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Things MY MOTHER Taught ME

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Things My Mother Taught Me

By Katherine DiSavino

PRODUCED BY THE PUBLIC THEATRE

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

THE PLAYWRIGHT. Katherine DiSavino was born in Pennsylvania in 1986. Growing up, she was no stranger to theatrical comedy. Her parents, Cynthia (Cindy) and David DiSavino, both professional actors in New York, had moved to Pennsylvania to form a comedic theatre company in 1984. They were married that same year and continue to operate the Rainbow Dinner Theatre today.

In one of those serendipitous moments where art and life intersect, *Things My Mother Taught Me* was originally produced at the elder Savino's Rainbow Dinner Theatre in 2012. Katherine co-directed her play about a young couple renegotiating relationships with their respective parents. She also cast her own mother and father as Karen and Carter Keegan, the parents of Olivia, the female lead.

DiSavino's first play, *Nana's Naughty Knickers* (2010) centers around a young woman who moves in with her grandmother for a summer in New York only to discover that her dear nana is operating an illegal lingerie business out of her apartment. Most recently DiSavino co-wrote *Seasonal Allergies* (2013) with Kevin Mead. Her third play focuses on a heartbroken man who is staying with his sister through the holidays as he goes through a divorce. Though the emotional turmoil is real, the comedic ensemble of family and neighbors allows for optimism to ultimately cut through. Across all of her plays, zany familial dynamics and heartwarming quirks abound, traits which have lead critics to compare her work to that of Neil Simon.

Currently based out of LA, DiSavino also writes for film and television. Her original pilot, "Blackmarsh" landed her on the Tracking Board's "Young & Hungry List" and she has pitched several film and television projects while consulting with screenwriters on feature scripts and television series that are in development.

THE SETTING. The entirety of the action is set within a two-bedroom apartment in a newly gentrifying neighborhood in the midwestern city of Chicago, Illinois. Neighborhoods like West-town, Pilsen, Humboldt Park, and Logan Square would fall under this category—young people flock to find reasonably priced apartments in two and three flats near to trains and an increasing number of bars and restaurants, but they also encounter a residual amount of gang activity and crime in one of the nation's most geographically sprawling and statistically violent cities.

At rise we see Olivia attempting to wrestle an oversized chair into her new living room through an uncooperative doorway. She and Gabe resort to using a fire escape once the front door is blocked by the now-stuck chair. When the window to the fire escape opens, the stage directions indicate that the sounds of the city intensify; traffic, honks, and various fragments of conversations reinforce the busy, urban setting.

The fact that Olivia and Gabe resort to using a fire escape strengthens the impression that they are a few floors up. This and Wyatt's first lines, "How many floors up are they? Hail Mary and Joseph!" reiterate that the walkup apartment is just that. There appears to be a shared hallway and landing just outside of the apartment door where characters enter and exit. Initially they must do so over the stuck chair, but eventually with normal ease once Wyatt saws away a large portion of the doorframe, much to the chagrin of Max, the building super.

Aside from the doorway that leads in from the landing and the main living space, the kitchen is also visible to the audience. This is where Lydia exerts some of her most concentrated cleaning efforts. It is also where she has trouble letting go of some of her previous authority as household matriarch (this will be revisited below in the discussion of THEMES). Immediately offstage, we are aware of two bedrooms and a bathroom. Beyond the apartment, the unseen space is made up of other apartment units and the street below. Further still, we are aware of Chicago's sprawling grid of a city-scape.

Chicago is a very socioeconomically and racially polarized city with the majority of its residential wealth concentrated downtown and on the North side. There are pockets of affluence in Southside neighborhoods like Hyde Park, Beverly, and Bronzeville, but much of the city's South and West sides experience higher crime rates, lower incomes, and a lack of basic amenities, like grocery stores, hospitals, and well-maintained roads. Thus, the idea of Gabe, Wyatt, and Carson taking it upon themselves to track down the stolen van in this unfamiliar city, is incredibly dangerous and ill advised. In other words, it is right for Lydia, Olivia, and Karen to be alarmed.

THE PLOT. The play centers around Olivia Keegan and Gabe Lawson, a couple in their late twenties who are moving in together after relocating from New York to Chicago. As the play begins, Olivia is struggling to wrench an oversized armchair through an uncooperative doorway. The building super, Max Mirowski appears to introduce himself, but provides no help in regards to the stuck chair on the grounds that it is not a problem with the building itself. He also warns Olivia not to leave the moving van full of their belongings unattended in this particular neighborhood.

Olivia races to the window to call out to Gabe below. He is gone, but she screams at a man ogling their unattended possessions. Gabe appears carrying a large box. He pragmatically climbs over the chair and announces his presence. Gabe's entrance startles Olivia, causing her to bang her head into the window sash. As he comforts her, she lightly reprimands him for stepping on the new chair as it is the first item that they ever picked out and purchased together—their first shared piece of furniture for their new home. Its symbolic value is stressed even further when we find out that it is the shiny new replacement for the decrepit orange chair that Gabe has smuggled into the truck from New York despite Olivia's protests. Olivia worries that it might be a bad omen for their new cohabitation venture, but Gabe playfully suggests that they leave the chair as is and build their decorating concept around it a la HGTV. When Olivia covers her face with her hands, he suggests she have a snack from the crate of Cocoa Bites he also brought from New York. Olivia expresses incredulity at his packing an entire crate of cereal for the cross-country move, but Gabe maintains that it is the best cereal in the world and one of the last to include prizes in each box.

