

Lincoln Center Theater Review

Fall 2015 Issue No.66



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PAPA
HOT



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Lincoln Center Theater Review

A publication of Lincoln Center Theater
 Fall 2015, Issue Number 66
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Special thanks to the Drue Heinz Trust for supporting
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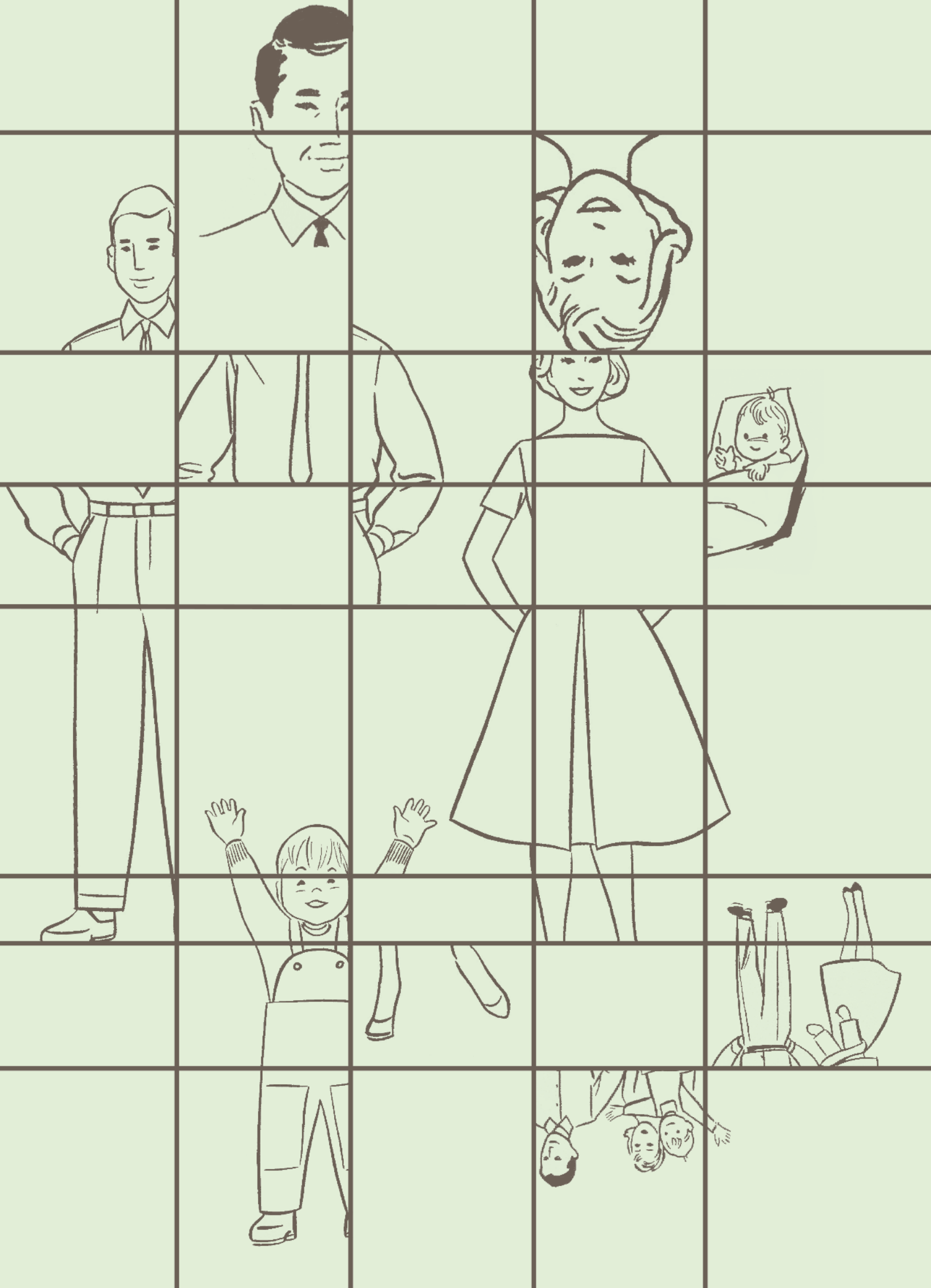
This edition of the *Lincoln Center Theater Review* is also
 supported by the David C. Horn Foundation.

