

Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

# LOST IN YONKERS



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## Lost in Yonkers

### Neil Simon (1927-)

Premiere: Richard Rodgers Theatre,  
New York 1991 (Pulitzer prize)  
Theatre J, Washington DC, 2009

*David E. Scharff*

Like all great comedies, *Lost in Yonkers* has an embedded tension between the humor and the pain of the situation in which the characters find themselves. At the personal level, the play is about the obstacles to development for Artie and Jay, the teenage grandchildren. At the family level, it concerns the attributes of character that have made life difficult in individual ways for each of Grandma's adult children: the boys' father Eddie who cannot be tough enough; their aunt Bella whose intellectual development

is stunted; Uncle Louie who is a petty thief; and Aunt Gertrude who is too frightened to have a social or romantic life and who can hardly breathe or talk in Grandma's presence. At the social level, the play deals with the aftermath of the persecution of Jews in Europe leading up to WWII, the pogroms and the holocaust that were part of Grandma's childhood, as we learn without surprise. Seeing *Lost in Yonkers* at Theatre J in the Jewish Community Centre of Washington DC in November 2009, I was particularly struck by the tragic backdrop to the comedy.

Before saying more about the play, I want to talk about the battle between trauma and love, and the vicissitudes of development in the wake of trauma and loss. When there is serious trauma and loss in life, especially when it is early, it handicaps the rest of the developmental progression for the whole family as well as for each of its members. In all such cases, there is the question of whether the forces of growth and the healing power of love will be strong enough to overcome or compensate for the destructive and inhibiting powers of trauma and loss. These questions, which are embedded in all great literature, have been explored in analytic theory beginning with Freud. Recent developments in the psychoanalytic literature and especially in two areas of research have helped our thinking enormously and have brought them once more to the center of psychoanalysis.

During the last thirty years, Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory

fostered groundbreaking research on the earliest infant-parent development and the transmission of templates of security, insecurity and trauma from one generation to another. The most recent developments in this area involve emotional communication and affect regulation that parents teach their children without knowing consciously that they are doing so. The basic attachment relationship forms the foundation for the growth of the child's mind throughout the developmental period. This has given us a new way of understanding the role of both conscious and unconscious communication in child development. We now understand that the surface of parenting technique, the things that formerly child developmentalists had focused on, is actually less important than the unconscious communication of security, anxiety or trauma through attachment style, mentalization, and projective and introjective identification.

Secondly, analytic understanding of trauma has been enriched by recent developments in neuroscience. Neuroscientists have been able for the first time to see the crippling of brain development that occurs with trauma and early deprivation. For instance, the need for substitute chemical objects to soothe the irritated brain pathways can lead to a propensity for drug and alcohol addiction. Fear pathways that form in the brain as a result of early trauma become exceedingly resistant to change and growth. Fear and despair hamper parenting, affect attachment styles, and interfere with the transmission of love and security in this family.

From this brief preamble, I'm going to switch gears now to talk in more colloquial terms about the battle between love and hate, trauma and growth in this play, and then discuss how that tension relates to the struggle of each character in the play to parent or to grow. The boys hold the center of the play, their adolescent language at the heart of the comedy. They use their adolescent jokes to disarm the force of the crueler aspects of life and love. As the boys are taken to their grandmothers' house, Jay begins the play by saying, "I hate coming here." Family times are tough. Their loving mother (who was also a loving wife) has died, and their father Eddie who mortgaged his family for the care of his ill wife, must leave them to find work to ensure his financial recovery. So Eddie takes his boys to his mother, who reluctantly takes them in. The boys are motherless, now fatherless, and imprisoned with a hateful, hard-hearted grandmother, an anti-mother who was hard to her own children. Only Bella stands between them and an orphanage – at least metaphorically. And she does so by taking her first stand with Grandma, and insists that Grandma must take in the boys. Each of the adults has a story of developmental delay and handicap which is the result of the impaired parenting in their childhood. Bella stands for the most severe developmental delay, a result of infantile scarlet fever. Other children who did not survive stand symbolically for the greater tragedy of death by trauma and deprivation. Bella is intellectually impaired – "a child" Grandma says. The resulting symbiosis between her and Grandma is one that Grandma both