DiSavino crams in many mundane details about this couple in these first moments; their furniture squabbles, Gabe's favorite cereal, and Olivia's insistence that hiring movers would be bourgeois. Although we might dismiss these as pieces of comedic minutiae, intended to merely introduce the audience to this young couple, they resurface with enhanced significance to the plot as the play continues.

Planting objects that will resurface later in the plot is reminiscent of a dramatic technique referred to as "Chekhov's gun." Anton Chekhov partnered with Moscow Art Theatre's Constantin Stanislavski in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and wrote highly detailed ensemble plays crammed with everyday minutiae. Characters ramble on about clocks, bookcases, and sweating too much even as cataclysmic events happen all around them. These seemingly random details are actually incredibly significant and rife with subtext. Chekhov argued that nothing onstage should be incidental or without meaning. He also argued that if a gun appeared in the first act then it had to go off by the final act. Although this is an extreme example, the sentiment is the same—if you draw the audience's attention towards particular objects at the onset of the play, they should resurface later with some purpose. DiSavino foregrounds the chairs and the cereal. She also plants that leaving the moving van unattended in an unknown and unpredictable neighborhood might be precarious indeed.

Gabe calms Olivia down, and they revert to playful banter. Gabe awkwardly asks Olivia whether she has heard from her parents today and Olivia expresses surprise at having not received any moving day phone calls from either set of parents. Dramatic irony occurs when the audience knows something that a theatrical character does not. In this case, they are quickly clued into the fact that Gabe has some sort of information regarding his and Olivia's parents that Olivia is not privy to. The conversation moves back to the predicament of moving all of their belongings in from the van when there is a chair blocking the front door. Gabe suggests that they use the fire escape for the smaller items and deal with the larger items later.

Moments after Gabe and Olivia exit via the offstage fire escape, heavy footsteps accompanied by the voices of Wyatt and Lydia Lawson are heard on the landing. They appear behind the wedged chair, excited and out of breath. After Wyatt fails to push the chair through the threshold, Lydia uses him as a stepping stool to catapult herself over the chair without leaving any footprints. She calls out, "Hello!! Surprise! Gabe! How's my baby boy?!" but receives no response. She helps a stuck Wyatt over the chair, gives him a hug, and admonishes him for leaving a footprint behind. Lydia orders Wyatt to find a dishtowel to clean up the dirt on the grounds that "The first

furniture a couple purchases together is momentous.” Wyatt does as he is told momentarily, but becomes distracted when he finds a bag of potato chips. When Lydia asks him what their first piece of furniture was, he pretends to remember, claiming, “it was the most comfortable... thing in the world.” Lydia responds, “It was a coffee table, you unromantic old poop.” They kiss and continue to banter when they hear a loud thud followed by Olivia and Gabe urgently speaking to one another and grunting from the bedroom. They freeze, horrified that they have walked in on their son and his girlfriend having sex. Wyatt and Lydia are horrified as everything that is being said about moving heavy objects, reads as erotic dialogue.

Gabe and Olivia emerge, laden down with a box and a large bag of tools. Olivia sees Lydia and drops her box. The fact that Gabe knew they were coming is hammered in by the fact that he winks at his mother and whispers “You are REALLY early.” When Lydia asks, “What were you two doing? We didn’t interrupt anything, did we?” it dawns on Olivia that Gabe’s parents thought that they had just walked in on them having sex. After this is cleared up, Olivia expresses shock that they drove all the way to Chicago from Connecticut to “help.” She then notices the footprint on the chair. She tries to conceal that this is causing her extreme anxiety whilst Lydia reprimands them about how they should have hired movers. Olivia responds through clenched teeth, “You sure did, Lydia.” As Lydia continues to hen peck, Olivia passive aggressively slams cabinet doors. This scene sets up a dynamic that continues throughout the rest of the act. Lydia takes over and Olivia internalizes her annoyance at being told how to set up and run her own home while Wyatt and Gabe somewhat haplessly attempt to mediate the tension but generally staying out of the way.

When Olivia suggests they go rest at their hotel, Lydia exclaims, “Why would we book a hotel? You’ve got two bedrooms right here?” When Gabe remarks under his breath that this is not the plan they discussed, Lydia steamrolls him, proclaiming that it will be like a “slumber party.” There is a beat interrupted by Wyatt sawing off a part of the door frame. Olivia and Gabe are horrified as he tosses a large chunk of their apartment to the floor and pushes the chair into the room. Max appears with a simple, “Uh-oh,” before the blackout.

Scene 2 begins several hours later. The apartment is still suspiciously empty and it becomes clear that Lydia has mandated a preemptive deep clean before the move in can continue. Wyatt attempts to reel in Lydia’s compulsive sanitization process. It becomes clear that her behavior is rooted in her anxiety about the fact that Gabe and Olivia are moving in together without first being engaged or married. Wyatt reminds her that the two have been dating for seven years, while they had gotten engaged after six months and married within a year. Further, despite the difference in framing, Olivia and Gabe keep choosing to be together. This calms Lydia momentarily.

