



The BRIDGES of MADISON COUNTY

Study Guide, April 2016
Prepared by Robert Neblett

the
rep

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Joan Hess (Francesca) and Michael Halling (Robert) in The Rep's production of *The Bridges of Madison County*. Photo by John David Pittman.

SYNOPSIS

BY MARSHA NORMAN

Act One

A beautiful Italian woman walks onto the dark stage and sings the story of her journey from wartime Naples to Winterset, Iowa, with her new husband, an American soldier. As Francesca sings, her new home fills with neighbors, children, crops and chores, everything you need "To Build A Home."

Then one morning, Bud and the kids leave for the state fair in Indianapolis, Ind. Francesca stays at home, knowing, as Bud promises, that they will be "Home Before You Know It."

But later that afternoon, a photographer from the *National Geographic* arrives, needing help finding the Roseman Bridge, the last of the covered bridges he has been assigned to photograph. Francesca rides with him to the bridge, listening as he explains his comfort in being "Temporarily Lost." As he studies the bridge, she studies him, wondering, "What Do You Call A Man Like That?"

Back at her house, Francesca offers Robert some iced tea, and he stays for supper. As they eat, his ex-wife Marian sings "Another Life," detailing her failed attempts to connect with this handsome loner. But as Robert leaves Francesca's house, they both find themselves "Wondering" what will happen.

The next morning, singing "Look at Me," Francesca goes into town to shop, and ends up at the bridge, where Robert is happy to see her. He sings "The World Inside a Frame," then gives her a copy of the *National Geographic*, in which his photographs of the restoration of Naples bring her to tears, and she invites him to dinner again.

Meanwhile, at the 4H Finals, Bud finds himself at a bar and sings "Something Like a Dream," realizing he needs to pay more attention to his wife.

That night, Robert asks Francesca to dance, the envious neighbor Marge sings "Get Closer," and Act I ends as Robert and Francesca embrace and sing "Falling Into You." At last, she leads him up the stairs, neither of them able to resist what they feel.

Act Two

Act 2 begins at the Indiana State Fair and a bluegrass band sings "State Road 21," and Francesca and Robert wake up in bed and sing "Who We Are and Who We Want to Be." As they drive to Des Moines, she sings "Almost Real," about her life in Italy and

the devastation of the war. Later that night, Robert asks Francesca to come away with him. She realizes her world is now divided into "Before and After You," and they sing "One Second and a Million Miles to Go."

The next morning Francesca panics at the knowledge that the family will arrive in matter of hours. Robert says he must leave town at 6, and she promises to meet him by then. He promises that all she ever has to do is call him, and he will come get her. She sinks to the floor in tears as he leaves, just managing to get back to the table before the family bursts in the door. Carolyn has won a blue ribbon for her steer, and Michael has declared he doesn't want to be a farmer. Francesca begins to tell Bud she is leaving with Robert, but the moment is interrupted as fight breaks out between Michael and Bud. Hoping to make peace, Francesca suggests they go into town for ice cream.

But in town, Carolyn sees a stranger across the street and asks, "Mom? Who is that man?" It is Robert, and Francesca runs into his arms, telling him she wants to go with him. Then she sees her family and knows she can't leave them. When she returns to the family, Carolyn says, "Mom, who is that man?" And we realize the exhilarating moment with Robert was only in Francesca's mind. This time, she answers the question simply, saying Robert is a photographer who asked her for directions one day. Years pass, and the neighbors are getting dressed for Carolyn's wedding. Marge's husband Charlie begins to sing "When I'm Gone," and that song carries us through the next 10 years, as Michael graduates from medical school and Bud dies.

A year later, as Francesca is thinking of him, Robert appears, older now, but we feel their love as strong as ever as he walks through her kitchen to his office. He calls the *National Geographic*, and we learn that he is gravely ill. He packs his cameras in a box, then encloses a letter to Francesca and sings "It All Fades Away." When she receives the box, she goes back to Roseman Bridge to read the news of his death and hear his final eternal declaration of love. She sings that love is "Always Better." Then she walks up on the bridge and he comes up behind her, his youth restored, singing the refrain from "One Second and a Million Miles." He wraps his arms around her, she leans back into him, he kisses her neck, and with this radiant moment of memory, as vivid as life itself, we have the end.

