

BEAU JEST

By James Sherman

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A STUDY GUIDE

By Alina Volobuyeva

Bates College

THE AUTHOR. James Sherman currently lives and works in his birthplace, Chicago – a city which he continuously celebrates in his writing. Chicago often figures as a backdrop in Sherman’s heartwarming comedies, which points to the influence it has had on the burgeoning dramatist.

Sherman quickly became involved in the whirlpool of Chicago’s theater culture. Of all theater companies he could have chosen as a starting point for his creative career, Sherman opted for the one whose name and influence spread like wildfire across the nation: The Second City. There, he worked both as a performer and a writer for three years in the mid-1970’s. Acting and writing for The Second City, Sherman was very much in touch with the latest trends in theater, for it was Chicago’s theater community that engendered the modern improvisational comedy movement in the country.

Sherman was not only connected to the tendencies of his own time, he inadvertently tapped into the comedic legacy that dated back to at least the 16th century, to the improvisational traditions of Italian *commedia dell’arte*. The playwright went on to explore the heritage of classical drama in Brandeis University, from which he received his M.F.A. degree in Theatre Arts in 1979. Apart from compiling rich literary knowledge, Sherman took care to exercise his acting skills, and for a time he was an acting student of Uta Hagen. His acting background further contributed to the development of his writing style. The sense of timing and spontaneity of an actor is readily apparent in his comedies.

Dennis Zacek, the director of many of Sherman’s plays, including *Beau Jest*, adds:

It has been suggested that theater style in Chicago is a cross between Stanislavski and Second City. Chicago theater artists are concerned with honesty of emotion and also tend to feel comfortable with the process and results of improvisation. James Sherman is no exception to this; as a member of The Second City Company, he was conditioned to “write on his feet.” Consequently, his work is humorous, immediate, and designed to be only as long as the writer’s objective requires.

Most of Sherman's plays revolve around the themes of Jewish culture and close-knit families. In 1985, *Chicago Sun-Times* christened Sherman as "the Neil Simon of Lincoln Avenue," after the premiere of *The God of Isaac*, a play which centers on Jewish heritage. The *Reader* described the play as "A warm, enjoyable search for roots, a search everyone in this society can identify with." This exploration of Jewish roots and their ramifications distinguish Sherman's work, which he further seasons with romance and family life.

Since 1986, James Sherman has been a playwright-in-residence at the Victory Gardens Theater, a place that dedicates itself to the development of an ethnically and culturally diverse community of artists. Sherman's other premieres at the Victory Gardens include *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*, and *Relatively Close*. *Beau Jest* became the theatre's biggest box office success. When the play transferred to New York, it became the Lamb's Theatre's longest-running production ever (1991-93). Productions of *Beau Jest* in Canada, Mexico, South Africa, England, Venezuela, Australia, Turkey, and Germany have brought Sherman and Victory Gardens international acclaim. Indeed, as Dennis Zacek said, "James Sherman has proven to be one of the most popular playwrights to emerge from Victory Gardens Theater. His writing is both funny and universal in its approach."

Sherman has been a teacher of playwriting and acting on the faculties of Columbia College Chicago, DePaul University, the Second City Training Center, Chicago Dramatists Workshop, Victory Gardens Theater, and at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. He was a visiting professor for the spring '01 semester in Seoul, South Korea, at the Korean National University of the Arts. Sherman was awarded a playwriting grant from the Illinois Arts Council for 2002. *The Old Man's Friend* and *Jacob and Jack* won the Streisand Festival of New Jewish Plays in La Jolla, California. He has been the recipient of fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, the Ragdale Foundation, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and Yaddo.

THE SETTING. The play takes place in Chicago in 1989, when the play was written. However, James Sherman did not inscribe any specific indications of the late 80's in either the setting or the action of the play, which allows for the temporal flexibility of the piece.

Although Sherman does not limit his play to any particular year, he does fix it in a specific season. He chooses spring, which is of course loaded with symbolic connotations. Spring has been traditionally linked with the celebration of new life, with the renewing powers of nature, abundance, fertility and love. The spring aura, like a film score, is omnipresent in *Beau Jest*. It informs both the decisions of the characters and the action of the entire play. Characters go through a series of recognitions and reversals, which leads them to relinquish old ways of life in favor of a fresh start.