Lydia’s cleaning decree becomes comically excessive when Olivia returns from the store and Lydia refuses to let her urinate in the toilet on the grounds that a new seat has not yet been purchased. Instead, she makes a “Pee-Pee pad” out of paper towels and accompanies Olivia into the bathroom. While they are offstage, Wyatt asks if Olivia suspects anything. He also asks if he has the ring on him. Gabe reveals that only himself, his father, and Lydia’s father are aware of his plan. He also proudly announces that he has it hidden in the moving van where Olivia will never find it. A somewhat shell-shocked Olivia emerges. Lydia and Wyatt leave to purchase a new toilet seat. Olivia acquiesces that like Lydia, her own mother has some quirks. Gabe agrees a little too quickly. As the conversation progresses, Olivia reveals that she has not been entirely forthright with her mother about the fact that she and Gabe are cohabitating in Chicago. When she expresses relief that her parents aren’t also due to arrive Gabe becomes uncomfortable. Just as Gabe is demonstrating the fact that their moving in together is something to joyfully proclaim rather than hide by climbing on to the kitchen counter and doing just that, Olivia’s parents, Karen and Carter Keegan walk in.

After awkward hellos, in which both Gabe and Carter do a terrible job of covering the true purpose of this visit, Olivia is left onstage with her parents. Karen is trying to appear upbeat about this new situation, when she is clearly shocked and unenthused. She expresses that this is a time when Olivia should be out there experimenting rather than committing to someone before she turns thirty. Carter manages to extricate himself from the situation to join the Lawsons in the bathroom while mother and daughter are distracted. Once they are alone, we learn that Karen, at the urging of her own mother, married a man while she was still in college. It ended in divorce and she eventually recovered and remarried Olivia’s father. As a result, she has always tried to encourage Olivia towards independence in her young life. We learn that whenever Olivia initially tried to tell her mother about Gabe when they first started dating in college, Karen changed the subject in fear that Olivia was repeating her previous mistakes. Olivia proclaims that this is why she stopped informing her mother about her relationship. There is a beat and the rest of the cast peers out from the bathroom to inquire about dinner.

Carter notices a man outside “admiring” their Nissan Juke. This spurs a few pointed questions from Karen about the crime rate in the area. Olivia begins preparing soup and salad for dinner. When Wyatt asks for meat, Olivia says they can make bacon in the morning. It then becomes uncomfortably clear that Carter and Karen are jealous that Wyatt and Lydia are staying with “the kids” while they had booked a hotel. Gabe extends the invitation to them as well despite Olivia’s reservations. The women continue to prepare for a tension filled dinner. Karen is still bristling from being left out of the loop and the accusation that she has not made the effort to get to know Gabe. She is also still full of reservations about Olivia being too young to be in a long term, committed relationship. Wyatt and Carter escape under the premise of moving more furniture out of the van.

While gesticulating with a knife, Karen launches into a diatribe about how Olivia doesn’t need to take moving in with Gabe so seriously on the grounds that if it doesn’t work out, no big deal, they aren’t married. Lydia remarks, “But they soon will be.” Outside there is the sound of shouts and screeching tires. Gabe reprimands his mother who begins crying. She admits to Karen that he is proposing this weekend. Lydia, also crying proclaims that they are “too young to get married.” Just then Wyatt and Carter return to announce that the U-Haul has been stolen. Carter is already on the phone with the police. Olivia begins to cry. Gabe announces that Lydia ruined his marriage proposal surprise. He also indicates to his father that beyond all of their earthly possessions, the engagement ring was also hidden in the van. Gabe exits announcing that he is going to find the van. Wyatt and Carter follow him out. The women stand motionless for a beat until Max pops in again asking, “Hey—where’s your truck?” Olivia cries louder causing Max to repeat his catch phrase, “Uh-oh,” before a blackout ends the act.

Act II begins an hour later. Karen sits on a blanket in the middle of the living room alongside two empty wine bottles and the remnants of dinner. Lydia is asleep in the chair and Olivia alternates between pacing, checking the window, and remaining annoyed at her mother. Max appears with a bottle of Polish honey vodka to thank them for feeding him dinner. As he pours them shots, he encourages them to talk through their problems before taking a phone call. Karen tries to maintain an air of calm, but Olivia explodes about Karen’s disapproval and the severity of having all of one’s possessions stolen, especially things like the brand-new mattress and curtains that she and Gabe had painstakingly picked out. A shift occurs after this outburst. Karen quietly admits that she thinks Olivia and Gabe made a good investment in buying curtains together. When Olivia states that she really loves Gabe and wants to marry him, Karen admits that she has expected as much for some time.

The reconciliation complete, Lydia, who has been feigning sleep for some time, gives up her ruse and joins the conversation. The three women proclaim their love for one another and share a group hug as Max re-enters. They all have another shot of honey vodka to celebrate. Max explains that he has enlisted his brother, a Chicago cop, to get on the case of the missing U-Haul. They are all touched. When Max states that he will also fix the hole Wyatt has sawed into their doorframe, Olivia begins to cry out of sheer happiness “even though this is a horrible day.”