MEET THE CHARACTERS



FRANCESCA
played by *Joan Hess*
a beautiful Italian
woman, generous,
luminous, and funny,
now married to a
farmer and living in
Iowa



ROBERT
played by *Michael Halling*
a ruggedly handsome,
worldly, visionary
photographer

MARIAN/CHIARA
played by *Cory Goodrich*
Marian: Robert's former
wife, a musician;
Chiara: Francesca's sister
still living in Italy



CAROLYN
played by *Julia Nightingale*
Francesca and Bud's daughter,
age 14



BUD
played by *Noah Racey*
Francesca's husband, an
Iowa farmer, a good guy,
diligent and dependable,
but always exhausted
and irritated that things
haven't gotten easier

MARGE
played by *Ann Ngaire-Martin*
Francesca's neighbor, sassy
and nosy



CHARLIE
played by *Timothy Shew*
Marge's husband

COMPOSER'S NOTES

I had been writing comedies for several years, and the longer lines of romance and yearning and fantasy had been building up, swirling around my head unchanneled, imprecise. When Marsha and I did *The Trumpet of the Swan*, big music started to leak out, expansive music, something beautiful. I was afraid of turning off the tap, so I told Marsha we should look for a project that would be serious and intense and overflowing with unrestrained passion, which is not the kind of thing I say very often. I said I was ready to write *La Traviata*. We set out to find a story.

The story found us. Robert James Waller's agent approached Marsha to adapt *The Bridges of Madison County*, and she immediately knew this would be our project. I had never read the novel but I regarded it warily - I was a 22-year-old single guy living in Manhattan when it first came out, and I was not, to put it mildly, the target audience - but Marsha saw in it a deeper resonance and a fiercer moral energy than I would have perceived, and she sold me on the struggles of these two broken characters who each see a piece of themselves trapped inside the other. I suggested we conceive it as an octet, a piece for eight lonely voices on a large stage.

The piano reflects my energy back at me, neurotic and complicated - I know the instrument so well by now that I sometimes have to wrestle with it to make it surprise me, and I knew that the skittery and dense music that the piano and I traditionally made together wasn't the right sound for this piece. I'd played guitar the way most guys who hang around rock bands play it - I knew a couple of chords and I could keep time relatively well - but I felt like the guitar was my way into the world of the Johnson family in Winterset, IA in 1965, so I bought a black Takamine and hoped for the best.

From the beginning, the music flooded out of me, music that I didn't entirely recognize as my own but that was clearly speaking some revelation I had yet to confront in myself. Knowing that I was writing for Kelli O'Hara meant that I had an extraordinary instrument of virtually unlimited emotional range, and so I dove in as deep as I knew how. I felt myself sometimes butting up against the corny, the cheesy, the sentimental, but I decided in those moments to push harder through it, not to be cynical about love or family but to sing about them with ecstatic truth.

We can love in many different ways, and we can love different things simultaneously. It is hard - it is insane - to place one love above another. With every show I've written, I begin by thinking it's just a job, the story doesn't have anything to do with me, and [end by realizing I have exposed some deep scary part of myself. I am unspeakably grateful to my beautiful family for holding our lives together while this score got pushed out into the world - I spent four years learning about Robert and Francesca and figuring out how and why they made the choices they did, and this show celebrates, in many ways, the staggeringly high price and the even greater value of the commitments and the choices we make to build a home.



-Jason Robert Brown March 28, 2014 New York, NY

ABOUT THE CREATORS

Marsha Norman

Marsha Norman is the winner of the 1983 Pulitzer Prize, Blackburn Prize, Hull-Warriner, and Drama Desk Awards for her play *'Night, Mother*. In 1992 she won a Tony Award and a Drama Desk Award for her book for the Broadway musical, *The Secret Garden*. She also wrote the book for the Broadway musical, *The Color Purple*, for which she also received a Tony nomination. The play is currently being revived on Broadway in a production starring Jennifer Hudson. She won a Peabody Award for her writing on the HBO television series, "In Treatment," starring Gabriel Byrne and Dianne Wiest.

She has Grammy and Emmy nominations, as well as grants and awards from among others, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Ms. Norman is co-chair with Christopher Durang of the Playwriting Department of The Juilliard School.



Robert James Waller

Robert James Waller grew up in Rockford, Iowa, a Midwestern town of 900 people, where his mother was a housewife and his father operated a small produce business. He studied at the University of Northern Iowa and Indiana University where he received his doctorate. As a professor, Waller taught management, economics, and applied mathematics courses at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) from 1968 to 1991, except for one year (1975-76) that he spent on leave at the Battelle Memorial Institute in Columbus, Ohio. From 1979 to 1986 he also served as dean of UNI's College of Business.

He has lectured and published widely in the fields of problem-solving and decision making and has worked as a consultant to business corporations and government institutions throughout the United States and around the world. An all-conference basketball player in college, Waller also worked for more than 20 years as a musician (guitar, flute, singer/songwriter) playing nightclubs and concerts, and is a serious photographer who travels the world for his images.

His best-selling novel *The Bridges of Madison County* has gone to press 64 times, has 12 million hardcover copies in print, is published in 36 languages and spent 164 weeks (over 3 years) on *The New York Times* bestseller list.

Robert now lives quietly on a remote ranch in the high-desert mountains of West Texas.



