



WRONG FOR each other



by Norm Foster

A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki

The Public Theatre and Professor Martin Andrucki

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By Norm Foster

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A STUDY GUIDE

By Martin Andrucki

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THE AUTHOR.

Born in Newmarket, Ontario in 1949, Norm Foster is the author, to date, of 57 plays—20 more than Shakespeare. The following material is taken from his official website:

“Norm Foster has been the most produced playwright in Canada every year for the past twenty years. His plays receive an average of one hundred and fifty productions annually, making him, by far, and the most produced playwright in the history of his country. . . .

“Norm attended West Hill Collegiate Institute and then went on to study Radio & Television Arts at Centennial College in Toronto and then Confederation College in Thunder Bay. Upon completion of his studies, he began a radio career that would span 25 years and which would take him from Thunder Bay to Winnipeg to Kingston and finally to Fredericton, New Brunswick. It was in Fredericton in 1980 that Norm was introduced to the world of theatre.

“A friend of mine was going to audition for a community theatre production of *Harvey* and he asked me to go along. I went, just to see what this theatre thing was all about, and I ended up getting the part of Elwood P. Dowd. I had never even seen a play in my life before this.’

“Foster fell in love with the theatre right then and there, and two years later he penned his first professionally produced play, *Sinners*. It was produced by Theatre New Brunswick and directed by Malcolm Black, who would also direct Foster's next effort, the highly successful, *The Melville Boys*. *The Melville Boys* would go on to be produced across Canada and in the United States, including a well-received run off-Broadway in New York. It would become Foster's signature play, and the one which would bring his name to the forefront of Canadian theatre. Since then, Norm Foster has produced an astonishing output of work. Over fifty plays in all, including *The Affections of May*, the most produced play in Canada in 1991. . . .

“Foster's plays are known mainly for their comedic qualities, but they are not without their serious moments as well. ‘I find it far more satisfying if I can make an audience laugh and feel a little heartache

within the same story. The farces (*Sinners*, *Self-Help*) are a lot of fun to write but it's the stories that touch an audience's heart as well as its funny bone that are the most rewarding. . . .'

"Norm Foster does not limit his efforts to writing though. He also tours with Patricia Vanstone in his play *On A First Name Basis*.

"Acting is great fun, but writing is my first love. A lot of people out there like the 'idea' of being a writer. The romance of it. The notion that we all sit around in cafes and talk about our writing with other writers. Personally, I would rather do it than talk about it. The actual process of writing is what excites me. Creating a world from the ground up and populating it with characters I've pulled out of my head. This is why I rarely set my plays in real cities with place names we recognize. I want the audience to imagine these locations right along with me."

"When asked to try and pin down a common theme that runs through his plays, Foster says, 'I think for the most part, they're about ordinary people just trying to get by in life. I never set out with a monumental purpose in mind. I'm not trying to teach an audience a lesson or pass along some profound message, because I don't think I'm qualified. What I am trying to do is make them feel a little better about this world, and that's not easy these days.'"

Wrong for Each Other, the author's ninth play, premiered in 1993 at Theatre New Brunswick in Fredericton, New Brunswick

THE SETTING.

The action of *Wrong for Each Other* unfolds in various locations in an un-named big city. The events of the play flow freely through space and time, moving from public to private settings, and from the present to the past.

A table and two chairs represent the restaurant which is the main setting. . . . The other settings: A few plants to show a flower shop; a breakfast table, two stools and a stove to represent Rudy's apartment; a table and chairs to represent Norah's apartment; a couple of bleacher seats to represent a ball park; and a bench and locker to represent a hockey rink dressing room. . . . *It is suggested that all of the props used in the flashback scenes be off-white in color. Everything from the plants, to the tables, even the coffee.*

This scenic arrangement supports the fundamental structure of the drama, which is based on the interplay between the characters' memories of their romantic past and the contrasting reality of their current relationship.

THE PLOT. The action begins as Rudy runs into Norah, his ex-wife, at lunchtime in a downtown restaurant. The meeting, which is apparently accidental, is their first encounter in almost four years. Norah agrees to allow Rudy to join her for lunch, and they begin to reminisce about their past together. They re-enact these memories in locations that are sketched out in various settings on stage.