Just as things are looking up, a dejected Gabe appears. He silently makes his way to the bathroom and shuts the door. Karen explains that when Gabe is upset, he lays in the bathtub without any water in it. Upon Karen’s insistence he comes out. He explains that he was at the police station. At this point it becomes apparent that Wyatt and Carson are not with him. In fact, no one knows where they are. While Lydia and Karen go into a frenzy trying to locate their phones and track down their husbands, Olivia questions Gabe as to why he didn’t return her calls and whether or not he was going to acknowledge his outed plan to propose that weekend. When Gabe responds, “Honestly, I don’t think I can anymore,” Wyatt and Carter burst through the door, clearly intoxicated and belting pop songs. They explain that when they couldn’t catch up with Gabe, they drove around for a while looking for the truck. When they didn’t succeed, they found a bar right by the apartment and went in under the premise of seeing if anyone had seen anything in regards to the truck. When that yielded nothing, they proceeded to imbibe in Whiskey and pickleback shots. When questioned as to why they didn’t try harder to find Gabe, Wyatt explains that his son was so upset about the truck that they thought they would give him some space. It is then revealed that not only was the ring in the truck, but that Gabe had emptied his bank account in order to purchase it for over twenty thousand dollars. When Olivia explodes over him spending that kind of money before consulting her, he explains that the proposal was supposed to be his big moment. According to him, “the guy only gets to do two things that are important to the wedding. They get to buy the ring. And they get to propose.”

Wyatt intervenes, stating that he and Carter need a moment with Gabe alone. Lydia grabs the honey vodka as she and Karen escort an a nearly crying Olivia to the bedroom. Wyatt and Carter explain that Gabe’s wish to begin a life with Olivia when he isn’t at financial rock bottom is responsible, but that he is also being entirely unromantic. They also explain that no one wants to hear a completely picturesque engagement story—they want to hear about the ones that went mortifyingly wrong.

Carter shares that when he proposed to Karen, he ended up in the emergency room, and Wyatt reminds him that a proposal is not a wedding. Gabe laments the fact that he is still without a ring when an epiphany has him ripping through the boxes of Cocoa Bites. He loops in Carter and Wyatt about the prizes and the three men forage until Gabe triumphantly shouts, "I FOUND ONE!" All of the commotion draws the women out of the bedroom. Olivia has clearly been talked down by Lydia and Karen, claiming that they all think Gabe is being very responsible when he pulls her into a dramatic embrace. He goes down on one knee, holds up a small bag with a plastic ring inside it, and launches into his proposal speech, listing all of the things that he loves about her. She accepts and they kiss.

Wyatt and Carter decide to celebrate by booking some hotel rooms to give the couple some time alone. Max appears, announcing, "I have many surprises for you." Just then, a truck horn beeps outside. Before they can celebrate too much, he explains that the truck is empty... mostly. He pushes on a dejected looking, old chair. Olivia laughs at how even criminals thought his chair was terrible, but Gabe drops to his knees with tears in his eyes. He explains that this was the one place Olivia would never have looked, and after digging around in the ancient stuffing, reveals a truly gigantic ring. Just as Gabe attempts to take off the plastic ring, and replace it with the over-twenty-thousand-dollar rock, Olivia stops him. She states that she loves him and doesn't need fancy jewelry before mandating that they sell the ring to a jeweler first thing in the morning. They will put half of the money in savings and use the other half to furnish their new home now that all of their furniture has been stolen. Gabe finally agrees and they kiss again. The rest of the action occurs in pantomime as Max exits silently, Lydia and Karen are blissfully ecstatic, and their husbands gather them up to leave. They appear one more time to snap pictures from the doorway before they are whisked away a final time. Once Olivia and Gabe realize that everyone is gone, they race to the door and lock all of the locks. They kiss once more as the lights fade.

One thing that is notable about DiSavino's romantic comedy, is that it fulfils many of the Aristotelian requirements for the genre. According to Aristotle, the first theatrical critic and theoretician that we are aware of in the Western world, in both tragedy and comedy, a character makes a critical error (*hamartia*) which precipitates a sudden down-turn of events (*katastrophe*). Eventually there is a recognition of that error (*anagnorisis*). In tragedy the recognition of the error ultimately brings about a negative reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*). In comedy, the *hamartia* brings about a positive reversal. In other words, tragedy is the representation of characters who experience a downfall. They end up much worse than where they started. Conversely, comedy represents characters who end up better than they began. Most commonly, tragedy results in death and destruction whereas comedy results in a kind of boon or rebirth—a family is reunited, adversaries are reconciled, a happy marriage is confirmed after many trials and tribulations. Beyond that, *Things My Mother Taught Me* upholds Aristotle's delineation of the three unities: the action occurs in a single location, within a single day, and concerns one major action. Aristotle thought to push the temporal barriers beyond twenty-four hours would snap an audience's ability to believe in the reality of a performance. Regardless of whether we believe Aristotle's theories to be true, DiSavino's play exemplifies the classical structure of comedy practiced by the ancient Greeks and carried forward into the early modern and modern eras: some sort of mistake occurs, which creates a pronounced degree of calamity. It is ultimately rectified and the play ends with some positive turn of fortune— in this case, not only is a fractured relationship repaired between Karen and Olivia, but a young couple becomes engaged with the support of their parents.

THE CHARACTERS.

