



**THE ENGLISH THEATRE
OF HAMBURG**

presents

ROMANCE IN D

by James Sherman

STUDY GUIDE

Premiere on 10th November 2022

Preview performances at reduced prices on 7th, 8th, and 9th November 2023

Tuesday – Saturday	19:30
Sunday	14:30
Wednesday/Friday	11:30 (Matinee performances weekly alternating)

THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF HAMBURG

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TICKETS

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The English Theatre will premiere **ROMANCE IN D** on 10th November 2022, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 7th, 8th, and 9th November. You can use the cover of this publication to advertise the play in your school or workplace. Bookings have already started. Teachers who wish to preview the play before bringing a group of students to the theatre should contact marketing@englishtheatre.de. The text of the play may be obtained at [dramatists](#) or [Amazon](#).

About the Author

James Sherman wrote the plays **MAGIC TIME, THE GOD OF ISAAC, Mr. 80%, THE ESCAPE ARTIST, BEAU JEST, THIS OLD MAN CAME ROLLING HOME, JEST A SECOND!, ROMANCE IN D, FROM DOOR TO DOOR, THE OLD MAN'S FRIEND, AFFLUENZA! HALF AND HALF, RELATIVELY CLOSE** and **JACOB AND JACK**. He studied theatre at Illinois State University in the 1970s and began his professional career as a writer and performer with The Second City in Chicago. Since 1986 he has been a Playwright in Residence at the Tony Award winning Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago. In 2006 James directed his own screenplay of his play **BEAU JEST** starring Lainie Kazan, Seymour Cassel and Robyn Cohen. He currently teaches playwriting and improvisation at Columbia College of Chicago and The Theatre School at DePaul University. He has been recipient of fellowships from The MacDowell Colony, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and is a member of The Dramatists Guild of America.

About the play

Charles Norton is a musicologist* in his early 40s. He lives alone in apartment 4D. He is single and just wants to be left in peace. Having a close relationship with someone does not interest him, and he resists his mother's constant attempts to convince him to get married and settle down. Next door in apartment 4E is his new neighbor, forty-year-old Isabel Fox. She is deeply depressed because her husband left her for a twenty-year-old woman. When Charles smells gas coming from apartment 4E he phones the emergency number 911, thus saving Isabel's life when she tries to commit suicide by sticking her head in the oven of her gas stove. Gradually Isabel and Charles get acquainted and against his own principles Charles finds that he is falling in love with Isabel. He prefers music to language. She, on the other hand, writes poems and doesn't even have a CD player. The two apparently have nothing in common, but Charles gradually becomes Isabel's confidant. His lively mother Helen and Isabel's father George hit it off right away. While the younger ones need time to get to know each other, the older generation gets along brilliantly right away. Despite some misunderstandings, Charles and Isabel eventually manage to form a close relationship. Charles composes a piece of music about Isabel's name and she writes a poem about a musician. Isabel's family is Christian and Charles' family is Jewish. There is a brightly lighted Christmas tree in Isabel's apartment and Hanukkah candles in Charles'. One critic described the play as having "two romances in one."

* A musicologist is an expert in or student of music as an academic subject, as opposed to someone trained in performance or composition.

SUMMARY

Act 1

Time: the late 1990s, a workday, early evening Place: two neighboring apartments in Chicago, 4D and 4E

Scene 1

Apartment 4E has been vacant for some time. Now there is one person living there, Isabel Fox, an attractive 40-yearold woman who has been severely depressed for some time. At present, she is on her knees with her head in the gas oven. Next door Charles Norton, a neatly dressed man in his early forties, enters his apartment 4D. He removes his coat and goes to the refrigerator to pour himself a glass of orange juice. Then he selects one of his CDs and inserts it in his stereo.

Next door Isabel takes her head out of the oven. Disturbed by the loud music coming from 4D, she goes to Charles' door and knocks. Charles likes to be alone, but when the second knock comes, he decides he had better open the door. Isabel tells him that she just moved into 4E and would appreciate it if he would turn down the music just for a little while. Charles does so and Isabel thanks him and returns to her apartment where she sticks her head back in the oven. Charles smells gas coming from 4E and has a feeling that something is wrong. He calls the emergency number 911.