The time of day also plays an important part. It mirrors the idea of rebirth encapsulated in the symbolism of spring. The first two acts are set in the evening, when Sarah's trick plan is still going strong and the parents are happily deceived. The last act, however, is the time of revelation and change. The play ends in the morning, as opposed to afternoon or evening, thus signaling the ascendancy of truth and a new beginning for all the characters.

Sherman has chosen to set his play in the Lincoln Park area, a very nice neighborhood which he knows by heart. Sarah Goldman is a kindergarten teacher, and Lincoln Park area is home to a number of excellent educational institutions, including two elementary schools.

Sarah lives in a one bedroom apartment (where the action of the entire play takes place) as opposed to a more spacious dwelling. The smallness of the apartment contributes to the claustrophobic sense with which Sherman plays. The family members are constantly on top of each other. Their excessive mental closeness has pushed their daughter to the end of her rope. Sherman could have easily staged his comedy in the parents' house. However, such a *mise-en-scene* would have lost the physical embodiment of the metaphor which Sherman carefully constructed: the invasion of the daughter's life by parental forces.

PLOT. *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote about *Beau Jest*: "Hilarious and quite moving. Sherman wonderfully blends farce with genuine insight."

We are indeed dealing with farce in *Beau Jest*. Farce is all about concealment and revelation. There is always a tension between being found out and maintaining the deception. The entire plot of *Beau Jest* hinges on Sarah Goldman's lie. Had she been up-front with her parents from the start, the play would have never taken place. There simply wouldn't have been a comic situation for the playwright to explore. However, fortunately for us, the audience, Sarah is controlled by the fear of disappointing her parents and, like any farcical character, is driven by her obsessive need to conceal the truth. Sarah's resolution to fabricate the perfect boyfriend thus sets the plot in motion. Apart from farcical elements, Sherman keeps to the classical template in constructing his plot. Dennis Zacek explains:

The script is written in a three act form, and as such, it has a somewhat classical structure. We, the audience, are presented with a situation, a complication, a climax, and a denouement. We experience a disordered world which is returned to order and Sherman allows the audience to experience mirth without taking a pejorative attitude to any particular character or characters.

The play opens with Sarah and her current boyfriend, Chris, waiting for the hired escort, who is to act out Chris' role in front of Sarah's parents. Robert Schroeder, Sarah's date for the evening, promptly arrives. After having small talk, which informs the audience of both Chris' and Bob's professional statuses as well as of some of their personality differences, Chris is "outa here."

Once Chris is gone, Sherman conveys further information on the background which made Schroeder's presence necessary. In fact, Bob is the perfect medium by means of which the playwright can dish up the premise of the plot; for Schroeder is in the same position as the audience. He literally has no idea about either what he is in for or what has happened prior to his walking through the door. The presence of such a character is a convenient device for providing exposition in the most natural and justified manner.

We thus learn that Sarah has been dating Chris, an otherwise perfectly nice guy, but who as his first name suggests, is not Jewish. This has automatically put Chris on her parents' black list. "So," Sarah tells Bob, "[Chris and I have] been seeing each other on the sly for the past

six months.” Instead of confronting her parents, Sarah lied that she had “stopped seeing Chris.” And after her mother’s attempts to “fix [her] up” all the time became unbearable, Sarah “just *invented* a boyfriend,” “just so [her parents would] feel better.” Although Sarah is aware of the silliness of her decision, she says that the wild story was concocted out of loving consideration: “They’re my *parents*. My dad was sick last year. My mother’s been so tense. I just can’t give them any grief right now.” Since Sarah was “too embarrassed by the whole thing” for any of her friends to know about it, she called Bob’s agency. Sherman has thus set up a perfectly absurd situation that can only happen in farce. However, this “absurdity” is an intrinsic part of our reality. Eric Bentley further underlines: “The ‘absurdity’ expresses the real absurdity of life.... If art imitates life, it should be added that while naturalistic art imitates the surfaces, ‘melodramatic’ art imitates what is beneath the surface.” Thus, the situation that Sarah finds herself in is deeply human, that all of us can share.