Olivia Keegan: Olivia is described as being twenty-seven and "full of energy." She has been dating Gabe since college—a fact which has driven a wedge between her and her mother Karen. She appears to be the only child of Karen and Carter Keegan. While she and her mother were very close and open as she was growing up, a distance has grown between them as a result of Olivia entering into a serious, long term relationship with her first serious boyfriend. Karen, who carries the scars of a failed marriage when she was quite young, has continuously warned her daughter off of becoming too serious about anyone while she is still in her twenties. In order to prevent her only child from repeating her past mistakes, Karen continuously changes the subject when Gabe comes up in conversation and preaches a doctrine of independence and experimentation rather than monogamy prior to thirty. As a result, Olivia has stopped confiding in Karen about her relationship or major life events like moving in with and being in love with Gabe.

Between Olivia and Gabe, Olivia seems to be the more pragmatic and organized of the two. She ultimately demands that he return the extravagant engagement ring that he depleted his savings to buy so that they furnish

their new apartment after all of their possessions were stolen. She is also prone to slightly more fatalistic thinking, (the chair is stuck so the move is ruined) but easily cheered up by Gabe, who is happy to play the role of the clown when necessary. She internalizes much of her resentment towards her own mother's passive aggressive disapproval of her relationship for years before her parents' surprise visit and Gabe's botched proposal propel them towards a confrontation. Olivia also manages her annoyance at Lydia's tendency to take over. Lydia's insistence that Olivia urinate on a make shift Pee-Pee pad rather than a previously used toilet is also taken surprisingly well. It is clear that she is not thrilled at both sets of parents staying with them rather than book a hotel, but she ultimately tables her protests.

Throughout the play we see Olivia become highly emotional on several occasions; when the van is stolen, when she confronts her mother, when they reconcile, when Gabe retracts his proposal. Ultimately though, considering the whirlwind of surprises she is subjected to throughout the day, she remains remarkably upbeat and adaptable. Despite a tendency towards obsessive organization, (a trait she seems to have inherited from her mother) we see that Olivia is good natured, enthusiastic, and positive in her relationship with Gabe.

Gabe Lawson: Gabe Lawson is twenty-eight years old and appears to hail from Connecticut. He too is an only child. His mother, Lydia, is a retired psychologist who dotes on her only son. Gabe, sometimes to the annoyance of Olivia, generally indulges his mother's tendency to coddle him. For example, Olivia mentions that his mother usually calls her "baby boy" several times every day.

There is an infectious, childlike enthusiasm about Gabe and a tendency to do things big, sometimes without fully thinking them through. For instance, he buys a crate of his favorite cereal, "Cocoa Bites" and moves them from New York in case they don't sell them in Chicago. Part of the reason he loves them is because they are one of the few cereals that continue to put prizes in every box. That being said, Gabe also has a sentimental streak. These two traits combine and manifest in his proposal plan. Not only does he practically bankrupt himself to buy an enormous ring, but he secretly invites both sets of parents to witness the occasion unbeknownst to Olivia without considering practicalities like Olivia's fraught relationship with her mother, who would be sleeping where, and the additional stress that this might add to the move. He also leaves the ring in an unattended moving van all day long.

Gabe clearly has an active imagination and a quick sense of humor. When Olivia bemoans the fact that the chair is stuck, he briefly creates a character called Carlton Prettyhouse of HGTV. He also suggests that they just move into the moving van. His imagination extends to the way he has thought out his proposal and the forthcoming wedding. He is devastated not just because he lost his life savings, but because he feels that he has been robbed of his big moment, so much so that he briefly decides to call the whole thing off. After a brief intervention by Wyatt and Carson, he is back on board and after ransacking the crate of Cocoa Bites, he pulls Olivia into a passionate embrace before proposing with a plastic ring.

Gabe appears to be on very good terms with both of his parents. We know that he has had some type of gainful employment, when he references the fact that he spent three month's salary to buy a ring that was over twenty thousand dollars. Thus, he is making more than eighty-thousand a year. Throughout the course of the play we also learn that he helps with household chores and spent hours deliberating over curtains with Olivia in preparation of the big move.

Lydia Lawson: Lydia Lawson is described as a retired psychologist in her sixties who is "always thinking of what's best for her only child." Although generally good natured, this mother-knows-best attitude sometimes comes across as overbearing. We also see that Lydia's training as a psychologist allows her to be perceptive about certain things. She recognizes the significance of the new chair immediately and chastises Wyatt for leaving a footprint on the first item of furniture that Olivia and Gabe picked out together.

Her fervent drive to help and guide her son, whom she still refers to as her "baby boy" also means that she has some trouble with boundaries; although Olivia is clearly apprehensive about them staying the night, Karen plows forward stating that they'll set up their own bed and it will be just like a slumber party. She places a moratorium on moving in the furniture until an extensive deep clean takes place, one that includes multiple rounds of wet and dry mopping, a new toilet seat, and scrubbing the top of the refrigerator. Although Olivia has expressed the wish to make, dinner Lydia attempts to take this over before Wyatt intervenes. Her most neurotic moment occurs with the making of the "Pee pee pad" to prevent Olivia from utilizing the bathroom's unchanged toilet seat. Not only does she construct one out of paper towels, but she accompanies Olivia to the bathroom to moderate its use. When Wyatt questions Lydia's move in procedures, we learn that her own mother hammered them in to her:

“always clean the top of your refrigerator. And always, *always* buy a new toilet seat.” Wyatt responds that her “mother was a lunatic” before asking her to pass the paper towels.