Scene 2, the next day

In 4E Isabel is listening to her father, George Fox. He has brought her a small TV/VCR unit and is unpacking a box full of outdated videotapes that he hopes will cheer his daughter up after her failed suicide attempt the day before. George is grateful that her neighbor, Charles, sensing that something was wrong, called 911 and saved his daughter's life. George is now in his mid-sixties but has lost none of the energy and enthusiasm he had when he worked in the theatre as a young actor. He reads aloud the titles of the videos as he takes them out of the box. Isabel is not impressed. She loves her father for attempting to raise her spirits, but now she finds him exhausting. She tells him she doesn't want to watch videos, so George says they can just sit and talk. George, not a resident of Chicago, tells her she can stay at his hotel with him if she likes. She replies that she would

rather remain in her apartment and will phone him if she needs anything. She reminds George that she didn't even expect to be alive today. But she now realizes that killing herself was a stupid thing to try to do. Commiserating with his daughter, George reminds Isabel that he knows only too well, after losing his wife, what it is like to be alone.

Scene 3, apartment 4D

Charles is sitting at the table having dinner with Helen Norton, his widowed mother, an attractive woman in her sixties. She is trying to convince her son to go to a friend's wedding, but he refuses because he knows there will be an attempt there to set him up with a single woman. Helen tells him he is a hero because he saved his neighbor's life. He insists he is not a hero. He just smelled gas and called 911. Helen asks if Isabel is single. Tired of his mother's continual efforts to get him married, Charles insists he is happy just the way things are. He has friends at work and sees a buddy of his once a week. And his mother comes over weekly with a homemade dinner for them to eat together.

Desperate to see her son married, Helen tells him she is planning on selling the family home so she can take the time to see something of the world. "It would help," she says, "if I knew you were with somebody." Charles ignores her by playing the piano.

HELEN. So maybe I'll go now. I think I'll go.

CHARLES. Go! You keep talking about going. So go. Leave me alone.

HELEN. That's what you want? I'll leave you alone. Have a nice life.

CHARLES. Same to you HELEN. So, goodbye.

CHARLES. Goodbye.

HELEN. I'll see you next Friday.

CHARLES. Fine (Helen exits.)

Scene 4, apartment 4D

Charles is playing the piano when there is a knock at his door. It is Isabel. She tells him that her therapist said she should thank him for saving her life. Charles says,



"You're welcome," and Isabel leaves. She soon knocks on the door again to tell him that if she can ever do anything for him, she would be glad to help. Charles says he doesn't need anything. Then she inquires if she can ask him if she ever needs anything. He says yes. She explains that she was thinking about making an omelet but realized she didn't have any eggs. She asks if she can borrow an egg. Charles goes to the refrigerator and gets an egg for her.

Looking around, Isabel marvels at how nice Charles has made his apartment look. Noticing that he has a piano, a lot of records, CDs and books about music, she assumes he must be a musician. He tells her he is a musicologist. She doesn't know what that is but is interested in finding out. She hints that she and Charles might go out on a date sometime, but her efforts are met with silence. Although Charles finds her very appealing, he prefers not to get involved with anyone. Feeling rejected, she starts to go, but Charles tells her to wait. He apologizes for being rude and tries to make up for his rudeness by asking her to stay and have something to eat. She accepts the invitation. He explains that a musicologist is a student of music as an academic subject as opposed to someone trained in performance of composition. He tells her that if everyone learned music, the world would be a better place. He thinks that words fail us, that they are useless. Then he asks Isabel what she does and is embarrassed to hear that she is a poet. She says she has had one book published and would give him a copy if he doesn't mind looking at some words. They laugh at their different views of the importance of words vs. music. As they talk they begin to connect and find that they like each other, but neither of them makes any premature advances. She gets up the courage to suggest that they share a meal sometime and asks if he has a significant other. Charles asks her the same question. She replies that she has a husband but they are separated. Charles agrees that they should have dinner together sometime. She suggests the next evening and Charles happily agrees. When they finish eating she starts to go but has forgotten the egg Charles gave her. He hands it to her and she thanks him.

Scene 5

On his way up the apartment house stairs to visit his

daughter in 4E, George sees Helen carrying heavy bags of groceries. He offers to help her carry the bags. Although Helen has never met George, she welcomes his assistance. When they arrive in 4D they put the groceries down and George, noticing that Helen is a little nervous about a stranger being in her son's apartment, explains that he is Isabel's father. George excuses himself, leaves the apartment and knocks on Isabel's door. When there is no answer, he returns to 4D and asks Helen if she has seen his daughter. She hasn't, so George starts to leave again telling Helen he'll run down to the corner and grab a sandwich.

