubiquitous return to this highly gendered division of domestic and professional labor seemed intent on dispelling the inconvenient truth that women were perfectly capable of performing vocational duties usually reserved for the opposite sex. We see the confining natures of this gender binary negatively affect both Bettina and Tom throughout the play. Blatant sexism prevents Bettina's admission to a top tier graduate program in the sciences on the grounds that she would walk away from her career when she inevitably married and had children. Tom's first wife ultimately leaves him because she is frustrated by his passiveness (a trait thought to be unmanly).

Bettina's first flashback to the senior year of high school is rife with assumptions about what boys and girls *should* do. When Bettina has her encounter with Bobby Thompson in the Biology lab, he implies that she is being anti-social by working on an assignment rather than participating in a communal show of school spirit: "You should go to the pep rally. People will think you're disloyal." Bettina similarly educates him about social expectations, "You don't ask a girl out on Friday to go out on Saturday" and "Seniors don't go out with juniors." This sparks a discussion about why Bettina doesn't already have a date. Bobby posits that it is because, "A lot of guys don't like smart girls." When Bettina tells him not to expect a "homerun," he responds, "only guys are supposed to know about that."

Similarly, in the flashback where Ellen leaves Tom, there is a sense that she finds his decision to leave New York to start a book store in Maine, to be somewhat unambitious. His passive and non-confrontational nature, traits that are inconsistent with the aggressive, profit-driven version of masculinity that Tom came of age in, also seem to irritate Ellen. The concept of social expectations comes up again when Ellen confesses that she accepted Tom's marriage proposal because, "Girls were supposed to be engaged by their junior year. Time was running out." Ellen essentially admits to marrying

Tom so that she didn't have to finish college, which she hated. The reference to the MRS degree comes up again when Bettina goes head to head with a sexist academic officer. He notes that most girls don't go beyond undergraduate education once they have snagged a husband and claims that educating an attractive girl like Bettina is a "waste of resources" given that she will inevitably recede into her destined role as a wife and mother.

**THE CHARACTERS.** The play centers around Bettina Belknap, a widowed neuroscientist who conducts research at Johns Hopkins, and Tom Terres, a divorced, independent bookstore owner and highly successful mystery writer who publishes under the pseudonym, Amanda Prescott. Both are now in their sixties. Although they ran in different circles in high school, they find that they have much in common as adults. Beyond a shared quick wittedness, they have both followed less conventional paths, and have focused on their work to the detriment of their personal relationships.

Bettina, we learn, was the class valedictorian, class secretary, and a prom queen nominee who Tom describes as one of the "popular girls." Her drive and proclivity towards the physical sciences is evident when we come upon her in a high school biology lab, working on a frog dissection after hours. We also see that she is a risk taker in that she opts to lose her virginity to Bobby Thompson while the rest of the school is at a pep rally. We see that Bettina is rather blunt in her interactions with men. This is most notable in her extended conversation with Tom, but we also see the younger Bettina frankly interact with Bobby Thompson, a dismissive academic advisor, and finally her husband Carl, who reveals that he is terminally ill. The necessity of Bettina's toughness makes particular sense when we see her battle the sexist academic advisor who acts as a personification of the institutionalized discrimination that has plagued Bettina throughout her career. When Tom asks if Bettina ever wore a beehive, she simply responds, "I was too busy protesting."

The only moment we see cracks in Bettina's blunt pragmatism is in regard to her family. When Tom asks about her children, Bettina responds, "Two. In their thirties. On their own. No pictures." She then immediately shuts down the topic. Later, in her flashback with Carl, we learn a little bit about why. As they are deciding where to have dinner, Carl confronts Bettina about giving their adult son, Ricky, five thousand dollars. It becomes clear that this is not the first time that she has sent him money despite the fact that he has a gambling addiction. Carl advocates a tough love solution whereas Bettina can't seem to say no. We learn that their elder child, Stephanie, agrees with Carl. Bettina accuses Carl of favoring Stephanie, his "logical, bloodless daughter," over Ricky thus contributing to his low self-esteem. Carl states that Bettina is acting out of guilt for loving her career rather than her children or him. Bettina resists, but Carl, who reveals he only has a few months to live, has made his peace with Bettina merely caring for him. In fact, he admits that he was always "grateful" to Bettina for marrying him in the first place.