In the following speech, Sarah serves us the next portion of an orderly laid-out exposition. We learn about her family, about what they do and where they live. Sarah also fills in Bob on the development of their imaginary relationship, at which point Bob informs her of his own background: he isn’t Jewish. “Honest mistake” on the part of Bob’s agency thus exhilarates the action and whets the audience’s appetite: What is going to happen now? What will Sarah do now that her brilliant plan has failed? The obvious answer is that they will, of course, go through with the plan. While Sarah is having a breakdown, Bob takes control, fulfilling his role of a gentleman:

BOB. Sarah. Sarah. It’ll be all right. Look... I’m a good actor. I was going to have to do some acting anyway.

SARAH. They’ll know.

BOB. No, it’ll be all right. I can improvise. I took classes at Second City.

SARAH. Oh, God.

BOB. Hey, lots of people think I’m Jewish. I’m taken for Jewish all the time.

SARAH. They’ll know.

BOB. I once did a six month tour of “Fiddler on the Roof.” Topol thought I was Jewish.

But Sarah’s parents “can spot a Jew a mile away. It’s like radar.” So who is going to win: the trained actor or the intuitive parents? The doorbell rings as if to announce the beginning of the performance. Just before the curtain rises, Bob learns his character’s name: David Steinberg. After Joel, Sarah’s brother, has entered, Bob discovers that his new character, apart from being Jewish, is also a doctor. While Bob tries his best to flesh out David Steinberg, the siblings chatter along revealing their mother’s obsession with knowing about every single move her children make.

JOEL. I tried an experiment. I went nine whole days without talking to her.

SARAH. What happened?

JOEL. Well, the National Guard was called out, of course. I mean, nine days. I had to have been lying in that gutter she’s always talking about. Have you talked to her?

SARAH. She only called me four times. Today.

Although Miriam has to know absolutely everything about her children’s lives, neither she, nor Abe breathe a word about any trouble in their lives. They have, for example, hidden the

fact that Abe “got held up again” and that for that reason he is “closing the Jackson Park store.” Sarah learns this from her brother: “I wish they would tell me these things.”

The doorbell rings again. Enter the much-anticipated Mom and Dad. And the long-awaited meeting takes place. Miriam seems to accept Sarah’s “perfect boyfriend” right away, despite the fact that he doesn’t “look” Jewish or knows anything about Sephardi Jews, or salmonella. Bob utilizes his acting skills and charisma to the maximum to cover his lack of ethnic and medical knowledge.

Once the parents have entered the scene, the action revolves around the table, food, and Jewish traditions. Sherman sets the first scene on Shabbat, the beginning of the holy day of rest and contemplation. It is a family night that calls for lighting of candles, recitation of blessings before and after eating, along with other rituals. The non-Jewish audience observes the rituals through Bob’s perspective, until the actor flawlessly recites the blessing for the wine, leaving both the audience and Sarah “awestruck.”

Scene 2 opens with everybody “sitting around the table, having coffee, finishing birthday cake.” After the usual squabble with Miriam about a trifling detail, Abe delivers his joke, which, curiously, only Bob appreciates. Miriam proceeds to question Bob/David about his “medical practice.” Once again, Bob passes the test wonderfully, supplying his listeners with ample information of Transient Ischemic Attack. The evening continues with the family’s prating about. The flow of the conversation at times gets interrupted by Abe and Miriam’s bickering. They talk about Abe’s business, and their heritage, and about opera. They of course “do presents,” and Abe happily receives his n-th tie. Then there is picture time, at which point Bob exhibits his acting proficiency by kissing Sarah for their mutual picture. Right after, the party leaves the apartment. Bob’s successful performance is once again underlined by Miriam’s “absolute, complete pleasure” upon meeting Bob/David, and Sarah’s exultation: “You laughed in all the right places. You ate like you knew what it was.... My mother’s going to be walking on air for days, talking about you. You’re sure you’re not Jewish?” Sarah makes out the check to Bob’s Heaven Sent Escort Agency as a final thank you: “You really saved my life tonight.” And just as the heaven-sent Bob exists, Chris rings at the door.