Helen quickly offers to make George a sandwich if he doesn't mind egg salad. George is delighted. He sits down at the table while Helen makes sandwiches for both of them. He tells her that, although he is from Maine he did some acting in New York when he was younger, but then he got married and needed to find a more reliable job to support a wife and children. They moved back to Maine and he took over his father's auto parts store. After his wife died and Isabel was grown up, he sold the store and moved to New York where, ironically, he made more money doing voiceover work than he had made in Maine. He is retired now and has moved down south where he bought a house on the Bimini Islands. When he mentions the names of some of the people he worked with in New York, Helen says she lived in New York at the same time and knows the same people. She was studying to be a dancer at that time. They discover that they lived in the same neighborhood although they never met. They find it remarkable that their children are neighbors.

Scene 6, apartment 4E

Isabel bursts into her apartment, not bothering to close the door. Enraged about something, she throws herself on the floor and lets out a shriek. Charles in 4D hears the loud noise and goes to 4E to find out what is going on. Isabel tells him she is furious because she just lost her job and her therapist has told her it is because she is suffering from a chemical imbalance and needs medicine, which she doesn't believe. She admits that what really has put her in this emotional state is not losing the job or hearing nonsense from her therapist. What really infuriates her is that she is forty, her husband is fifty and he



has left her for a girl who is twenty. Isabel finally gets up from the floor and sits at the table. They chat for a while, but when Isabel senses that he is showing an annoying amount of concern for her, she says, "I'm fine. I'm really fine. Go away!" Charles leaves.

Scene 7

Helen is in 4D putting fresh groceries away for her son. She places a CD she has just bought in the stereo and listens to it as she continues to unpack. In 4E George and Isabel are playing a game of Scrabble when George hears big band music coming from Charles' apartment. He gets up and goes to 4D and sees Helen's back when he opens the door. When he says, "Helen," she throws up her arms and shrieks. He apologizes for scaring her and she recuperates from the shock. Helen says she bought the Count Basie CD, but doesn't know why she chose that particular CD. George knows she is not being truthful because he mentioned to her days before that that music was his favorite.

George offers to introduce Helen to his daughter and the two of them go to apartment 4E. Isabel politely says hello to Helen and tells her she really likes her chicken soup. This startles Helen because she is unaware that her son and Isabel have even met. George invites Helen to play a game of Scrabble with him, but Helen, remembering that she has to put the groceries away, returns to 4D. Isabel tells her father she senses he's got something going with Helen. George denies it, but Isabel replies, "A woman who's good at cooking and talking. Woman of your dreams." Wondering why Helen hasn't returned, George goes to 4D where Helen is trying to operate the remote control to stop the Count Basie music. George ignores her problem, takes her hand and invites her to dance with him. George leads and Helen follows. They dance divinely together.

Scene 8, apartment 4D

Charles has invited Isabel to come over for a cup of tea. She says jokingly that she has tried to become a recluse but is having trouble doing it because she gets lonely. Charles tells her with a smile that after living alone as long as he has he still gets lonely. She tells him she met Helen and that she peeked in his apartment and saw her dancing with her father. She asks Charles if he would

like to hear a poem she wrote. She reads it to him and, although it is mediocre, Charles thanks her for reading it. After Isabel leaves, Charles plays "Fugue for Isabel", a song he has written that shows his growing feelings for her. He puts his heart into it and makes it sound romantic. When he is finished he says to himself, "Isabel. Damn." He realizes she is making him break his promise to himself to remain unattached.