When the audience meets Bettina at the reunion, she has been a widow for eight years. She is still passionately pursuing her research at Johns Hopkins and she seems to still regard romance with a certain degree of pragmatism. This is indicated by the fact that she frisks Tom to gauge the state of his health when they dance. She admits that this is her standard operating procedure.

Tom Terres has quite a different disposition. He admits to being an almost compulsive introvert, a quality that he doesn't particularly like about himself. At one point, he confesses that he is prone to getting the shakes in social situations. When Bettina has trouble placing Tom, he admits that he mostly kept to himself in high school. He didn't go to the prom and he didn't participate in any clubs or sports. When Bettina presses him, he mentions that he had a poem printed in the literary magazine about how he "hated keeping to himself." We also learn that he was in Advanced English via a conversation with one of the unseen reunion attendees.

Tom met his ex-wife, Ellen, when they were in college. They lived in New York for a time before moving to a university town in Maine where he started an independent bookstore—a fact that Ellen resents. She also seems to generally dislike Tom's appeasing and non-confrontational nature. In fact, his intense dislike for fighting seems to be a major factor in the failure of his and Ellen's relationship.

When Ellen's ire recedes momentarily, she asks if they ever actually loved one another. Tom responds, "I don't know. I think so. You were the first girl I ever wanted to marry. I was happy when you said yes." Ellen admits that although she thought Tom's laidback nature was "cool" at the time, she agreed to marry him in order to get out of college. When Ellen insinuates that Tom would be more upset about losing his bookstore than his ten-year marriage, he responds simply with, "I'll never give up the store," to essentially confirm her suspicions. He also states that she can have everything aside from the store and the books.

Tom's second flashback occurs ten years later in the bookstore after his secret career as a mystery writer has taken off. He is completely oblivious to the fact that his young employee is in love with him. She, in turn, is completely oblivious to the fact that he is actually Amanda Prescott, the writer whose books she is simultaneously stacking and berating on the grounds that the writer is a "woman who doesn't know anything about how other women actually feel." Tom bristles a bit but presses his young assistant to tell him what is bothering her. When she admits that she is in love with him, he is flattered and surprised, but unmoved. He assures her that she'll "get over" it and sees no reason why she can't continue working at the bookstore which she also loves. He is also genuinely confused about how she could "love two things at once." This is an important statement, and one that makes Tom more in line with Bettina than he initially seems. Both have had trouble loving other people as much as their work.

As the night proceeds, and both Tom and Bettina become increasingly aware of the growing spark between them, they also begin to notice that they have a bizarre number of miscellaneous things in common: neither had crushes on anyone in high school, their favorite color is blue, their favorite actor is Robert Mitchum, their favorite season is fall, their favorite song is *Blue Velvet*, and they both hate television.

Tom's final flashback to when Elinor DeHaviland confronted him in study hall about being "peculiar" prompts a revelation about why he actually decided to attend this reunion. Ultimately, he viewed it as a kind of new beginning, "I had this crazy idea about what it would be like to start again, not make the same mistakes now I'm older." Bettina reveals that she too has made mistakes. Most notably, never really loving anything or anyone besides her work. Tom reveals that he has only really loved his books. This prompts them to experimentally try looking at one another as if they were in love. As will be discussed in more detail below, this experiment goes much better than either of them had expected.

**THE PLOT.** As noted above, the central action of the play occurs at the Midvale High School class of 1954's fiftieth reunion. The play opens on Tom, adjusting his recently acquired name tag while negotiating a drink in his other hand. He is bumped into by the invisible Mark Rothbein. Tom makes a joke about accelerated English which appears to fall flat and Mark fails to recognize Tom. The music pauses and the voices of Warren Chrisman and Wilma Bucky interject with information about refreshments. Tom bumps into Helen Vandermann next and is shocked to find that she knows who he is. He turns around next to see Jim Borio, who it takes Tom a minute to place. Tom's is surprised to discover that Borio, who often tried to recruit him for the Young Christians Club, actually had a crush on him and has been married to a man for the past thirty years.

Bettina enters on the opposite side of the room. She greets several classmates in passing before being approached by Dickie Wolfson, her extremely smart, former lab-partner. She is shocked to learn that he is a remodeling contractor rather than a scientist. They are interrupted by Harriet Wendelman, former hockey enthusiast turned motivational speaker. Bettina catches up with Freddie Hostadter, a former cool guy who wore his cigarettes rolled up in his sleeve, as he passes by with his granddaughter.