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Courtesy of Mike Berenstain.





| THE RULES OF *ENGAGEMENT* / By Stephanie Grant

Not unlike many straight couples, my partner and I decided to try to get pregnant around the time our sex life went sour. But that overstates it. Simplifies a complex, yet partly unconscious, calculus. Let me back up.

She and I knew, when we fell in love, that we were going to have children together. It was part of *why* we fell in love. At the time, she—let's call her A—was finishing her Ph.D. in anthropology, and I had just published my first novel. She was involved in more than one "story," as she liked to call them; one lover lived in Thailand, the other in Mexico. I felt certain that I occupied a strong, bird-in-the-hand position. I was single—I'd just left a five-year relationship with someone whom I loved deeply but with whom I could not build a life. This because she was—how to put it?—absolutely crazy. Sexy, devastatingly sexy, but certifiable. (Which she announced on our first date, and which I cavalierly brushed aside. But that is another essay.) In A, I glimpsed the promise of a life replete with what Freud had said all of us need: good work and good love. I have never fallen so hard.

To the surprise of our closest friends ("So soon after your last breakup?" mine asked; "With an American?" hers asked), we aban-

doned our former lives, left New York City, and set up a household in Columbus, Ohio, where she had landed her first tenure-track teaching job and where I embarked on my second novel. We agreed that she should get tenure and I should finish my book before we had kids. We didn't love the Midwest, but it was a means to an end, and we buckled down, quite joyfully, to work.

Early on—I don't recall when—dissatisfaction crept into the bedroom. Sex was no longer easy or automatic. Not surprisingly, we had different viewpoints on the problem. Suffice it to say that she disdained what I wanted, and I was unable (she would say unwilling) to provide what she needed. In retrospect, I think our differences—the ways in which we were incompatible—came to be expressed most forcefully in the bedroom. If sex is a kind of theater for the psyche, the bedroom became the stage where we dramatized our disagreements and, perhaps, because of the nature of sexual intimacy, activated each other's deepest wounds. Somewhere along the route—year four? year five?—and despite the obligatory visits to couples therapy—we stopped having sex altogether. Which felt like

a huge relief: the little sex we'd been having often left one or both of us feeling enraged and grief-stricken. At the same time, abandoning sex felt like the worst, indeed the most tragic, outcome possible. We were, both of us, bereft.

By then, we were also trying to get pregnant. When I try to reconstruct how I narrated this to myself—how can I commit to raising children (a lifelong project) with someone with whom I no longer have sex?—the best I can do is say that I pushed my disappointment away. That is, I wanted children, at the time, more than I wanted sex. Or: I knew that I wanted to have children with A, and I knew that I was likely, at some point, to have sex again. I did not dwell on the question of how, or with whom, this would come to pass.

When our twin daughters were born, we were each forty years old, and we hadn't had sex for two years. Once the girls arrived, we didn't care very much. We loved being parents, loved having twins, and we worked very hard at the give-and-go necessary to parenting,

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which was all-consuming and astonishingly exhausting. When we traveled home to New York City to show off the babies, our friends remarked on how well we worked together and how little rancor was evident between us. The idea that our coupledness was tragic (how can we love each other so much and yet not be able to express this sexually?) began to ebb. We abandoned the moribund project of "the two of us" in favor of the ecstatic and ever-unfolding project of "us four."

It wasn't until our daughters were three years old that we recovered enough energy to think about sex again. Of course, we were miserable in our tandem celibacy; neither of us had any notion that abandoning our sexual lives was a good choice for our children or for ourselves. But we were a strong unit; neither A nor I wanted to risk ruining that. We decided to "open up" our relationship. Because one-night stands with quasi-strangers did not appeal, we knew that we had to find a way to establish significant outside sexual relationships that could sustain us without threatening our family.

Once we'd decided, the change came quickly. My partner met someone at a conference. We set up some basic rules: the kids—our foursome—were paramount; no one could audition for the role of "stepmommy"; and out of town was best. The first six months were challenging. I was jealous and resentful until I found a lover and a certain balance of power was restored. Soon the rage and grief we had been living with began to dissipate. We each felt enormously grateful for the other's willingness to make space for our sexual desires. The joy of being fully seen—recognized—returned.