resents and exploits. But Bella who has such weakness also has strengths that make her level of development more complex than the initial picture of her we are introduced to in Jay and Artie's jokes. In not having the intellectual veneer and ability to falsify or dissemble, Bella always goes straight to the emotional heart of matters, a capacity that is demonstrated as the play progresses and the stakes get higher for her. She begins to want to be the woman that her body makes her want to be, not the child that Grandma tries to keep her. Although she strikes out on her first, belated attempt at independence with her similarly challenged boyfriend, an usher at the local cinema, the last lines of the play make it clear she has just begun to fight for the right to grow.

Uncle Louie and Aunt Gertrude are less fully developed characters. Louie represents the steely side of his mother, taken to the extreme of delinquency. He describes the parenting "tough-love" that produced his tough hide and his criminality. He learned to not fear anyone or anything, just like his mother. That toughness enabled him to face her down, but it cost him his integrity. He is a grown-up delinquent who fears no one and who is constantly on the edge of society. He is Grandma "gone bad." And his literal criminality underscores the emotional criminality that Grandma excuses in herself. Gertrude has sucked in all her fear of her mother. She too is stunted physically and emotionally, and so cannot talk, cannot make a romantic connection, and trembles before the world. Eddie can love, but he cannot be

manly or really productive. The play seems to say that his mother's accusations that he has no balls are correct. Louie has the balls but at the cost of honesty. Eddie has the honesty, but no balls. He is the only one who could be in a marriage, and a loving one at that – but until now, he has not been able to manage the world on his own.

Finally, Grandma: She became tough as nails to survive the trauma of witnessing the beating of her father and other acts of German cruelty to Jews. Given her history, we feel sympathy for her way of being and for the sad fact that the blessings of new life in the next two generations could not save her from her anger and resentment. Her family has suffered her emotional withdrawal and hardening. She fights – almost to the death – the appeals from her children and grandchildren to open up to love. The viciousness she shows to herself and her children is in excess of what is needed for survival and represents her personal version of the crime against humanity. Grandma's hardship in childhood, loss of husband, and alienation from her children are counter-balanced by Jay and Artie's optimistic struggle to grow and to love in the face of the death of their mother, abandonment by their father, and the national trauma of war around them all.

Jay and Artie's grit is at the center of the play. Their humor, their relationship, and their capacity to relate to everyone else ties the whole play together. They have the developmental fluidity to bring out the best in each

character, and they stand up to each of the adults when required. They even cope with Grandma by surviving her while not antagonizing her more than absolutely necessary. In the spirit of the romantic and essentially comic theme that “the child is father to the man,” the boys provide the growth element for each member of their family. They are the real parents in the family. They are companions of a different stripe to Bella and Louie. They get along with Gertrude, whose character is peripheral and not fully developed but who does take in Bella in time of need. The boys are the reason that Eddie takes on the challenge of a job he finally does well in, and in doing so, meets his own mother’s challenge. But most of all, the boys are the ones who bring a fundamental change of heart to Grandma. She softens in her own guarded way, and comes to love them, and she even gives them a present, although as Bella says, she has to be told she’s doing it. And she comes to respect them as they come to respect her.

*Lost in Yonkers* is about the triumph of growth over trauma, of love over hate. As Eddie says, “My wife didn’t turn me against you, Momma. She turned me towards her with love.” That is the love that the boys also had during her lifetime: the love of a mother and of two parents who loved each other. And fundamentally that is why they have love to share, love that turns out to be tougher than the steely anger of their grandmother. As love flows upwards through them into the previous generations, it goes a considerable distance towards freeing up development for Bella and for Grandma. They have had a

secure attachment to loving parents, and that security and the love that is built on it are stronger than steel. It produces “moxie” and “balls.” The kiss they finally force their grandmother to accept, stands, as all comedy does, for the triumph of love over hate.

## References

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.