Tom returns with a new drink and both he and Bettina continue to have separate rapid-fire conversation with various classmates. The music subsides and both make way for the imaginary people leaving the dance floor. As they do so they back towards one another. They turn just before bumping into one another. Tom identifies Bettina immediately as the "Valedictorian. Class Secretary..." but Bettina has trouble placing him. He admits that he was pretty much a loner. The only thing of note that he can think of is having had a poem printed in the literary magazine about how he disliked being a loner. They both confide that this is the first reunion they have attended. Bettina, perhaps because her husband died eight years ago and she's been forcing herself "into situations like this just to keep going." Tom says that he "wanted to do a reality check on [his] memories."

Tom's reason for going to the reunion prompts Bettina to reveal that she is a neuroscientist who specializes in memory, something she often keeps to herself as it has a tendency to stop whatever conversation she has been participating in. Tom, however, is genuinely interested. He presses her on explaining why memory is so unreliable in scientific terms. She ultimately relents and explains that long-term memories are stored in the pre-frontal cortex where they get mixed together with other long-term memories. When short-term memories move from the hippocampus to the pre-frontal cortex they are intermingled with other long-term memories and thus rendered unreliable.

Tom responds that he remembers how the class of '54 was "golden." In his reflection, everyone was going to take the world by storm. Success seemed imminent. Confronted with his classmates fifty years later, he is struck that so many of the golden generation actually became insurance salesmen. This prompts Bettina to ask Tom what he does for a living. He reveals that he has owned an independent bookstore for the last forty years, a fact which impresses Bettina. Tom goes to refill their drinks.

While Tom is off, Bettina is approached by another invisible classmate. It turns out to be Bobby Thompson. Bettina seems shocked and a little bit aggressive before the lights bang up on her memory space to reveal a young Bettina, working on a frog dissection assignment in the Biology lab outside of class hours. Bobby Thompson comes looking for her. He asks her to go to the pep rally with him but she

refuses on the grounds that she has work to do. He asks if she wants to go to a party with him the next night. Bettina refuses again on the grounds that she could never accept such a last-minute invitation despite the fact that she is actually free. Bobby thinks that Bettina doesn't already have a date for Saturday night because the other boys are intimidated by how smart she is. This is a problem that Bobby does not share. He reveals that Bettina's friend Serena Kunkel told him that Bettina thought he was good looking which Bettina views as an act of betrayal. Bobby asks to stay with Bettina in the lab. As she explains the frog dissection, he continues to make advances. He kisses her and she eventually responds. The lights shift back to the reunion as they are sinking to the floor. From Bettina's side of the conversation, the audience learns that Bobby hasn't aged well, that he married Bettina's classmate, Roberta Parsons, and that he is a retired insurance salesman. He promptly moves on after she tells him that she is a neuroscientist.

A message from Warren Chrisman, the unseen master of ceremonies, comes through the loud speaker to announce the dance competition that will decide the King and Queen of the Fiftieth Reunion. Tom returns with the drinks and Bettina fills him in on her run-in with Bobby Thompson. She reveals that she lost her virginity to him on the floor of the science lab senior year. Tom reveals that he is feeling so lucky that he ran into Bettina when everyone else seems to have come as a couple. This prompts Bettina to probe a little bit into Tom's romantic history. When he confesses that he was married, but that his wife had "fled," the lights come up on Tom's memory space where the audience encounters the end of his ten-year marriage to Ellen.

The memory takes place in Tom's bookstore in Maine, a place that his soon-to-be-ex-wife clearly detests. Tom is immediately conciliatory which further enrages Ellen. He offers up the idea of having a kid which Ellen views as a trap. He counsels Ellen to stay until she figures out what she wants to do. When she refuses, he suggests that she could go back and finish college. Ellen states that she hated college, a fact that contributed to her accepting his proposal so that she could leave school. Tom admits that he had known this was coming for the past five years and Ellen notes that he'd be far more devastated about losing his store than his wife of a decade. Tom confirms this when he replies, "I'll never give up the store." The scene ends with Ellen accusing Tom of only caring about books rather than people. He confirms this again by stating that she could have everything except for the store and the books in the divorce. The flashback ends with Tom wishing Ellen good luck. When the lights come back on at the reunion Tom is musing about the fact that he remembered Ellen telling him that she was leaving him as if it were an isolated incident, which probably wasn't accurate. He believes that he had actually combined many memories of other times into one Ur-memory to mark the end of his marriage.