Act II begins much like Act I, with Chris and Sarah “sitting on the couch.” It is their anniversary and Chris presents Sarah with a gift, while Sarah can offer nothing in return because she’s been “so busy. Getting ready for the seder.” Chris’ “stand-in” arrives, again mirroring Act I. This time however, Chris does not even deign to say hi to Bob, he really does “hate this.” After Chris’ departure, there is another obstacle to Sarah’s plan, this time it is not Sarah who tries to back out, but Bob: “I don’t think we should do this.... We pulled it off once. I don’t think we can get away with it again.... I just hate to keep fooling them.” However, Sarah seems to know what buttons to push when dealing with a sensitive actor: “You should’ve seen my mother last night. She was so heartbroken when I told her you couldn’t come to her seder. She set a place for you anyway. It was so pitiful...” Bob stays and the second performance commences.

Once again, the action revolves around the Jewish tradition, which in its turn revolves around the table. If in Act I the audience was getting acquainted with the tradition of Shabbat, in Act II Sherman introduces us to Passover Seder. We see the family leaf through their Haggadahs, the traditional prayer books, and go through the order of the service. The

service gets briefly interrupted by yet another stellar performance from Bob as Dr. David Steinberg on call; he beautifully delivers a story he's heard on the radio earlier that day (and which Miriam heard too), which he then tailored to his character. They then proceed to do the Four Questions, one of the most important parts of the Passover Seder, The scene ends with Abe's invitation to eat.

Scene 2 of Act II opens after the rest of the party has left the apartment. Bob and Sarah are the only ones who remain. They proceed to drink vodka, over which Bob (just as he did in Act I, only minus the drink) reveals his acting tricks, such as the beeper's going off during the service. They soon start talking about deeper things, such as Sarah's job in kindergarten, her view on life, and Bob's childhood relationship with his father. We find out that "both [his] parents are dead" and that his "life is very ... transitory." Sarah expresses her wish to see Bob perform and even offered her help in establishing a connection with her friend, who is "the casting director for Milwaukee Rep." However, what is really happening is the beginning of the development of a personal, rather than professional relationship. In Sarah's request to "let [her] know next time [Bob is] in something," there is a germ of something very strong, an anticipation of the twist about to take place in the last Act. The final fact that seals their relationship as personal and no longer professional is the moment when Bob refuses to take Sarah's money:

SARAH. I have to pay you.

BOB. No, you don't. You allowed me to spend Passover with you and your family. It was wonderful.

SARAH. Are you sure?

BOB. Absolutely.

As they walk to the door, Sarah keeps coming up with questions that have only one objective: to keep Bob for longer. And she is successful in pursuing her goal, for she not only ends up receiving "a Bob kiss," but also gets to keep Bob for a much longer time, in fact longer than she initially imagined, for Bob and Sarah start what promises to be a very strong romantic relationship.

Act III opens with Sarah's answering Chris' phone call. This time Chris is not even physically present, as he was in the previous two acts. Sherman thus shows the change in Sarah and Chris' relationship. The emotional distance between the two characters that was present from the very first act has been gradually building up in the course of the play and is now physically manifest: Sarah can't find time to have a proper *phone* conversation with Chris.

Sarah doesn't have time for Chris, but she does take the time to plan her engagement to Dr. David Steinberg. The engagement party is the occasion for which Bob has been asked to appear for his last performance. Bob is shocked at the news, but agrees to go along, once Sarah mentions the happy look on her mother's face.

Sarah has also taken the time to script her breakup with Dr. Steinberg, but hasn't had the time to sort out her real life: Chris is still unaware of the fact that Sarah is breaking up with him, her future with Bob is also under question. Bob confronts the situation and attempts to persuade Sarah to "go public." Before he can say anything else, a doorbell rings.

Enter Joel. The observing quiet therapist has finally acted on his instincts and discovered the truth: the real Dr. David Steinberg is “eighty years old and works in Orthopedics.” Sarah is thus forced to explain the whole situation. This is the first moment of recognition and reversal which will be followed by several others, and will finally throw off the protective cloak of Sarah’s deception and unveil the truth.

Once Joel learns the truth, he proceeds to use his professional “psychoanalyzing” skills to shed light on Sarah’s obsessive fixation on her parent’s wishes. In fact, Joel functions as a classical *raisonneur* figure that traditionally serves as a mouthpiece for the playwright’s views. He attempts to explain to Sarah, that “the problem isn’t simply about interfaith relationships.”