Their first shared memory is of their meeting nine years earlier while they were both shopping for plants. Rudy claims he is looking for a gift for his mother, and asks Norah's advice because he doesn't "know a whole lot about plants." She recommends a hibiscus, and things move on from there. After learning that Norah lives nearby, Rudy claims to be a virtual neighbor, and notes approvingly that it's a "small world." In fact, he sings the Disneyland song of that name, realizing immediately that he's being "goofy." Eventually he asks for her phone number, and, after much hesitation, she supplies it, understanding that this will lead to further developments.

They return to the present and the restaurant, but again their shared past leads them back into their memories, this time to a ball park, where they went on their first date. Rudy is an ardent fan; Norah is essentially indifferent to the game. They fall into conversation and exchange information about their lives. He's a housepainter, loves rhythm 'n' blues, and comes from a family that runs a fruit and vegetable market; she manages the city's civic center, listens to classical music and jazz, and has a father who plays the violin in the symphony orchestra.

When, given Norah's lack of interest in the game, Rudy suggests they leave, she immediately assumes she has said something to provoke this abrupt termination of their date, delivering a long speech in which she accuses herself of talking too much. Rudy then wonders if, in view of their sharply diverging tastes and social backgrounds, they are fundamentally mismatched, a concern only sharpened by their conflicting views on having children (he: yes; she: no), and even their choice of ballpark snacks: a club sandwich for him; a chef's salad for her.

Returning to the present, she acknowledges that, though she wasn't enjoying the game, she was glad to be with somebody who was actually having fun, and wanted "some of that to rub off on me."

The memory of fun takes them back to the past, to an amusement park, where they are riding the roller-coaster. This time Norah is enjoying herself, while Rudy frets about safety and the likelihood that he will vomit. As their car begins its plunge, Norah initiates their first kiss.

Another few moments of reminiscence in the present lead them to Rudy's old apartment, where, after their fifth date, they are about to have sex for the first time, at which point the lights go down on stage, ending the first scene of Act One.

As the second scene begins, we are still in Rudy's apartment, but now it is the morning after their first night together. Norah teases him about his noisy love-making, and he takes offense. She discovers that he has also been seeing another girl, but that he has broken up with her—20 minutes earlier. At which point she lays down the law to him: "When you're with me, you're with me alone. Whether it lasts a week or a month or a year, it's me and nobody else, all right?"

As the scene continues, we learn additional details about their sex lives: Rudy has been to bed with nine women; Norah, with ten men. Rudy is taken aback by this number. He is also rattled to learn that Norah had recently been having an affair with a much older man named Norville, a musician who plays in the local symphony orchestra. We also discover that her mother abandoned the family when her daughter was two years old, and that Norah was raised by her single father, a symphonic colleague of

Norville's. Hearing about her family, Rudy invites Norah to meet his parents, an offer she turns down because she doesn't want to "rush things."

The action returns again to the present, as Norah informs Rudy that she is now the tour manager for the symphony orchestra, a job requiring constant attention to detail, just right for a person who describes herself as "demanding" and "finicky." We learn that Rudy's father died two years ago, something he didn't tell Norah about because he didn't want to talk to her, though now that they've crossed paths, both declare they are glad to see each other. Rudy asks about her father, and that leads us to the past again, back to Norah's apartment.

They have just finished hosting her father for dinner, an event Norah thinks went well until Rudy tells her that their guest spent much of the evening covertly throwing food at him. A sign, she concludes, that her father hates Rudy, a problem for their relationship.

This leads Rudy to suggest that they live together, and then, in a romantic leap, to propose marriage because, as he declares, "I love you." She is surprised by the first idea, but flabbergasted by his uttering of the "L" word, which introduces a multitude of complications into their life together. In view of this reaction, Rudy wonders whether they might need some time apart to assess their feelings.

When Norah agrees, Rudy, who was expecting her to reject the idea, is shocked, and immediately withdraws it. But the genie is out of the bottle, and they agree to an indeterminate period of separation, bringing the first act to a close.