An unseen Warren Chrisman approaches to recruit them for the dance contest. Tom states a little too quickly that they are not a couple and immediately apologizes to Bettina before informing Warren that he does not dance. This conjures up a memory of being beaten out for prom queen by Ginny Burkhalter for Bettina. In which case, Tom says that he's willing to help Bettina out in the dance department. The two ponder over the notion of peaking in high school. When Tom asks Bettina when she peaked, she says that she doesn't think that she has yet. She is still incredibly driven in her work. When Tom jokes that she is holding out for a Nobel Prize, she rather seriously responds, "That would do." She also admits that her ambition is partially fueled by a sense of revenge.

This prompts the lights to come up on Bettina's memory space. Bettina is in her twenties and she is meeting with an academic officer in his fifties to discuss her admittance into a graduate program at an unnamed research university. Despite having an academic record that is superior to the men being admitted into the program, the academic advisor informs her that she will not be accepted because she is a bad investment as an attractive young woman. He makes a slew of discriminatory blanket statements like, "Girls can't do hard science," calls Bettina emotional, and warns her against getting "a reputation for being unreasonable."

The lights shift to signal a return to the reunion. Tom comments on how Bettina's eye's changed when she said the word "revenge" and wonders if it was a memory. Bettina confirms this, impressed by his insight, and abruptly asks him to dance. She is surprised to find that Tom is actually an excellent dancer. He reveals that he took lessons with his ex-wife, but that she became angry when Tom was a better dancer than she was. Bettina returns to the question of Peak experiences. Tom admits that it was probably when he won his first Edgar, which he describes as the Pulitzer for the mystery genre. Turns out, mysteries are the only thing that Bettina reads other than academic articles. Tom admits that he began publishing under the pseudonym Amanda Prescott just after his divorce. Impressed, Bettina tells him that she is a huge fan. This revelation leads to a lull in the dancing and Bettina says that they can sit down because she has gathered the information she needed. Apparently, Bettina uses dancing to frisk potential suitors for medical equipment. This makes sense when we later learn about her husband's illness and the fact that he was twenty years her senior. Tom has passed the test with flying colors and he is actually flattered that Bettina is showing such an interest in him. Bettina offers to get another round of drinks. Left alone, Tom cannot believe his good fortune.

The lights of the memory space come up on a middle-aged Tom, stacking Amanda Prescott novels alongside a female employee in her twenties. Unaware that Tom is actually the author, the young woman slams Amanda Prescott's work. Her main point of contention being that the writer has no concept of women's emotional life. She even goes so far as to say that the protagonist reminded her of a high school boyfriend who "turned out to be a real loser." The irony in this is that the young woman is working up the courage to tell Tom that she is actually in love with him. Although flattered, Tom fails to reciprocate her affections. He is also genuinely confused about how she could possibly love multiple things at the same time. When he assures her that she will "get over" being in love with him, she observes that he is "as bad as Amanda Prescott" in failing to comprehend human emotions. She prophesizes that he will fall in love someday and that she wishes she could be around to observe the calamity.

The lights come back up on the reunion as Bettina is returning with the next round of drinks. She relays that the bar is crowded with people talking about their children and grandchildren. This prompts Tom to ask Bettina if she has any children. She very succinctly responds in the affirmative before making it clear that the subject is closed. An announcement comes over the PA system that the buffet is now open and Tom asks about Bettina's husband. This is another subject that Bettina closes down on the grounds that it is "Too soon."

The lights come up on Bettina's memory space to show her at home with her husband Carl. She is in her late fifties and he is in his seventies. The conversation about where to have dinner is initially benign, but it quickly takes a serious turn. Carl keeps referring to himself as old while Bettina insists that he is merely

retired. Carl asks about Bettina's day in order to change the subject. She responds that her research team has secured another three years of grant funding. When Carl continues to be combative, Bettina presses him about what is bothering him. He reveals that he was going over their accounts that day and he discovered that Bettina had sent five-thousand dollars to their twenty-six-year-old son, Ricky. As the conversation progresses, it is revealed that Ricky is a compulsive gambler who frequently comes to Bettina for money. Carl believes that she is enabling him out of guilt for not loving him. Bettina protests, but Carl insists she has never really loved anyone or anything besides her work.

