

InDepth Notes on

Regrets Only

by Paul Rudnick



Diversionary Theatre
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Regrets Only: Playwright Biography and Production History

Paul Rudnick's plays have been produced on and off Broadway and around the world. They include *Valhalla*, *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*, *Mr. Charles*, *Currently of Palm Beach*, *Pride and Joy*, *The Naked Eye*, *I Hate Hamlet*, and *Jeffrey* for which he won an Obie, an Outer Critics Circle Award, and the John Gassner Playwriting Award. His novels are *Social Disease* and *I'll Take It*, both published by Knopf. His articles and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New York Times*. He is rumored to be quite close to *Premiere* magazine's film critic, Libby Gelman-Waxner, whose collected columns have been published under the title *If You Ask Me*. His screenplays include *Addams Family Values*, the screen adaptation of *Jeffrey*, and *In & Out*. *The New York Times* has called Rudnick "one of the funniest quip-meisters on the planet."

Regrets Only premiered in New York at the Manhattan Theater Club's Off-Broadway City Center space in November of 2006. The original cast included Christine Baranski (*Cybill*, *The Good Wife*), George Grizzard (Original Broadway casts of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *A Delicate Balance*), Jackie Hoffman (*Hairspray* and *Xanadu* on Broadway, *Kissing Jessica Stein*), David Rasche (*Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *Sledge Hammer*), Diane Davis (*Old Acquaintance*, *Festen*), and Sian Phillips (*Marlene* on Broadway and in the West End, *I, Claudius*). The production was directed by Christopher Ashley, who is currently the Artistic Director of La Jolla Playhouse and has also directed four of Rudnick's other plays (*Jeffrey*, *The Naked Eye*, *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*, and *Valhalla*).

TheaterMania's Barbara and Scott Siegel called the play "a miraculous marriage...of caricature and character" and "a smart play with a several rich conflicts waiting to explode" in which "the characters and the plot are in perfect balance." BackStage called it "a devastatingly accurate political and social satire."

Since opening, *Regrets Only* has been performed around the country, including in St. Louis, MO; Richmond, VA; Raleigh, NC; Connecticut, Louisiana, New Jersey, Tennessee, Florida, and California.

"It's Paul in Good Taste"

By Monty Arnold

This article originally appeared on Playbill.com on October 20, 2006

Regrets Only, a new play from Paul Rudnick, finds the witty author in Philip Barry territory, offering up a drawing-room comedy made for modern times. Rudnick, ever the stylish and witty playwright, pressed foot to pedal on his imaginative overdrive to see how far it would take him into his new comedy, and, after two years of dreamy labors, it seems to have taken him into an elegant terrain akin to the Main Line manse where Tracy Lord luxuriated in that bygone best of all possible worlds.

The result, which is now in previews prior to a Nov. 14 opening at Manhattan Theatre Club's City Center Stage I, is *Regrets Only*, a retouched *Vanity Fair* kind of view of marriage as it is practiced in modern-day Manhattan by husband, wife - and best friend.

"I just love the formal challenge of writing a real drawing-room comedy - a play that's going to be set in a Fifth Avenue penthouse that has been strikingly designed by Michael Yeargan, with a proper staircase for entrances by stunning women in William Ivey Long gowns." (Smoke's not really streaming out of Rudnick's ears, but it's clear he's cooking.)

"I'm such a fan of writers like Philip Barry and Noël Coward - not to mention Oscar Wilde - and I thought that it would be such a treat to see if it were still possible to have that kind of fun, with a very contemporary madness attached to it." (This "madness" has even older theatrical roots, but he ain't showing 'em - to preserve his second-act surprise.)

Suffice to say, he enjoyed the exercise of creating a handsome drawing room and telling himself to *draw!*: "I like the sheer technical discipline of saying, 'Okay, you've got one beautiful drawing room, with so many entrances and exits. You're going to be getting the people on and off stage gracefully and with as much humor as possible. Let's see how it works.' I think it's enormously difficult - and, if you can bring that off, it's enormously pleasurable, both for the writer and for the audience. When you watch *The Philadelphia Story* or *Hay Fever*, you feel like you're in such good hands, and you can feel the level of the audience just delighting in that kind of theatrical joy. *That's* what I was aiming for.

"A real sense of high-style comedy is very daunting because, when it works, it needs to feel effortless and like the most delicious dessert - but that takes the hardest work imaginable, and that's why I have so much respect for playwrights who

manage it. It also requires a staggeringly difficult degree of acting, which is why I feel spoiled by this cast."