End of Act 1

Act 2

Scene 9, Holiday time in December

In 4D Helen watches Charles light the Hanukkah candles. In 4E Isabel and her father are putting final decorations on a small tabletop Christmas tree. He plugs in the tree lights as Charles finishes lighting the Hanukkah candles. In 4E George and Isabel exchange presents wishing each other Merry Christmas, while in 4D Helen and Charles do the same except that they wish each other Happy Hanukkah. They go to the table and sit down to eat a traditional Jewish dinner, potato pancakes. George in 4E gives his daughter an audiocassette with a popular Christmas song on it. Next door Charles hears the music with disdain. To him it sounds like elevator music, but in 4E the music brings tears to Isabel because she remembers how much her mother used to love it. Charles puts on a CD of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in G minor. George hears the classical music coming from next door and suggests to Isabel that they invite Charles to go out to dinner with them. Before Isabel can respond, George is knocking on Charles' door. Charles looks through the peephole to find out who is there. He doesn't open the door because he doesn't recognize George, but Helen looks through the peephole and sees that it is George. She tells her son to open the door.

George introduces himself to Charles and thanks him for saving Isabel's life. Then George sees Helen and tells her what a nice surprise it is to see her. He tells them he and Isabel were just about to go out for dinner and would like them to join them. Helen thanks him for the invitation but says they have already started their dinner. George looks around and sees the menorah.



He realizes that they are eating the traditional dinner for Hanukkah. He tells them he knows the special name for potato pancakes: Latkes. George says he and Isabel are about to celebrate Christmas and asks if there is any way they can combine the two traditions. Isabel knocks on the door and enters. They greet each other and George tells her of his plan to celebrate together. On the phone he reserves a table for four at the fancy restaurant where they plan to eat and asks Helen if they can eat the Latkes later. Helen says yes.

George goes to apartment 4E to get a bottle of egg-nog and beckons Charles to come with him. There he starts questioning Charles about his relationship with his daughter. When he realizes they have become good friends, he gives Charles his business card and asks Charles to keep an eye on Isabel for him and contact him if there are any problems. George adds that if Charles needs anything he can help him. Charles asks George suspiciously if he's offering him money. He is relieved when George says no. Without much thought, Charles says he will keep an eye on Isabel.

While George and Charles are talking in 4E, in 4D Isabel questions Helen about how long she was married to her husband. Thirty-five years, Helen replies. Isabel wants to know how they stayed married for such a long time. Helen replies that she never thought about "staying" married. They simply got married and did what they had to do. Helen, who has always been on the lookout for a woman for Charles to marry, asks Isabel what happened to her marriage. Isabel tells her that her husband chose a young teaching assistant over her. Helen responds by telling Isabel that she is a beautiful woman and if her husband chose a teaching assistant over her, he's a fool. She adds that marriage is not supposed to make people happy. People are supposed to make the marriage happy.

George returns to apartment 4D thinking that Charles is right behind him. He tells the ladies that they have to leave for the restaurant soon or they will be late. When Isabel notices that Charles is not with George, she goes to her apartment looking for him. When she gets there her phone rings. It's her husband, Mark. She signals to Charles that he should wait for her next door. After the

conversation with her husband, Isabel returns to 4D. She tells them that something serious has come up and that she has to meet and talk with her husband right away. They all encourage her to do that, and Charles offers to stay home so Helen and George can enjoy dinner together at the restaurant.

Scene 10 the next morning. apartment 4E Isabel enters her apartment in a terrible state. She sits on the floor and pulls her coat up around her. Charles knocks on the door. She refuses to open it, but Charles is persistent. He says he will break the door down if she doesn't open it. Finally, Isabel opens the door and goes to sit at the table. Charles comes in carrying a bag a groceries. He knows that she saw her husband the previous evening and didn't return home until morning. He saw her on the street just now and called her name, but she ignored him and ran to put more distance between them. Isabel asks Charles to leave her alone, but he won't leave until she tells him what is wrong. Charles thought that because Isabel was gone all night that that was a sign that she and her husband had reconciled. It was not a good sign, she tells him. On the contrary, they are getting divorced and her soon to be ex-husband wants her to get her personal belonging out of the house by next week because someone else is moving in. He often gives her bad news on special occasions, she says. Christmas was no exception.