We learn through the course of scene two that some of Lydia’s behavior is driven by anxiety that Gabe and Olivia are moving in together without making a more formal commitment. She is running through all of the negative scenarios of Gabe proposing, “What if it everything goes wrong? What if she says no?” Wyatt manages to talk her down and she is much more on board for the rest of the play, especially after Karen arrives and she must take on the role of cheerleader in light of the other mother’s skepticism. When Karen implores her daughter not to take the move in too seriously and takes comfort in the fact that they aren’t married, Lydia states, “But they soon will be!” thus letting the cat out of the bag in front of Olivia that Gabe was planning to propose this weekend. Lydia begins crying when she realizes what she has done. Her unchecked urge to help has once again produced some unwanted consequences. As the play moves on, Lydia is more restrained; she pretends to be asleep as Karen and Olivia work out their issues, and celebratory when they reconcile and Karen becomes supportive of the engagement. When the two embrace Lydia joins them.

Ultimately, we see a woman who is driven by a wish to help. She has a strong relationship with her husband that is full of humor and honesty, and although she is having some trouble renegotiating her previous role as the primary woman in her son’s life, she is reflective enough to moderate her behavior.

Wyatt Lawson: Wyatt Lawson is described as a “good natured man in his sixties who loves his son, marriage, golf, and beer—not always in that order.” Wyatt is a jovial sixty-five-year-old who chooses his battles. He will happily extricate himself from emotionally fraught situations to have a beer or move a box, but he will involve himself when necessary. He confronts his wife when her anxiety over her son’s proposal is beginning to spin out of control and he partners with Carter to give Gabe the pep talk he needs to move forward with his proposal despite the loss of the ring and all of his savings.

He is thrifty in the sense that he and his wife would rather get up at 2:00 am to drive straight through from Connecticut to Chicago, rather than stop for the night at a hotel. He has a can-do attitude but, like his son, he doesn’t always think things through, as is the case with sawing away a large portion of the door frame without consulting anyone first. Age has caused him to be a bit more cautious than his son on some levels. He expresses concern that Gabe has not prepared Olivia for the now public proposal in any way.

We find that behind the humor, he can be quite romantic at times. He recalls how when he told his own mother that he was going to marry Lydia she asked, “You think you could love her even if you two didn’t have any money?” When he responded in the affirmative, she proclaimed “Good, cause I’m not paying for the wedding.” As a result, Wyatt worked two jobs to pay for the wedding himself until his mother revealed that she was teaching him a lesson and she and Lydia’s parents financed the entire wedding.

He is also clearly a man who likes to have a good time. When he and Carter leave to help Gabe track down the stolen moving van, they fail to catch up with him. They drive around for a brief while before retreating to a bar right next to Olivia and Gabe’s apartment under the premise of questioning any possible witnesses to the theft. They find no witnesses, but they do discover whiskey and pickleback shots. When they return to the apartment they are slightly drunk and belting out pop songs despite the fact that they are in the midst of a disaster. When Gabe returns, and they realize the true scope of the crisis with the ring, the two slightly inebriated men gather themselves and tell Gabe exactly what he needs to hear. It is also Wyatt who finally suggests that both sets of parents spring for hotel rooms to leave the newly engaged couple in peace. He gathers up his deliriously happy wife’s things and gently ushers her out as Olivia and Gabe embrace.

Karen Keegan: Karen Keegan is a lawyer in her fifties with a pronounced type-A personality. She is described as impeccably dressed and there is a running joke about her not having a sense of humor. Gabe recalls how they showed up early for a visit once and she frantically had to run out to Kinko’s to pick up the itinerary pamphlet she had had made for the weekend. Just prior to Karen’s arrival, we learn that Olivia has not been entirely upfront with her mother about the fact that they are cohabitating. Gabe, aware of the Keegan’s impending arrival is somewhat distressed, but launches into a comedic proclamation of his love for Olivia and his wish to shout their moving in together from the rooftops. Karen and Carter arrive just as Gabe is standing on the kitchen counter screaming about how he is thrilled to be moving in with Olivia Keegan and proceeds to list the reasons why he loves her despite having some “MOMMY ISSUES.”

There is a brief break in the tension when Karen and Lydia agree that a rigorous cleaning and toilet seat replacement protocol is appropriate when one moves into a new apartment. The Lawson's excuse themselves under the premise of toilet seat installation, and when Karen demands, "what did I always say?" Olivia first responds, "stop dressing like you're going to a picnic," and, "always use protection," before Karen can correct her. Karen exasperatedly states that she has always warned Olivia off of getting married before she was thirty. Karen shifts tactics, noting that she supports Olivia's decision to "experiment" with her current living situation, since it was not serious enough for Olivia to tell her mother about it. It comes out that Karen is conflating her experience of getting married before she finished college with Olivia's. She admits that she entered into a committed relationship when she was much too young because her own mother encouraged her to. The marriage failed and it wasn't until Karen recovered and improved her self-esteem that she was able to enter into successful marriage with Olivia's father.