Bettina tires of the conversation stating, "How could you be wrong? You're older and wiser than I am" which prompts Carl to reveal that he is also dying. He has just been informed that he has an untreatable form of pancreatic cancer. His doctor, who is also his oldest friend, has given him mere months to live. This was the reason he was going over their accounts. When Bettina asks why he hadn't said anything about not feeling well earlier, Carl states that he didn't want to distract her from her work. Bettina is stung by the repeated insinuation that she loves her work more than him. He maintains that she is comfortable and fond of him, which he appreciates, but that her eyes light up when she talks about her work. Bettina continues to insist that she loves him, but Carl is resigned. He states that he was always grateful that she married him in the first place.

The lights come back up on the reunion. Tom admits that he is shaking with nervousness like he did in high school. When he asks Bettina if girls ever got the shakes, she replies that she thinks they were a result of having crushes, which she never had. Tom admits that he has never had a crush on anyone before either. Tom launches into a rapid-fire round of questions about Bettina's favorite things. Turns out that they share the same favorite color, actor, season, and song. They also both hate television. They are interrupted by Warren Chrisman and Wilma Bucky announcing the results of the evening's questionnaire. As they announce the winners for most grandchildren, Bettina exclaims that the memories are all coming back. When they announce the longest married-couple, Bettina asks how it makes Tom feel. He replies, "Like I want to keep my head down again." Bettina forbids him to do so and the lights come up a final time on Tom's memory space.

A high school-aged Tom is doing research for a report on the industrial revolution during study hall when Elinor DeHaviland approaches him on what she views as a goodwill mission. She pulls out a movie magazine and attempts to engage him in a conversation about actresses. When Tom fails to manufacture enthusiasm about Grace Kelly, Elinor asks him if he is a communist. She informs him that people find him strange because he shows no interest in being popular. Not only do they find him "peculiar," but there are rumors circulating that he is either a communist, a homosexual, or both. She also makes it clear that she is talking to him at the risk of her own reputation. Elinor insists that she is just trying to be nice and tells him that he should try asking someone out to prove that he is not gay. Tom asks if Elinor wants him to ask her out on a date. Elinor claims that to even ask her that is an insult and reiterates that she was just trying to be nice. As she leaves, she notes that Tom has "a lot to learn about people." This echoes what Tom's ex-wife and his young co-worker have told him in previous flashbacks.

The lights come back on to the reunion where Wilma Bucky is announcing a special award "For the person who still looks the most like they did in 1954!" Bettina is horrified when her name is called but manages to wave and smile. After she sits down, Tom admits that he actually deliberated quite a bit

over whether or not to come to the reunion. He actually was viewing it as a catalyst for a new beginning: "I had this crazy idea about what it would be like to start again, not make the same mistakes now I'm older." An invisible Wilma Bucky approaches Tom and Bettina to try to convince them to join the dance contest yet again. They resist until they find out that the prize is a donation to a scholarship fund in the winners' names. They decide to go for it.

After Wilma walks away, Tom asks Bettina about what her mistakes were. She recalls how the only thing she has ever really loved was her work and that she has never really let herself go enough to love another person the way her husband loved her. She remembers how Carl would look at her and she knew he was only thinking about her. She asks Tom if he ever looked at anyone else that way. He admits that he has not. He proposes that they give it a try; they will look at one another as if they were in love. They are shocked to find that this goes quite well. Just then, the band strikes up and the masters of ceremonies announce the dance contest. Bettina and Tom are competing against four other couples for the King and Queen of the reunion.

The others are eliminated one by one as they move from foxtrot to rhumba. As they dance, they discuss the logistics of travelling back and forth between Baltimore and Maine to see each other on weekends and holidays. They move from a lindy to a cha-cha and notice that there is only one other couple left. Tom asks if they are going to remember this moment, to which Bettina responds, "We're doing it already." Bettina remarks that Baltimore would be a lonely place to retire and the voice of Warren Chrisman announces the final elimination of James Kelly and Marion McAllister Kelly. Tom and Bettina begin to dance the last waltz as the lights fade.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.**

Outside of when they converse together, the audience is only privy to Tom and Bettina's sides of their interactions with fellow classmates. How does that effect the way that these two characters are characterized?

Tom and Bettina have both struggled with loving other people as much as their work. How do they seem to define love? Is it possible to love multiple things at the same time?

How do societal expectations effect the characters in this play? How are those societal expectations specifically tied to gender?

Do you feel sympathy for Tom's ex-wife Ellen? Why or why not?

How does Carl's statement that Bettina didn't truly love her children effect the way you feel about her? Do you think your reaction would have been different if Bettina were a man?