1965

The Bridges of Madison County takes place in rural Iowa over the course of four high-passion days in 1965. In order to understand the characters and their world, it is helpful to research what the living circumstances were like at the time, compared to those in the contemporary world of 2016.

Cost of Living

Average annual income: \$6,450
Average cost of a new house: \$13,600
Average cost of a new car: \$2,650
Average cost of gas per gallon: 31 cents
Loaf of bread: 21 cents
Average rent per month: \$118

Music

“Downtown” by Petula Clark
“My Girl” by The Temptations
“Stop! In the Name of Love” by The Supremes
“Yesterday” by The Beatles
“The Sound of Silence” by Simon & Garfunkel

In the News

- 📍 The president in 1965 was Lyndon B. Johnson.
- 📍 The first American combat troops arrive in Vietnam. As the military action in Vietnam escalates, so do anti-war protests, including marches on the Washington Monument, “teach-ins,” draft card burnings, and the self-immolation death of Quaker Norman Morrison, who set himself on fire outside the Pentagon.
- 📍 After a clash between demonstrators and Alabama State Troopers known as “Bloody Sunday,” the second and third Civil Rights marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama take place, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., leading to violent clashes with police. These actions prompt President Johnson to create the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- 📍 Malcolm X is assassinated in Harlem.
- 📍 Medicare and Medicaid are established by the Social Security Act.



Q&A with Mark Binns

Musical Director for *The Bridges of Madison County*

We asked the production's musical director, Mark Binns, to speak about the appeal of this musical's score and about Jason Robert Brown as a composer for the stage. Here are his thoughts.

How would you describe the score to *The Bridges of Madison County* for Arkansas Rep audiences?

Jason Robert Brown has created one of the most beautiful scores I have ever had the privilege to direct. The soaring melodies and intricate rhythms and harmonies truly convey each emotion they are setting out to depict. It is a score full of romance, passion, mystery, intrigue, and, most importantly... love. The story of *Bridges* is set in 1960s Iowa. The score is full of the sounds of both the period and the surroundings. Our story's protagonist, Francesca, was born and raised in Italy, so you can expect to hear some Italian flavors in the songs that she sings, most notably in the orchestrations. Stylistically, the score pulls heavily from the sounds of country, folk, Americana, opera, and even blues...all while staying true to the tradition of musical theatre. While *Bridges* is a modern, contemporary piece of musical theatre (premiering on Broadway in 2014), it is very much written in a more traditional style. You can expect to hear more of the "legitimate, head voice" vocal quality, as opposed to the more "belted, chest voice" vocal quality heard in much of the modern musical theatre repertoire.

What is it about this particular story that makes it ideal for the musical theatre format?

Bridges has previously existed in several mediums, including the novel by Robert James Waller and the 1995 film starring Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep. It has already proven itself as a solid piece of masterful storytelling, so a stage version seems like a natural reincarnation. I have often heard naysayers belittle the idea of musicals, claiming that it is not natural for one to "burst out into song." However, I believe what makes the great musicals great is when we "burst out into song" not just for the sake of singing, but because the dialogue is simply not enough to convey the depth of the emotions the characters are feeling. The music of *Bridges* does just that. You will see moments in the show that can only be fulfilled by the outcry of emotion through the sounds of this gorgeous score.

What do you hope local audiences take away from this production?

I believe *Bridges* is a very personal story that will, hopefully, cause us all to examine our own lives. I hope we will open our hearts and minds and ask very poignant questions about love and about how we give and receive love. I also hope they are moved not only by the story, but by the amazing performances they will see. You will see actors at their most vulnerable states. I've often heard people describe The Rep like watching a play in their living room. It is an intimate production for an intimate venue. Audiences are invited to go on a journey for a couple hours where we see love poured out on the stage in its most raw forms. I hope the intimacy of each emotion, each melody, each bow of the strings, and each strum of the guitar stays with audiences for a long time.

If someone had never heard Jason Robert Brown's music before, which show other than *Bridges* would you recommend as an introduction to his style?

The Last Five Years is the show that introduced me to Jason Robert Brown over a decade ago. It is arguably his most well-known score. It tells the story of a five-year marriage between Jamie and Cathy. We see the show unfold in chronological order through Jamie's eyes, and reverse chronological order through Cathy's eyes. They meet in the middle for one beautiful duet. Brown pulled inspiration from his own failed marriage when writing this show. It is deeply personal and very candidly explores both the triumphs and failures of marriage. We understand a little bit more about the man with each song. Almost entirely sung through, I believe this is the perfect show to acquaint oneself with Brown's artistry as a musician and a storyteller. Each song is a perfect example of how neither the musical accompaniment nor the vocals outshine one another. Rather, they work together in perfect symbiosis to expose the deepest emotions of the human psyche.

Do you have a favorite Jason Robert Brown musical? What is it, and why?