Christine Baranski, until recently Mame Dennis Burnside of Beekman Place and, therefore, thoroughly familiar with the ups and downs of penthouse staircases, rules this rarefied Rudnick roost - "a dazzling socialite," he calls her, "a woman who has lived for fashion" and who, almost parenthetically, has also raised a family. Her closest friend and constant escort is a brand-name designer, "a real gentleman of the old school along the lines of a Bill Blass or an Oscar de la Renta. Men of that caliber were the first designers America knew by name. They established that level of both branding and style; a woman could feel a degree of absolute comfort wearing their gowns. Although the play is not in any way directly based on them, it was gentlemen like that that I always found inspiring."

George Grizzard fills the Bill Blass-like bill, and David Rasche occupies the third corner of the triangle as Baranski's hubby, one of Manhattan's most successful "white-shoe" attorneys. Her mother, a grand socialite of the old school, is played by the English actress Sian Phillips, and the youngster underfoot is Diane Davis. The maid who keeps them relatively real and close to the pavement is played by Jackie Hoffman. Christopher Ashley, who has helmed every Rudnick play since *Jeffrey*, is directing.

What prompted this play, says Rudnick, was the current cultural discussion of marriage. "You wonder what value does marriage still have for anyone? - straight, gay, whatever. This play is about personal responsibility - what do we owe to ourselves, and what do we owe to our friends? - and that all can swirl around marriage, particularly for this kind of drawing-room comedy. This is about one of your great Manhattan marriages and one of your great Manhattan friendships - how those relationships support each other, and how those relationships conflict with each other. Who do you have sex with, and who do you have fun with? Are they always the same person? Who understands you best? Who drives you insane? Who do you run to when you have a problem, and who *is* the problem? Who is your great romance, and who is your great friend? The play deals with all those questions, and, even though it deals with a very glamorous level of Manhattan society, it's still a situation anyone - particularly anyone in any sort of marriage - will come across.

"Sometimes I think the really great marriages always involve the two people who are married to each other - and a third party, a best friend, another man/another woman, someone whom both partners can confide in, someone who may be married themselves. I've been in a relationship for 13 years. You need your partner, and you need your pals."

Conversation Starters

How do you define marriage? What makes a good marriage?

Is marriage different for same-sex couples? Should it be?

Are romantic relationships more important than platonic friendships? Does our society value one more than the other?

Do you think that friendships are unique between gay men and straight women? Do their relationships differ from friendships between straight women and straight men? Straight women and each other? Gay men and each other? Gay men and lesbians? How so and how does their sexuality affect these friendships?

What stereotypes do the characters of *Regrets Only* perpetuate? What stereotypes do they resist?

How do politics interact with society? With family? With friendships?

Do class and privilege affect a person's political, social, and cultural views? If so, how? If not, what do you think are the guiding factors of those views?

One of the major plot points involves a strike as a form of protest. Do you think that this is an effective way to affect change when you feel that there has been social injustice? If not, what would be?

Since this play was written in 2006 many states, including New York, where it is set, and California, where this production is being performed, have legalized same-sex marriage. Do you think that the ideas brought up in the play are still relevant? Why or why not?

Although the play certainly has politics in it, Paul Rudnick has stated that he did not set out to write a political play. Do you think it would have been more or less effective if he had written a deliberately political play? Why or why not?

Regrets Only uses humor to explore the very serious subject of marriage equality. How do you think that humor helped make the play's statement more effectively? How do you think it hindered its message?

What ideas about marriage and relationships do you take away from the play? Has watching *Regrets Only* changed or influenced your thoughts?

Political and Historical Context for *Regrets Only*

The Federal Marriage Amendment

Though the conflicts in *Regrets Only* are all interpersonal, at the core of the arguments once they begin is the Federal Marriage Amendment proposed by the Bush Administration in 2006. This is the amendment that Jack McCullough is called to work on. The FMA was originally proposed to the Senate in 2004. This proposal read:

Marriage in the United States shall consist solely of the union of a man and a woman. Neither this Constitution, nor the constitution of any State, shall be construed to require that marriage or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon any union other than the union of a man and a woman.

Although the 2004 FMA was immediately voted on, the Senate vote for cloture, which would have progressed the bill to the stage of a direct vote to enact the amendment, reached only 50 of the 60 votes it needed. The bill then moved to the House of Representatives, where it failed again. Only 227 Representatives voted yea, whereas 290 were necessary to pass the amendment.