JOEL. [Our parents] are just expressing their opinions about what they think will make you happy. Granted, they have a very strong set of values about how we should live. But you don’t have to let another person’s values control your life.

Like a devoted brother and an experienced therapist, Joel encourages his sister to decide on what she wants most for herself “right now.”

JOEL. The only one who’s keeping you from living your own life is you.

Sarah and Joel’s fighting gets interrupted by the parents’ arrival. Sarah attempts to reveal the truth of the matter, but finds herself unable to and goes back to her deception. Soon, yet another visitor arrives, Chris. After a long speech, he asks Abe for Sarah’s hand in marriage. Bob does not stay behind and also proposes to Sarah. In the moment of grand confusion, all the truth comes out in the most disorderly and clumsy manner. Both Miriam and Abe, of course, are hurt. But it is not until they find out that Bob is “not really Jewish” that they try to physically leave the place. At this, both Bob and Chris declare that they are prepared to convert only to be with Sarah. This however, does not console the wounded Abe, who is fuming with resentment until he actually gets a heart attack and needs to be taken to the hospital immediately.

The last scene takes place in the morning after the storm, after the whole truth has been revealed and there is no more playacting. Sarah and two of her wooers are in the apartment, while the rest of the family is on their way back home from the hospital from which Abe has just been released. Before going home, however, the family has to stop by Sarah’s apartment to pick up Miriam’s purse and, consequently, to resolve their misunderstanding. Before the family come, Sherman sprinkles some humor for a comic relief: Bob and Chris fight over who would become a more pious Jew upon the conversion.

Miriam and Joel arrive. Miriam retrieves her purse, but more importantly apologizes to her daughter for “whatever [Abe and she] did to make [Sarah] so unhappy.” In her turn, Sarah acknowledges her own fault and proposes for the two women to spend more time together “to get to know each other.” As mother and daughter reconcile, the father rings the bell.

Abe stands at the door, but would not come in, “I don’t come in where I’m not welcome.” Slowly, Sarah gets him to step through the door. She lets her father know how much she cares and that from now on she wants “to be honest” with him, as a way to express her love

for him. She also asks her dad to be honest with her as well and not to hide facts such as his “being held up,” only because he “wouldn’t want [her] to worry.” Once she has reconciled with her beloved father, Sarah proceeds to sort out her life. She breaks up with Chris in the most considerate way possible, while announcing to Bob that she “would like [him] to be [her] official and very conspicuous boyfriend.” After Sarah’s decision has been made, Chris leaves, carrying his defeat in the most dignified manner. Bob also goes to exit so that Sarah can spend “some time with [her] family.” But Sarah’s family, as it turns out, wants to spend time with Bob Schroeder in order to get to know him. Abe questions Bob about his acting. Sarah brings out the food and the family moves to the table while discussing Bob’s next acting job in a “revival of *Fiddler on the Roof*.” The play ends with Abe and Miriam’s usual bickering over a trifling matter, this time about the play which they have or have not seen in Bob’s theater.

CHARACTERS. Maria Aitken has said that farce “very often relies on the exaggeration of one particular element above all other elements; and the situation rules in farce rather than character.... Once you’ve found a single aspect of your character that is predominant, then the situation rules.” Indeed, the characters in farce are usually driven by one concentrated desire, which is usually an obsessive need to conceal something. The presence of such an overriding objective reduces the character to one particular quirk. The characters thus become caricatures, overshadowed by a single hyperbolized characteristic. Just as Ms. Aitken pointed out, farce deals with flattened stereotypes rather than with multi-faceted fleshed out characters. Farce is home to stock character types (Bucco, Maccus, Pappus, and Dossenus) that derive from Ancient Greek comedy. In *Beau Jest* they get turned into Jewish stereotypes. The characters get reduced to one or two tricks, or the characteristic lines that define them.

MIRIAM and ABE are the two characters who are the most stereotypical in the play. They are the epitomes of the stock character types: the Jewish parents.