As Act II begins, Norah is sitting alone at the restaurant table. Behind her, the settings for her and Rudy's apartments have been combined, visually declaring the merger of their lives at some point in their shared past. As she sits, we hear a "pre-recorded exchange" in which Norah begs to hold her baby. But, Rudy tells her, she can't because, "She's gone."

Rudy returns to the table, and Norah queries him about the current status of his life. How has he been doing in meeting his goals in life, his "timetable": "Sex before eighteen. . . Your own place at twenty. . . Your own business at twenty-five. . . The house in the country at forty. . ." All accomplished, except for one: "What about the family at thirty?" Not achieved, but, he asserts, "It'll happen. . . One day."

Again, the past beckons, this time leading them to a dressing room in the civic center, Norah's old place of employment. They're there because she's "taking a break" from their wedding reception taking place upstairs. She is, she says, "scared. . . What if...what if this doesn't work? What if we made a mistake? . . . How do we know we're right for each other? . . . And what if we have kids? . . . I'm worried I'll do what my mother did." Again declaring his love, Rudy urges her to embrace the happiness she feels in the current moment and to stop worrying about an unknowable future. At which point she astonishes him by saying, "I love you too, Rudy."

This draws them back to the present, where they recall that their marriage lasted only three years. When she says there is currently no man in her life, Rudy invites her to have dinner with him. She

declines, and heads off to the ladies room, dodging this possible renewal of their relationship. As she leaves, Rudy returns to the past, crossing into their shared apartment.

We discover that Norah has lost a baby who died in child birth. As a result, she has stopped eating and going to work. As a matter of fact, she hasn't been out of the house in two months, still overwhelmed by grief and depression over the loss of the child. Rudy tells her he has to leave on business, and that he will be working late, so she shouldn't expect him to be home for dinner. That detail cues a move back to the present.

Norah wonders if that was the moment Rudy started being unfaithful to her: "You knew how I felt," she reminds him. "You sleep with me and nobody else." Rudy attempts to excuse himself by recalling how withdrawn and inaccessible she had become, and their quiet conversation escalates into loud recrimination as he discovers that she has resumed her relationship with Norville. But despite the bitterness in their exchanges, he persists in inviting her to have dinner with him. She persists in refusing, and the emotional energy of their dialogue propels them into the past—to the moment where their marriage ended.

His infidelity and dishonesty were the decisive factors in their break-up, but Rudy refuses to accept that as the ultimate cause of their impending divorce. Instead, he accuses her of quitting on their marriage because she is obsessed with having been abandoned by her mother, a loss that has undermined her confidence in her ability to sustain a stable family life. "You said you didn't want to turn out like her, but that's exactly what you're doing," he declares.

The action returns to the restaurant, and Rudy resumes his campaign to renew their relationship. Norah tries to dismiss the idea as pure folly, saying it would never have arisen had it not been for their accidental meeting in the restaurant. But Rudy reveals that their meeting was no accident, that he has been thinking about her constantly, and that in fact he followed her all morning, right to her table.

He persists in wooing her, telling her he will call her office, and asking what time she arrives at work. And she persists in refusing him, ordering him not to call. Finally she informs him that Norville has asked her to marry him. At last, Rudy seems defeated, ready to say goodbye permanently. Norah leaves the restaurant, gone forever it would seem. But then, a moment later, she returns, saying, "I usually get into the office at about eight-thirty." And with this promise of love's renewal, the play ends.

THE CHARACTERS.

What does he want, and what is he willing to do to get it? The answers to these questions define a character on stage.

Late in the play, Norah asks **Rudy** about his "timetable"—the set of goals and deadlines he has laid out for his life. These include both personal and professional intentions, with the ultimate objective being to establish a family by age thirty. Rudy, through force of will and dogged persistence, has achieved all of those ambitions except the last. But just as an arch needs a keystone, the arc of Rudy's life requires that final structural element to stand firmly in place, stable and complete.

