

Psychoanalysis at the Theatre

FRANKIE & JOHNNY
IN THE
CLAIR DE LUNE



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Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune

Terence McNally (1939-)

Premiere: New York off-Broadway, 1987

Broadway, 2002

Dramatists Guild Hull Warriner Award

David E. Scharff

The play opens with a nude couple lost in intercourse, building to climax. Then they put on their clothes. In the aftermath of physical intimacy, they try to get to know each other. After sex, they pull closer, driven by Johnny's urgent desire for emotional connection, but held off by Frankie's guardedness. Having overcome her initial resistance, Johnny gets the announcer from the radio station to play "the most beautiful music in the

world” for them, and as Act I closes, Debussy’s *Clair de Lune* plays, and they begin to make love again. Act II opens in the aftermath of sex, this time with Johnny in a funk because he had lost his erection. Now they struggle with the world of obstacles to connection and emotional intimacy. Frankie and Johnny feed, drink, spar, come together, and disengage, in a recurrent dance, until they find connection. As the sun comes up, they sit listening again to *Clair de Lune*, brushing their teeth, apparently and hopefully, with a future together.

The play begins with full exposure to a couple in sexual passion. Without warning, lacking preparation or context, and with no connection to the characters, the audience is pulled uncomfortably into a vivid sexual scene, just as the characters have been thrown together by physical desire without emotional connection. We do not know these people at all. In this way, the couple has a mythic presence in their ordinary nudity. There is an intention to shock here, and that goal is achieved.

The opening of the play must have produced an even greater shock wave in the theater when first produced in 1987, a time when few films other than pornographic films would show an orgasm, much less Broadway or even Off-Broadway theater. The famous scene of orgasm in *When Harry Met Sally* is a fake one, in a public setting, and the characters are fully clothed and with a table between them. To deal with the love, hate, and sexual longings of intimate partners is very much the stuff of theater. But this play uses its

malapert beginning to turn the theatrical convention on its head. It looks beyond concern for the characters and explores the meaning of sex for human development. And beyond that, it looks at the modern theater which often substitutes nudity and other devices of shock value for the intimacy of small gestures and careful, well written language.

The play links itself to the history of theater through references to classical theater, song, and popular culture. The play explicitly recalls the traditional song that begins, “Frankie and Johnny were lovers, Oh lordy, how they could love.” For me the play has resonance with Lerner and Loewe’s musical *Brigadoon* in which the hero has one chance in a hundred years to find love in the mythical Scottish Highlands, in a far-away village that is here today and gone tomorrow, only to come to life a hundred years hence when the audience will be long forgotten. Like the characters in *Brigadoon*, Frankie and Johnny have, as Johnny says, “one hell of an opportunity to feel with your own hand the human heart.”

The protagonists begin naked and *in flagrante*. They quickly build to a climax, loud, joyous and shockingly obvious. In 2002, when I saw the first Broadway production with Stanley Tucci and Edie Falco from my front row seat, pretty much underneath their bed, I felt like a small child excluded from the primal scene and yet fully exposed to it. I don’t think my Oedipal association is farfetched, because within minutes, Frankie says, jokingly, she

wants her mother, and Johnny talks of seeing his girlfriend's mother nude in the bath. Mothers are, otherwise, mostly missing in this play, but in a way, it is a mother that Frankie and Johnny seek in each other. Within minutes of the opening, the playwright has connected sex to mothers, the body and its faults, and all the elemental aspects of life. Soon the scars of life are also exposed.

Frankie and Johnny continue to explore each other in various ways – the shared and separate geography of the cities they have lived in, the diner they work in, what they do with their time and their loneliness, Johnny's love of the sight of women, and Frankie's shyness. Frankie and Johnny begin with a sexual connection, fully exposed in an animal way, and only when they get dressed do they begin to confront the wish for, and fear of emotional intimacy. They reveal the ways that they have guarded themselves against repetition of these failures, and against the pain of recognizing what they each want desperately.

Freud founded psychoanalysis on the thesis that sex is at the center of all development from infancy on. In an obvious sense, we could wonder if this play might ring the changes on that theme. But it seems to me that instead the play reverses the field. I find the play psychologically extremely true and poignant, but not because it puts sex at the center of the human story in that way. Instead I think it does the opposite. It shows that all of development is centered in the problems of connecting and relating with emotional depth,

and that sex, that preoccupation of our culture since the 1960s, takes its meaning from these relationships and their inherent difficulties. By focusing on sex in the way Frankie and Johnny do, McNally gives us a textured, subtle exploration of an ordinary troubled couple who yearn to relate and sadly find that so much is in the way of their happiness. In the end, we love them because they try so hard despite all the obstacles, and because in the way great theater can, they express for us many of the factors that prevent us from successfully connecting with the people we care the most about.

Sex carries the burden of human problems as if they can be solved by passion in an animal sense. The play begins with sex, and shows how it is used to translate emotional needs into physical terms experienced as need and gratification. As they move from night to day, from orgasm to brushing their teeth, from nudity to dress, from sex towards knowledge of each other, Frankie and Johnny slowly and guardedly become more intimate, perhaps able to love. Sex contains their hopes and fears, successes and failures. In the familiar old song, when Johnny betrays Frankie, she seeks him out and shoots him, and dies herself for her revenge. Could this Frankie and Johnny kill if they fail? No, because from almost the beginning, they are swearing to be different, to undo their past failures.