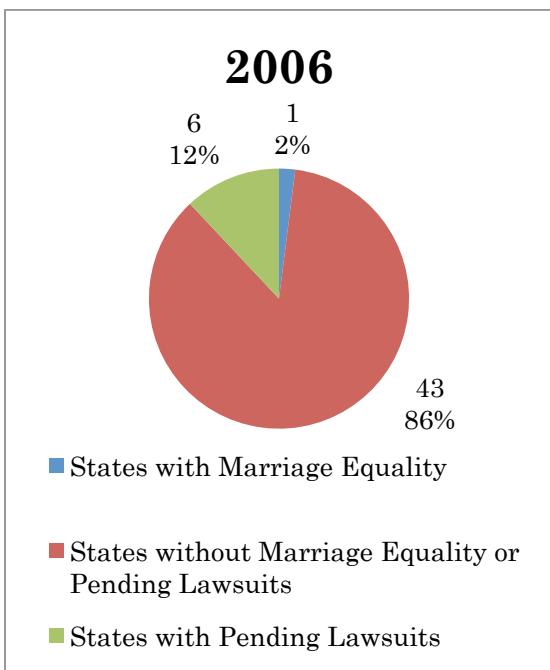
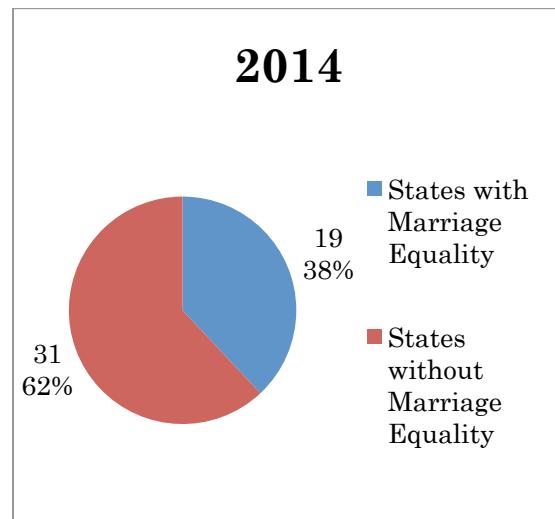
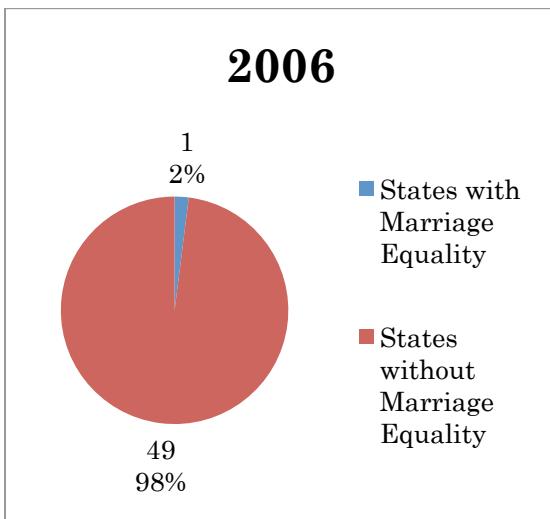
The amendment was reintroduced to Congress in 2005 by the Republican party, this time called the Marriage Protection Amendment. The bill was approved by the Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights and Property Rights in November of 2005, and the bill was put to the vote in the Senate in June of 2006. This time, only 48 Senators voted in favor of the FMA. The amendment failed in the House in July of 2006 with 236 of the necessary 290 votes.

The Defense of Marriage Act passed ten years earlier enabled individual states to ban same-sex marriage, but the FMA would make the ban a constitutional rule, removing the ability of states to fight for marriage equality in their jurisdictions that DOMA permitted.

Although the FMA that features so prominently in *Regrets Only* failed to pass, it is not the only bill of its kind, nor is its defeat necessarily permanent. The section of DOMA defining “marriage” as a union between a man and a woman was deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in the *United States v. Windsor* ruling in June 2013. In response, Republican Representative Tim Huelskamp reintroduced the Federal Marriage Amendment to Congress once more. Popular opinion, however, indicates that the bill will be unsuccessful once more. A May 2014 poll conducted by Gallop indicates that 55% of Americans are in favor of same-sex marriage, and only 42% of the polled Americans were opposed to same-sex marriage.

Marriage Equality: 2006 vs. 2014

When *Regrets Only* was written in 2006, only one state had legalized same-sex marriage (Massachusetts). Now, in 2014, nineteen states, as well as the District of Columbia, have legal same-sex marriages. Every state in which same-sex marriage is still prohibited has a lawsuit pending to fight for its legalization, with North Dakota being the last state to file a lawsuit in June 2014. In 2013 alone, nine states, including California, passed legislation that made same-sex marriage legal. Although only two states (Oregon and Pennsylvania) have legalized same-sex marriage this year, courts have ruled bans on same-sex marriage to be unconstitutional in thirteen of the 31 states in which same-sex marriage is still illegal.