Karen asserts that she is very open-minded on the grounds that she used to ride a motorcycle and loves listening to pop music. She claims that she would have been alright with Olivia telling her the truth, but contradictorily keeps insistently reframing their cohabitation as an experiment rather than a commitment. Olivia refuses to downplay what they are doing and accuses her mother of failing to get to know Gabe. When the rest of the crew returns, Karen passive-aggressively asks questions about the local crime rate and whether or not Olivia and Gabe have done their research. As Olivia begins to prepare dinner it comes out that Lydia and Wyatt are spending the night while Karen and Carter have booked a hotel. Karen is clearly hurt and somewhat jealous causing Gabe to extend the invitation to them as well. Eventually Lydia reveals that Gabe is set to propose that very weekend to prove the seriousness of their commitment to one another. Karen begins to cry proclaiming, "You are too young to get married!" but is interrupted by the revelation that the van has been stolen. She shifts gears in order to comfort her daughter.

Act II is dominated by Olivia and Karen's reconciliation. With the aid of wine and honey vodka, Karen comes to realize that Olivia is not repeating her past mistakes, and that she has been listening to her advice all along. She is reassured by the fact that Gabe spent two hours helping to pick out curtains for their bedroom and by the revelation that he helps with housework. She eventually admits that she has suspected that Olivia was in love with Gabe for some time and praises the smart, confident woman her daughter has become. Olivia is overwrought with emotion and praises her mother for her teaching her to love with her entire heart. Olivia describes her as "fierce, and loyal, and aggravating," but ultimately loving and motivating. Karen tells Olivia that she loves her, but also Gabe. From that point, she is a source of unequivocal support.

Carter Keegan: Carter Keegan is described as a man in his late fifties who perpetually has an iPhone in his hand. He often functions to try to break the tension between his wife and daughter but like Wyatt, he will eagerly remove himself from situations when things get overly tense. We do not know much about his background other than the fact that when he proposed to Karen, she thought he was kidding, threw the ring down the sink, and he had to be rushed to the hospital after cutting himself while fishing it out of the garbage disposal. He is delighted at being looped in about Gabe's proposal, but it is somewhat telling that he withholds this information from his wife. He also does not seem surprised that Gabe and Olivia are living together.

Like Wyatt, Carter seems to like having a good time, and often acts as the comic relief within his own family. He is mutually complicit in the decision to go to a bar when he and Wyatt are supposed to be out looking for the stolen moving van, and he enthusiastically joins the other father in dancing around and singing pop songs when they are buzzed. Clearly, they are enjoying their bonding time and are still excited about the pending proposal.

When a distraught Gabe reveals that he can no longer move forward with his plan, Carter joins forces with Wyatt to let Gabe in on some man-to-man wisdom as well as some stories from the marital trenches. Carter wisely reminds Gabe that no one wants to hear a picturesque engagement story. They want to hear about the doozies where everything went horribly wrong. He also notes that Gabe's future sons will learn from his mistakes: "always keep your engagement ring on you at all times." He finally asks Gabe three crucial questions: 1. "do you want to marry my daughter?" 2. "Do you love her?" 3. "Will you eventually have more than three hundred dollars in your bank account?" When Gabe answers all three in the affirmative, Wyatt and Carter burst into the chorus of Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" to spur him on.

Once the engagement is back on track Carter uses his handy Priceline app to book two hotel rooms and helps Wyatt in collecting Lydia and Karen to give Olivia and Gabe some much needed privacy in their new home.

Max Mirowski: The elusive Max Mirowski initially appears as a somewhat unhelpful building super but as the play progresses it is clear that he has a quirky sense of humor and a heart of gold. He is fluent in Polish and English, but frequently states that he does not understand the latter when he does not wish to acknowledge certain aspects of a conversation. When this occurs he ironically states, "I'm sorry. My English is not so good. I don't understand when you're saying," in perfect English. This is his tactic when he introduces himself to Olivia and does not feel obligated to help her with the stuck chair as it is not technically a problem with the building. His catch phrase appears to be, "Uh-oh." He says this when he first notices the chair, again when he clocks the fact that Wyatt has sawed off a portion of the doorframe, and a final time when the moving van is stolen.

Although he initially seems aloof, Max increasingly comes across as an altruistic hero of sorts. He checks in with the women as their partners are out scouring the unfamiliar city for all of Olivia and Gabe's worldly possessions, he brings them Polish honey vodka, encourages them towards communication and reconciliation, and enlists his brother, a Chicago cop, to track down their stolen van with a posse of his coworkers. Max is ultimately responsible for the return of the engagement ring and the otherwise empty van. He also deigns to fix Olivia and Gabe's ruined doorframe. By the end of the play, he is practically a member of the extended family and there is an indication that he might fulfil a position of surrogate parent to Olivia and Gabe now that their own parents are living so far away.

THEMES. On many levels this is a coming of age story, both for Olivia and Gabe, as they formalize their commitment to one another, but also for their parents, who still retain some of their residual authority and influence in the lives of their children as they fully transition into adulthood. We see that both Lydia and Karen are having a difficult time renegotiating their maternal role. In Lydia's case we see that some aspects of the previous power relationship must shift. Her urge to protect and guide her son manifests in her aggressive cleaning protocol, her refusal to let any furniture be moved into the apartment, and her wish to make dinner even though Olivia has expressed an intention to do so. She (with Wyatt) also show up much earlier than was agreed upon and make an executive decision to spend the night so that they can all be together. She still refers to her twenty-eight-year-old son as her "baby boy" and calls him multiple times a day. It seems that even though Gabe is a gainfully employed college graduate who has been living on his own for several years, the fact that he has not yet officially moved in with Olivia until now has allowed Lydia to continue to occupy a more prominent position in his life.