Frankie and Johnny at the Clair de Lune gains its poetic value from the ordinariness of this pair – a short-order cook and a diner waitress – and from

their all-too-human weaknesses and failures. At the same time, they are Everyman immortals connecting us to our culture of song and poetry. Johnny, an autodidact, calls upon his beloved Shakespeare over and over, finding new meaning in quotes he selects and applies at random. He appreciates Shakespeare for having “put it in poetry so that people would know up here what they already knew in here and so they would remember it.”

With his creative genius, McNally has chosen music for his play, from the universally-known folk ballad “*Frankie and Johnny*,” to the Beatles’ *Eleanor Rigby*, to the *Goldberg Variations*, and especially to Debussy’s *Clair de Lune* (moonlight). These and other pieces of music are specified in the stage directions but *Clair de Lune* is not referred to in the dialogue. While McNally includes the others for their musical quality and emotional resonance, it is *Clair de Lune* that he selects as the theme for the setting for the play. Then he can play with all the associations to moonlight – the light of love, witchcraft, craziness, werewolves – a full range of fearful and romantic mythical associations stretching all the way to Johnny’s beloved Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* with its magic spells and transformations. We are in the moonlight in which Frankie’s beloved mother (the only good mother of the play) feared transformation into a wolf while Frankie held onto the smell of her life-giving breasts and felt for the strongest time in her life fully loved and protected by her guardian angel.

The moonlit setting symbolizes a magical, bewitched space. The radio announcer mentions “two moonbeams”, an apt phrase for Frankie and Johnny. The omnipresence of the moon tells us that we are in a realm of depth psychology that the playwright will have to handle deftly for it to ring true. And for me the play does ring true – and more. It resonates with a depth that gives added meaning to the simple words of these rough-cut characters who are trying so hard to know themselves and to wrest themselves free of the constraints of a lifetime. It is a play between moonlight and sunlight, everything and everywhere, magical and ordinary at the same time.

Each of the characters has been abandoned. Johnny was abandoned by his mother, then his father, and sent to foster parents. Frankie had a marriage of abuse and injury, so extreme that she cannot bear children. Johnny has a background of jail and alcoholism, and is now unable to face his children. Frankie and Johnny are the wretched of the earth, the forgotten of society – and even so they dare, they care, and they struggle to build something together in this microcosm of a bedroom filled with moonlight, poetry, and music. All the elements of hurt and healing that each of us relate to from our own experience are condensed into these two hours of the theater.

Through cheap Venetian blinds we glimpse the world outside, the world Frankie sees every night. The lighting through the slats makes them seem like the bars of Johnny’s jail cell and a cage for the wordless, animal quality of

their sexual connection. Identification with animals runs through the dialogue. Johnny refers to Archie the Great Dane, a dog that has haunted his solo masturbation. Frankie compares herself to a caged parakeet but she'd rather identify herself as a golden Labrador. She ruffs at Johnny playfully as they try to pull together sexually once more like two lonely dogs.

The blinds are a metaphor for the shuttered experience of Frankie and Johnny's world. The bars of the blinds remind us of all the constraints in the way of mature love. Frankie cannot have children, but if they were to adopt, Johnny could repair his childhood experience of being abandoned, fostered, and never adopted and cared for. They want, most of all, to be adopted by each other. As the Frankie and Johnny song reminds us, love can also lead to betrayal, revenge, murder, and punishment. As the Frankie and Johnny of the play show, it is no easy thing that they are attempting!

The moon shining through the window reminds us of the outside world. Frankie tells Johnny about two couples she has gazed at for years: the old husband and wife who never speak, who seem the essence of married loneliness; and the abusive couple in which the man beats and bruises the mutely suffering woman. These two couples embody the risk of becoming intimate. This is the fear that provokes Johnny's failed erection. Frankie and Johnny are each afraid of becoming like the failed couples. We tend to believe Johnny because he seems so sincere when he says that he would never hit a

woman, and yet we know as little about him as Frankie knows after this one night. Nevertheless we do see them doing what all couples, mundane and heroic, must do to build trust.

They have to build upon the repair of inevitable failings and hurts in order to achieve a lasting connection. Frankie and Johnny do it first with food and milk, those nurturing aspects of mothering that they offer each other. Then they try to add sex after they have become more intimate than when they first had intercourse, and they find that sex does not work for them. Johnny not only loses his erection which makes him ashamed, but he asks Frankie for oral sex in a manner that makes her feel offended. Although sex works to bring them together, it alone cannot keep them together. Sex alone does not suffice as a central building block for a relationship. Passion can bring the individuals together, and it can help them maintain the couple bond, but the relationship needs much more than passion. Frankie and Johnny quickly have to learn to compensate for sexual disconnects. They have to find other ways of caring if they are going to make up for their loneliness, emptiness and desperation.

This play presents the world in a grain of sand, a view from the theater about the compelling need for relating. It shows us just how hard that is. It is a view of the struggles we all face, Everyman given mythic status. It starts under the light of the moon and slowly gives way to daylight. It starts with the

thrill of orgasm and ends with the challenge of intimacy. How do we combine the everyday tasks of brushing teeth and frying eggs and having sex into a life that feels loving and rewarding?

At the same time, the play is a reflection on modern literature and theater. The more explicit the drama or the novel, the harder it is to appreciate the subtle intricacies of intimacy. This play begins with the explicit and delves deep and sensitively into the excruciating and fundamental struggles of human needs, loves, longings, and failures in the search to find ourselves and to know one another. For me, this is a work of genius, of wonderful words that inspire beautiful acting and directing, and of unconscious resonance.