The two of them are always squabbling about the most trifling matters. This bickering is one of their trademarks as farcical characters. Abe, whose Biblical name is of the father of the Hebrew nation, is the ultimate stereotype of a Jewish father. An incredibly hard worker during the day, he relinquishes his authority once he gets home from work in favor of rest. Sarah mentions that Abe’s business is as important to Abe as his religion. Curiously enough, in their first meeting with Bob/David he only joins the conversation once Bob/David’s busy schedule gets mentioned:

MIRIAM. She tells me how busy you are.

ABE. So business is good.

Abe indeed never stops working, the fact which caused his recent illness and perhaps the heart attack in Act III. Both of his children are troubled by their father’s overworking himself. One of their arguments about his work, in fact, explodes into a verbal fight, with Abe and Miriam yelling at each other in Yiddish.

However, when at home, Abe gets reduced to a pushover, which is very much a part of the Jewish father stereotype. Because he works hard during the day, he does not need to spend

his energy on ordering around his family at night. Abe's lack of character is summed up in his rhetorical responses to any of the orders that either Miriam or Sarah gives him.

SARAH. Can we skip the Four Questions?

ABE. Skip the Four Questions.

MIRIAM. Do the Four Questions.

ABE. Do the Four Questions.

SARAH. Daniel did the Four Questions last night. I'm too old to do the Four Questions.

Miriam is a mother. This sentence would be enough to describe her character. She is bossy and constantly orders her family members around. One of her numerous quirks is that she loathes microwaving food because "it doesn't taste right from the microwave." When greeting her son she, instead of asking Joel about his day, scolds him for wearing an ugly sweater that she hates.

Everything has to go her way. However, all her bossiness revolves around her one and only desire: making her family, especially her children, happy. She is incredibly well-intentioned. Her only fault is that she doesn't know the limit. She doesn't realize that her ways of making her children happy have quite the opposite effect. The problem is that she treats both Joel and Sarah as if they can't think for themselves. This is wonderfully exemplified in Miriam's forcing Sarah to do the Four Questions.

Traditionally, it is the children who are supposed to read the Four Questions. Miriam completely disregards Sarah's protest that she is "too old to do the Four Questions": in her mother's eyes, Sarah is still a little girl. It is for that reason that she calls both Sarah and Joel a hundred times a day. She needs to make sure that her babies are doing well. And even when Miriam learns of Sarah's lie, she continues to look after her daughter in the same loving way: "Sarah, whatever we did to make you so unhappy, we apologize."

JOEL. Reserved and unobtrusive, Joel is cool observer of the drama that gets played out in front of him. Joel is a therapist and a perceptive elder brother. That sums up his whole character. He stays aloof, calmly observing, until his help is needed. Until Act III, he hardly participates in the action of the play. In the first two acts we get very few remarks from Joel. Most of his lines are either responses to Miriam's reproaches or probing comments regarding Bob/David, such as: "I notice you're not wearing a pager."

However, he becomes very eloquent in Act III when his poor sister experiences a breakdown. At that point, Joel is at his best both as a brother and as a therapist. His speeches are very personal and at the same time incredibly universal, allowing any member of the audience to emphasize with and learn from his ideas. At the end of the day, Joel is part of the team who saves the day.

CHRIS. It is not an accident that Sarah's first boyfriend is called Chris Cringle, "like Santa Claus." In this very Jewish universe, Chris is clearly an outsider and his name blatantly proclaims his alienness. In spite of that, Chris is "a very decent human being."

He does indeed care for Sarah very much, which he proves in Act III by proposing to her and declaring his readiness to convert. In fact, Chris would have made a perfect husband:

practical (as emphasized by his practical rather than romantic anniversary gift to Sarah), reliable, and hard-working. Indeed, Sherman portrays him in a very pleasing light. In fact, Sherman is brilliant at constructing a comedy “without taking a pejorative attitude to any particular character.” However, although nice and incredibly positive, Chris is not destined to be with Sarah. After all, it is not possible for Santa Claus to convert to Judaism.

BOB. It seems that Sherman has encapsulated his love letter to theater in the character of Robert Schroeder. Bob is an actor. He is the sensitive artist, the noble soul, the free spontaneous spirit. Sherman’s actor is incredibly genuine and generous and has an acute feeling of justice. He refuses to take money for the job he has done well only because he enjoyed the company of the Goldman family. He has always been courteous to Sarah, even before he has grown to love her very deeply. What more, he doesn’t only love Sarah, he loves her parents.