With nearly 2/5^{ths} of the United States currently performing and recognizing same-sex marriages and judicial movement in place in the other 31, all signs indicate that even more significant progress will be made toward marriage equality in the near future.

Paul Rudnick

Paul Rudnick is one of the most celebrated gay voices in modern theatre, film, and journalism. His method of peppering works of social commentary, emotional heft, and stories uniquely and openly of the LGBT community with his own unique brand of one-liners is unmistakable. It has given him a one-of-a-kind platform to make people both laugh hysterically and think critically about the world around them.

After being born and raised in New Jersey, Rudnick went to Yale before moving to New York City. He dabbled in copywriting and made early attempts at playwriting before penning two well-received novels, *Social Disease* and *I'll Take It*. He then wrote the play *I Hate Hamlet*, which travelled a famously rocky path to become Rudnick's Broadway debut. It was at this point that he really found his stride as a writer for the theatre, writing the Off-Broadway hit, *Jeffrey*.

Jeffrey, which Rudnick later adapted into a film, is the story of a man who falls for an HIV positive man after vowing to give up sex in order to avoid AIDS. The play debuted in 1993, when the health crisis among gay men in NYC was at its terrifying peak. Rudnick's play allowed them to laugh at themselves and each other by lovingly skewering gay culture while allowing them an emotional release when they needed it the most and also giving honest voice to thoughts they had never thought they would see portrayed on stage. It remains one of the most important plays of the last fifty years and one of the greatest pieces of LGBT literature ever written.

He continued to boldly write characters that were openly, and usually unashamedly, LGBT in plays such as *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*, *The New Century*, and *Valhalla*. He also wrote the screenplay for the Oscar nominated comedy *In and Out*. By addressing issues that are close to the hearts of queer people, such as AIDS, religious oppression, and identity, Rudnick has become one of the most produced gay playwrights in America and one of the most respected in the LGBT community.

We at Diversionary have staged *Jeffrey*, *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*, *The New Century*, and *Valhalla* and are proud to continue to share Paul Rudnick's work with the San Diego premiere of *Regrets Only*. It is an opportunity for our local community to come together, laugh, celebrate how far we've come, and contemplate the road ahead of us.

Exploring Marriage in the LGBT Community at Diversionary

Marriage Equality is having a moment in the United States. It is a very exciting time to be an LGBT person and see decision after decision fall in your favor on an issue that is so close to the core of our beings. It felt like exactly the right time to bring Paul Rudnick's *Regrets Only* to our community. It is both a celebration of how far we've come in the eight years since the show debuted in New York City and a reminder of how far we still have to go. At Diversionary, *Regrets Only* joins a list of other shows that have touched on subject of marriage in the LGBT community.

During our 2004/2005 season, we produced *Looking for Normal* by Jane Anderson. The play tells the story of Roy, who, after twenty-five years of marriage, tells his wife Irma that he wants to transition into living as a woman. This revelation affects not only their marriage, but also their children and their community. After debuting in LA in 2001 with Laurie Metcalfe and Beau Bridges, it was adapted into an HBO movie called *Normal*, starring Jessica Lange and Tom Wilkinson. It is a fascinating exploration of the dynamics of a transgender-inclusive family.

In 2010, Rosina Reynolds directed the West Coast premiere of *The Marriage Bed* by Nona Shepphard. The central couple, Val, a radical feminist, and Jeni, who has not yet come out to her Indian family despite her seven year relationship with Val, struggles with the question of whether they want to become civil partners under British law in 2005. The play tackled the issue with a gentle touch, exploring how suddenly having the ability to make a formal commitment to each other gives rise to issues unique to marriage within a same-sex relationship.

2013 brought a new twist on a classic musical revue to our stage. *Marry Me a Little* explores the relationship between two people using cut songs from the trunk of composer / lyricist Stephen Sondheim. While originally written to be performed by one man and one woman, director James Vasquez staged the show to be performed by two men, two women, or as originally conceived. The subsequent performances, the first to implement this concept of three couples of varying sexualities in rotating repertory, allowed the audience to see the emotional commonalities that transcend gender and sexual orientation in relationships.

As the cultural landscape shifts rapidly, Diversionary is excited to continue to explore the topics that are at the forefront of the LGBT community's mind. From coming out, to AIDS, to family, to marriage, we have been proud to look to our patrons and supporters to lead us to the stories that are on the pulse of what is important now. We could not ask for better guidance and we thank you.