In the process of setting up an autonomous home and proposing to Olivia, Gabe is formalizing Olivia's position as the primary woman in his day to day life. He is no longer an extension of his parent's household, he is setting up an autonomous home of his own. With this transition implicit familial hierarchies must be redefined and Lydia must relinquish a certain amount of control to Olivia.

It is important to remember that what could come across as micromanagement comes from a place of concern and a little bit of loss on Lydia's behalf. Not only has Lydia's only child moved across the country after living close by, but she is terrified by the prospect that something might not work out. There is bit of a generational divide in the sense that Lydia and Wyatt were married before they moved in together. Lydia is concerned that Gabe's planned proposal might not work out and that Gabe and Olivia would be left in an incredibly messy situation. Ultimately, other than some neurotic behavior involving the toilet seat, Lydia manages to reel in her maternal instincts. Wyatt reminds her that Olivia and Gabe are doing things their way, but that they have been repeatedly and consistently choosing to be together for over seven years.

While Lydia and Gabe's relationship might be classified as overly-close, Karen and Olivia's have become distant as a result of Karen's passive-aggressive disapproval of her daughter's relationship. It becomes clear that Olivia has not been explicit about the seriousness of her and Gabe's relationship and the fact that they are moving in together. We learn that Karen has been hammering in a mantra of independence, experimentation, and discovering one's self prior to entering into a long term, romantic relationship since Olivia can remember. Karen experienced a divorce after getting married in college at the urging of her own mother, and has been aggressively trying to prevent her daughter from that same heartache.

Karen's strategy has been to refuse to take Olivia and Gabe seriously in the hopes that her daughter would do the same. Whenever Olivia talked about Gabe Karen would change the subject. Thus, Olivia has stopped attempting to confide in her mother to that effect. Olivia insinuates that Karen has not made a concentrated effort to get to know Gabe. Karen bristles at the accusation and then aggressively over-compensates. Even after encountering Gabe's very loud proclamation he and Olivia are living together and in love, Karen insists on downplaying it as an

experiment. When Lydia breaks the news about the engagement, Karen begins to cry insisting that Olivia is too young to get married. The crisis of the stolen moving van, the consumption of alcohol, and the absence of the men (aside from a few cameos by Max) forces Karen and Olivia to confront and rectify their differences. Karen finally acknowledges Olivia's love for Gabe and the fact that she is making smart decisions about her life.

We see that both Lydia and Karen are operating from a place of care, and also the feeling of impotence that they cannot fully intervene in their adult children's lives or protect them from harm. As the play progresses, they increasingly come to terms with these facts, and take comfort in the strength of their children's relationship. We see the difficulty with which parents stop seeing children as extensions of themselves as they grow older in these interactions. We also see that process of healthy detachment taking place in Olivia and Gabe. The younger generation also remains somewhat dependent on their parents' approval and authority. While they bristle at Lydia's decisions about the move in and sleeping arrangements, they ultimately fall in line and although Olivia independently decides to move in with Gabe, her decision to hide this fact from her mother communicates a fear of disappointing Karen.

As the title suggests, this play is also about the things that are passed down between mother and child; the inherited wisdom, but also baggage that comes down through the generations. There are certain neurotic behaviors, but there is also humor, the modeling of unconditional love, and a practical guideline for how to sanitize a brand-new living space. We also see certain behavioral patterns repeating themselves. As much as Olivia rebels against her mother, she is inadvertently taking on many of her traits; she unknowingly organizes the groceries while talking to Gabe and she confesses that she loves her new curtains which she took hours to pick out. We see that there is a tendency to internalize things and communicate passive-aggressively in both Karen and Olivia. We also see a similar relationship dynamic manifesting between Olivia and Gabe as is apparent in both sets of parents. Karen and Lydia are both more prone to worry and organization, whereas the fun-loving Carter and Wyatt generally act as the tension breakers and mediators when necessary. Ultimately, we see that both Olivia and Gabe have caring parents with strong, healthy marriages. This fact seems to bode well as they begin their own marital journey

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. How realistic do you find this play? Do characters interact in a way that is true to life? Do you find the plot believable?
2. In the course of the play, we are made aware that Lydia is a retired psychologist and Karen is a lawyer. Why do you think the playwright chose to inform us of their professions, but not Olivia, Gabe, Wyatt, or Carter's?
3. The entirety of the action occurs in the course of one day. Did this make the plot more or less believable to you? Why?
4. David Ball states that the end of every play is the beginning of another. What is the play after this play? What do you think it looks like?
5. The play deals with children renegotiating their relationships with their parents as they grow older. Do you see any continued conflicts for the characters as they move forward?
6. The play takes place entirely in the interior of a Chicago apartment. What was the effect of having a stationary location where characters entered and exited? How did it effect the comedy, the pace, and the tension?
7. Were there any characters that you found more or less sympathetic? Why?
8. How did gender roles seem to function in this play? Did the women characters seem to embody different roles and responsibilities than the men?