Charles invites her to come to his place so they can talk and have a bite to eat, but she refuses. He asks her if she has any plans for the day. Jokingly, she suggests that they go and kill Mark. All she needs, Charles says, is a reason to live. She replies that she spent the night walking around outside trying to think of a reason, but couldn't find a single one. She laments that she is forty years old and has nothing to show for it. Charles knows what she means. When his father was his age he had a wife, two children, a successful business and a hobby. In contrast, Charles says he has a survival job and a single bed. Isabel is not moved by this and continues to sulk. Unexpectedly, Charles takes her in his arms and kisses her. Dazed by this, she nevertheless allows herself to be kissed and lets it grow in feeling. But suddenly she pulls away from him. She tells him she was shocked by the kiss but only because she has been thinking all this



time that he is gay. He says he is not and that he has been wanting to kiss her since they first met. He apologizes and starts to leave. She tells him to wait and asks him why he wanted to kiss her. He's not sure how to answer, but he tells her it has something to do with the fact that he thinks she is beautiful and smart. She reminds him that she was trying to commit suicide when he first met her. He says she looked okay to him and she came over to his place to make a connection. "You're not chronically depressed. You're chronically alive." Charles admits that he kept telling himself not to fall in love but in the end, he couldn't help himself. He confesses he is in love with Isabel. Charles protests, however, that he shouldn't have kissed her because he knows how often people have problems once they get close. He doesn't want that kind of life and he certainly doesn't want to get dumped like Isabel just was. He discloses that it happened to him once too but refuses to talk about it. He grabs the bag of groceries and leaves. When Charles enters his own apartment, he goes to the bedroom and lets out a shriek when he finds his mother on top of his bed with George. The three of them come out of the bedroom and George tells everyone to calm down, that no harm has been done. Charles asks them why they are in his apartment and they answer that they have been waiting for him to arrive. Charles asks George if he is drunk. He says no, but admits that in the restaurant they drank cocktails and shared one bottle of wine. Helen reminds George that there was brandy in the dessert.

George dropped Helen off at her home and went to his hotel to spend the night. He picked her up in the morning and they both came to see if Charles and Isabel would like to have breakfast with them since the four of them could not have dinner together the night before. To Charles's surprise George tells him that he would like to marry his mother--not right away, but after some time. He asks Helen if she would like to go to Bimini with him. His plane leaves in the afternoon and she has just enough time to pack. Charles is upset by all of these sudden arrangements, but Helen and George ignore his frustration. Isabel comes into 4D and they explain to her everything they just talked about. Helen and George profess their feelings for each other to Isabel's delight. She waves to them happily as they depart. Isabel then calms down the frustrated Charles with a big hug. Isabel tells Charles she came over to tell him it was a nice kiss and she likes him. Charles repeats what he said to her earlier: "I don't want a relationship." Charles fears that there's a chance that one of them is going to get hurt, but Isabel tells him there is also a chance that they'll live happily ever after, adding that there is only one way of finding out. They decide to have breakfast together and watch one of the video tapes that George gave Isabel. Charles gets the food and Isabel runs over to her apartment to get the videotape. They both stop for a moment and consider their options. Then they make their decision and exit their apartments simultaneously to join each other.

End



Study Questions

1. Why does Charles call the emergency number at the beginning of the play?
2. Why does Isabel try to commit suicide?
3. Who visits Isabel to cheer her up?
4. Who regularly brings food to Charles' apartment?
5. How does Helen annoy her son Charles?
6. What is Charles' profession?
7. Does Isabel write poems or articles for a magazine?
8. Is George still working as a voice-over artist or is he retired now?
9. What did Helen want to be when she was younger?
10. Why does Isabel have trouble being a recluse?
11. Does Charles write a symphony or a fugue for Isabel?
12. With whom does Isabel discover her father dancing?
13. What interrupts the plans for the four of them to celebrate Hannukah and Christmas together in a restaurant?
14. Do Isabel and her husband intend to reconcile or get a divorce?
15. Why is Isabel surprised when Charles kisses her?
16. Why has Charles resisted starting a relationship with Isabel?
17. What do George and Helen plan to do at the end of the play?
18. Do Charles and Isabel decide to take a chance on love or not?

Answer Keys

1. Because he smells gas coming from the apartment next door. 2. Because her husband has left her for a younger woman. 3. Her father George. 4. His mother Helen. 5. By telling him to get married and settle down. 6. His profession is a musicologist. 7. She writes poems. 8. He is retired. 9. A dancer. 10. Because she gets lonely. 11. A fugue. 12. Helen, Charles' mother. 13. A telephone call from Isabel's husband. 14. They intend to divorce. 15. Because she thought he was gay. 16. Because he was dumped in a previous relationship and doesn't want to be hurt again. 17. They plan to go to Rimini and perhaps get married later. 18. They decide to take a chance on love.