We have been living in this state of mutual recognition ever since. Which is not to say that our relationship is issue-free, far from it. (I like to joke that, now that sex is not a place of constant struggle we are free to argue endlessly about money.) I have always felt lucky to be a lesbian, and I have felt especially so while we've negotiated this. What an added burden heterosexuality brings to this delicate conversation: the (ritualized) expectation of lifelong fidelity (which, from a distance, looks patently absurd), as well as the history of—how to

put it?—*The Battle of the Sexes, Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. The history of misery between men and women. Also known, in some circles, as patriarchy.

The question everyone asks: What do the kids think?

Usually, I dance around the answer—and I'm going to bring out my tap shoes here in order to protect their privacy. No doubt, in a few years they will pen their own essays about their burdensome moms. But the question points to what feels like the paradox of being a queer parent. Before my children were born, I drew a lot of meaning from my queerness. From where I sat, everything looked different: sex and gender, friendship and family; even the nature of intimacy had revealed itself to be more complex than advertised by the mainstream, which is to say, by the straight world. (There is nothing like being disinherited by your parents to give you a fresh take on family ties.) And there was urgent meaning everywhere—in the way I lived my life, in the choices I made and the politics I espoused. I was part of a radical community that was transforming American culture—being queer was a thrilling place to live.

And then came the kids. Who have, of course, brought other meanings with them. Also thrilling. Perhaps what I didn't expect was being integrated into the mainstream, where my children live much of their public lives. At the school talent show, I am one white, middle-class mom among many, raising my head when one of my daughters appears onstage. Indistinguishable. I love my kids, but I don't always like the view. That is, I don't fully recognize myself in these settings, and yet I feel churlish in my resistance: isn't acceptance what queer folks have been after? Well, some of us have, yes; but not all of us, no, not exactly. There is a difference, after all, between acceptance and assimilation. We had, many of us, been hoping to change the world. Quite possibly—and this is not a frivolous fear—it is the world that is changing us.

After much lobbying from them, I took my tween girls to see *Magic Mike XXL* this summer. If you don't know, the movie is about male entertainers of the Chippendale variety, and features heartthrob Channing Tatum. One of my daughters was bored and somewhat irritated by the aggressive male display; the other, whose heterosexuality has recently exploded into view, was elated. She whispered in my ear throughout the movie: who was hot and who wasn't, what was sweet and what was "weird." She was moved by how "loving" the men were with each other and pronounced it "not-homophobic" and "not racist," high praise in her carefully kept book of accounts. At one point, she reached over and held my hand, full, I thought, of both fear and pleasure, full of excitement about what was yet to come.

It was an ecstatic parenting moment—there is no other way to describe it—an ecstatic moment of recognition. I see you, I thought but did not say. I see you—your glorious self—not being me.

Stephanie Grant is the author of two novels, The Passion of Alice, which was nominated for Great Britain's Orange Prize, and Map of Ireland, which was selected as an Honor Title in Fiction by the Massachusetts Book Awards. Her just completed third novel, Home Equity, is about contemporary marriage and debt. Grant teaches in the MFA program at American University in Washington, D.C.





THE HUG

By Thom Gunn
1929-2004

It was your birthday, we had drunk and dined
Half of the night with our old friend
Who'd showed us in the end
To a bed I reached in one drunk stride.
Already I lay snug,
And drowsy with the wine dozed on one side.

I dozed, I slept. My sleep broke on a hug,
Suddenly, from behind,
In which the full lengths of our bodies pressed:
Your instep to my heel,
My shoulder-blades against your chest.
It was not sex, but I could feel
The whole strength of your body set,
Or braced, to mine,
And locking me to you
As if we were still twenty-two
When our grand passion had not yet
Become familial.
My quick sleep had deleted all
Of intervening time and place.
I only knew
The stay of your secure firm dry embrace.

Born on August 29, 1929, in Gravesend, England. Thomas William Gunn wrote many books including *The Fighting Terms*, *Touch*, *To the Air*, and *The Man with Night Sweats*, exploring themes of sexuality, intimacy, drugs, and death. The recipient of such laurels as the Levinson Prize and the Rockefeller Award, Gunn died on April 25, 2004.

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Lincoln Center Theater
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New York, New York 10023

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