As he says to Norah in their final scene together, “You’re the one for me and I’m the one for you and we should’ve realized this a long time ago. . . . I’m coming after you. . . . Because you’re the one. You’re it. . . . Eventually we’re gonna get married because we’ll know its forever. . . . So there you have it.”

So Rudy has convinced himself that their relationship is somehow destined to continue and to end in eternal marriage. The family he has scheduled may be materializing a little late, but he is confident some cosmic force has ordained that it will be.

This confidence expresses itself in Rudy’s most conspicuous personal trait: unstoppable insistence on getting what he wants. On the evening he declares his love, he has this exchange with Norah:

RUDY: Why did you invite me to dinner with your father if you didn’t want to get closer?

NORAH: I didn’t invite you. You invited you!

RUDY: Well, I couldn’t wait for you to do it. I’d never get to meet him. . . .

NORAH; I knew it was a bad idea.

RUDY: Am I pushing things? Is that it?

NORAH: Yes.

RUDY: I’m being pushy?

NORAH: You want so much so fast. I just don’t see what the big hurry is.

RUDY: There’s no hurry. For you maybe this is a hurry. For me, this is a normal pace. It’s a walk.

What seems like a mad dash to Norah is a mere stroll to Rudy, a man energized by his desire to meet the compelling demands of his timetable.

We see this quality again when he confesses to Norah that their meeting at the restaurant wasn’t accidental, but the result of a relentless plan on his part. “I’ve been following you all morning,” he says, “just waiting for the right time to approach you.” When Norah accuses him of lying, he refutes her by reciting a list of everything she has done thus far in her day. “Determination” was the driving force behind all this stalking. “I had to see you. . . . I had to. I can’t get you out of my mind.”

We should note that Norah accuses him of lying about all this, not simply because it sounds implausible, but because Rudy has a habit of deception. He has lied about old girlfriends, and his adulterous affair in the wake of Norah’s miscarriage was cloaked by lies. So, along with pushiness, recurrent dishonesty is a trait that marks Rudy’s character. Why is this?

Perhaps it is because Rudy is so absolutely convinced that his plans are destined to succeed, that they are sanctioned by fate. If what you want is what is dictated by destiny, then lying to achieve your ends makes perfect sense. The end justifies the means, because the end is inevitable.

“Rudy” is the diminutive form of the Germanic name, “Rudolph,” which means “famous wolf.” Whether the playwright named his character with this in mind is irrelevant to the name’s appropriateness for the man who bears it. Like a wolf, Rudy stalked his prey, Norah, finally cornering her in the restaurant. There he resumes his insistent wooing, his unstoppable pushiness. And, as the play’s final moment of reversal reveals, he succeeds in catching his quarry.

Norah's character has been shaped by a painful event that occurred early in her life: her mother's desertion of the family when Norah was two years old. As she and Rudy discuss the future of their marriage, she wonders, "What if I'm a lousy mother? . . . I'm worried I'll do what my mother did. Maybe I won't be able to handle it either." Her mother's abandonment has left her feeling betrayed and unsure of herself, reluctant to make emotional commitments for fear that she will false to them.

It has also led her to value stability and safety as the most important elements in her relationships with men. "When you're with me, you're with me alone," she tells Rudy as they are getting to know each other. "Whether it lasts a week or a month or a year, it's me and nobody else, all right?"

But Rudy violates this rule in the dark period following the stillbirth of their first child. As a result, she promptly leaves him, to return to Norville, the never-seen older man who is so much like her father.

Given Rudy's exuberantly pushy personality, why did a person like Norah, who values the quiet virtues of stability and safety, take up with him in the first place? We find at least a partial solution to this puzzle in a remark she makes about her experience with Rudy at the baseball game: she says she was glad to be with somebody who was actually having fun, and wanted "some of that to rub off on me."

Norville doesn't seem like a person who takes that kind of raucous pleasure in life. He plays the bassoon, not a splashy instrument, and his dressing robe is a subdued black. If Rudy were to be a musician, he would probably play the trumpet, or maybe the drums. Norville is a quiet man; Rudy is not. In fact, Norah teases him about his noisy lovemaking, probably not a feature of Norville's bedroom behavior. Rudy offers a kind of liberating joy; Norville promises shelter and safety.