Bob is a contrasting figure to Sarah. While Sarah has too much family, he has none. Yet, he does his best to connect with whoever is around him in order to recreate the lost family feeling. Having no family and no fixed job, Bob is the stereotypical actor: a blank sheet of paper ready to be filled. He has waited tables, worked as a masseur, escorted old ladies to opera. Despite his nomadic lifestyle, where nothing is fixed, Bob is incredibly optimistic and comfortable with himself. He has a beautiful soul, as manifested by his love for the arts, and big generous heart. In the end, it is such guy as Bob that “tense” Sarah needs.

SARAH. Sherman’s protagonist is marked by her obsessive concern for other people’s feelings. It is this pathological concern that pushes Sarah to invent a lie only to keep her parents happy. However, Sarah’s concern for others does not appear to be particular only to her. She seems to have inherited it from her parents, who always hide their troubles from Sarah, because they don’t want her to worry.

Sarah is thus trapped in a vicious circle engendered by her of excessively close, worrywart family. Because each of them is obsessed with not worrying the other, and because the family is so close, Sarah is forced to come up with more ingenious ways of keeping her parents worry-free. In these conditions, Sarah’s wild lie seems to be the only way to keep the balance. This balance is too delicate to be sustained for long. In a way, that is what *Beau Jest* is about. Sarah’s situation reveals the faultiness in the family relationship. It is time for the vicious circle to be broken. After much confusion, stress, and a visit to the hospital, the family agrees to be completely honest with each other and thus to be truly close.

THEMES. In his director’s note, Dennis Zacek said:

Beau Jest is a play in which Judaism might be considered to be a major theme and yet, I think the play is far more concerned with the behavior that exists between parents and their children. The central focus in the initial production was Sarah Goldman’s “Coming of Age.”

The theme of the family with which Sherman works and that seems to be so contemporary is in fact age-old. The family theme has entered comedy back in the classical antiquity. New Comedy relinquished Old Comedy’s preoccupation with satirizing public figures, and chose to center on private institutions such as marriage and family. From then on, comedies have

been associated with family life and with young lovers seeking to attain happiness via a nuptial union. All these elements are present in *Beau Jest*, although arranged in a different way. Sherman focuses on the phenomenon of obsessive family closeness. What more, Sherman works with the family of a particular ethnicity: the close-knit Jewish family.

In *Beau Jest* we are dealing with a whole universe of ethnic themes that are projected through Sherman's archetypal characters and the traditional rituals in which the family engages. On one hand, *Beau Jest* is very much a play for an urban audience that understands Jewish stereotypes, conventions, and humor. On the other hand, Sherman makes his play broadly accessible by blending the ethnic specificity with the generic universal quality of the action (classic New Comedy plot and themes).

Apart from ethnic and family themes, Sherman weaves in the motif of theater. Mr. Zacek underlines:

Since Sherman is a man of the theater, his plays are often balanced between "theatrical" characters and viewpoints and those of the "real world." The pleasure of *Beau Jest* is in viewing Bob, and actor, making the best of a difficult situation while, at the same time, seeing him share in the joyous contribution of Jewish culture – L'chaim.

The theater leitmotif is on one hand a tip of the hat to Sherman's governing passion, but on the other, it is theater that makes the whole action possible: only a truly gifted actor could pull off such a scam.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION.

1. Have you ever invented a lie not to hurt somebody else's feelings? Was it worth it?
2. Why is the play named *Beau Jest*? How does the title relate to the themes in the play?
3. What is a stereotype for an actor? Does Bob conform to that stereotype?
4. Do you think that Sarah is in love with Chris at the beginning of the play? If you do, why? If you don't, why not?
5. Why do you think Miriam prefers listening to rather than watching opera?
6. Have you ever been with a family whose traditions are completely unfamiliar to you? If so, how did you feel while being with them? Did you learn anything?
7. Have you ever pretended to be anybody you are not? If so, for what reason?
8. Does the Goldman family follow their Jewish traditions because they are religious or for some other reason?

9. Do you think the Goldman family will be completely honest with each other in the future?

Why or why not?

10. Why does the play end with Miriam and Abe's squabbling?