So Norah is pulled between opposites: the fatherly Norville, and the bad-boy Rudy. She begins and ends in that situation.

THEMES. In the traditional understanding of sexual identities, it is assumed that men and women express their common humanity in radically different ways. "The opposite sex" is the phrase we use to capture this difference. If the sexes are, in fact, "opposite," then perhaps we're all "wrong for each other," as high divorce rates in the in the years since World War II might suggest.

Hostility between the sexes has been a recurrent theme of drama since its beginnings. In *The Suppliant Women*, a tragedy from 463 B.C., Aeschylus tells the story of 50 women who flee to Greece to escape forced marriages to 50 of their cousins from Egypt. In the course of their attempt to escape unwanted bondage, 49 of those women kill their husbands after their compulsory weddings.

So much for marriage *en masse*. What about individual "opposite-sex" couplings in dramatic literature? Well, we have Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. She murders him on the day he returns home after ten years of fighting the Trojan War. Wrong for each other. Then there's Oedipus who marries Jocasta only to discover that she's his mother. Very wrong.

Shakespeare gives us Macbeth and his Lady. She goads him into murdering the king, then kills herself when guilt drives her to madness. Not so much wrong for each other as hellishly well-matched. And

let's not forget Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* who, in a fit of insane jealousy, accuses his chaste wife of adultery and orders her infant daughter to be killed, all of which causes his young son to die of grief.

There's not much improvement when we come to modern drama. Ibsen's groundbreaking *A Doll's House* is about a woman named Nora who abandons home and children because her husband doesn't understand her. Much of the work of August Strindberg, Sweden's greatest playwright, features vampire-like women who suck the spiritual life out of their husbands. Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, arguably America's greatest play, portrays a mismatched couple who are slowly, but unintentionally, killing each other and their children. Which reminds us of George and Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They tear each other to shreds on stage while also inventing, and destroying, an imaginary child.

Tragedy has gotten a lot of mileage out of "the war between the sexes?"

Of course, the same is true about comedy, which features its own gallery of characters who are aggressively wrong for each other. Kate and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* come to mind, as do Benedick and Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*. In *Private Lives*, Noel Coward gives us a hilariously incompatible couple in Elyot and Amanda. Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn spend a lot of time on screen playing up their differences of opinion and temperament, only to be happily reconciled in the end. And is there a more unlikely couple than Woody Allen and Diane Keaton?

Unlike tragedy, however, comedy shows us characters overcoming obstacles and getting on with the fundamental business of life: keeping the human species going through our powers of procreation. Traditionally, this has meant plays about wooing and wedding. And "to woo," according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, means, "To entreat, solicit, or importune."

That certainly describes a lot of what goes on in "*Wrong for Each Other*." Rudy is a champion importuner, while Nora is a major-league resister. They nonetheless marry. We learn, however, that wedded bliss was not a big component of that partnership. Instead, Nora sank into a deep depression after losing her baby, and Rudy committed adultery. So far, so Strindberg.

But the playwright leads his characters—and his audience—into this vale of tears only to make a U-turn at the last moment, when Nora, in effect, says "yes" to Rudy's entreaties. In an instant, Rudy and Nora step over a threshold leading from serious loss to comic fulfillment.

But given their history together, it's difficult not to ask ourselves whether the future will repeat the past. Rudy will not stop being Rudy, just as Nora will remain Nora. Rudy has battered down the door of her resistance, but is that the same as being fully welcomed into her life?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. Rudy's most conspicuous trait is his dogged insistence on getting what he wants. Do you know people like that? How do you feel about them?
2. Can you think of examples of people who seem "wrong for each other," who have nonetheless had successful relationships?
3. Given the big differences between Rudy and Norah in social background, occupation, and culture, why is she still attracted to him?
4. Same question concerning Rudy: what attracts him about Norah?
5. Rudy lies frequently in the play. Why do you think he does that?
6. Why do you think Norah is so insistent that Rudy be absolutely faithful to her?
7. What role does Norah's mother play in her emotional life?