Bridges is, hands down, my favorite score of his. It won a Tony for Best Original Score and also for Best Orchestrations, if that tells you anything. I believe Brown totally captured the essence of the story with his score. It is just as thrilling to play as it is to listen to. I will also always hold a special place in my heart for *The Last Five Years*. I had the privilege of serving as the show's musical director in a production of it here in Little Rock last year at The Studio Theatre. And it didn't hurt that one of my dearest friends, Erin Martinez, portrayed the role of Cathy. There were some transcendent moments that I had while performing that show, especially during the opening number, "Still Hurting." If you haven't heard that number, look it up now.

What is the most challenging aspect of working on this production? The most rewarding?

The most challenging aspect is also the most rewarding. Playing a Jason Robert Brown score is often a daunting task that requires much practice and preparation. Brown is a very accomplished pianist, and his music is written exactly the way he would play it. Personally, I have always found that his music fits really well in my hands. There are a lot of notes on the page, but it ultimately comes down to finding the right 'groove' for the piece. I find once the groove is in place, the notes kind of simultaneously fall into place. *Bridges* is also a very strenuous show for the singers. Performers are not machines. We will have to work to get to a place where we feel like we can perform it to a certain standard eight times a week. However, once we get to that place, there is so much rewarding to reap in the process.

It is also extremely rewarding to work with a director like Bob Hupp, who gives performers so much room to grow and develop the characters. I previously worked on *Les Mis* with Bob. He asks a lot of smart questions that cause a performer to see things from all angles, which is exactly what you want in a director.

I think the ultimate reward will be witnessing the audience reactions. This is an exciting show for The Rep. It has previously only existed in workshops, Broadway, and is currently enjoying a National Tour. We are the North American Regional Premiere...the first regional theatre to be granted the rights to perform the piece. There is a lot to live up to, but the material is strong and speaks for itself.



Questions for Writing and Discussion

Before You See the Play:

- 📍 Have you ever had to give up something you wanted in order to do “the right thing”? What was the rationale for your ultimate decision? Looking back, did you make the right decision? What do you think your life would have been like if you had taken the other path?
- 📍 What are some iconic love stories that do not have happy endings? Why do you think we are still attracted to “star-crossed lovers”?
- 📍 Which of these qualities is most important in life?
 - Loyalty to family
 - Being true to yourself
 - Finding your soulmate
 - Being a good person
 - Creating something that will last when you are gone
- 📍 Write a short essay about the quality that you choose, defending it against the other qualities. Share your answers with the class and debate your answers.

After You See the Play:

- 📍 Do you think Francesca made the right choice at the end of the play? Explore the role of duty and loyalty in all of the characters’ motivations and actions.
- 📍 Compare Robert and Francesca to other couples in literature who have had to reject their love for one another:
 - Launcelot and Guinevere
 - Erik (the Phantom) and Christine
 - Sally/Linus, Peppermint Patty/Charlie Brown, Charlie Brown/The Little Red-Haired Girl
 - The original Hans Christian Andersen “Little Mermaid”
 - Cyrano de Bergerac and Roxane
 - Jo March and Laurie
 - Scarlett O’Hara and Ashley Wilkes
 - Orsino and Olivia/Olivia and Cesario (Twelfth Night by Shakespeare)
 - Marius and Eponine
 - Jay Gatsby and Daisy
 - Severus Snape and Lily Evans/Potter
 - Aragorn and Eowyn
 - Winnie Foster and Jesse Tuck
 - Romeo and Rosaline
 - Jacob and Bella
- 📍 Explore what the symbolism of bridges might mean in the overall interpretation of the story of the musical. What metaphors can a bridge represent? How does that illuminate the relationship between Francesca and Robert, as well as that between Francesca and Bud?

Activities

Write a love song or poem to someone you can never have, for whatever reason. Let that unrequited love and constant craving influence the words and emotions you set down in the language of the song/poem.

- You do not have to reveal the identity of the person about/to whom you are writing.
- Try to write it so that this person would never know it was about him/her, even if you sang/read it directly to him/her.

Write a new version of *The Bridges of Madison County*, but tell the story from Bud's point of view. How does that change the emotional stakes of the romance? What are the central values that bind the story together?

- Do the same exercise, but tell the story from the perspective of one of the secondary characters, such as Marge or Charlie.

Watch the 1995 film version of "The Bridges of Madison County" and compare/contrast it with the musical. Which had a greater emotional impact on you? Can you identify why?

Watch the recent film of Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years* and compare Jamie and Cathy's relationship to the central one in *The Bridges of Madison County*. Do you notice any similar themes or characters? Discuss the theme of missed connections in both musicals.



ARKANSAS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK TAUGHT IN STUDY GUIDE, ATTENDING THE SHOW AND SHOW DISCUSSION

FINE ARTS

R.7.THI.1-5, R.7.THII.1-5, R.7.THIII.1-5 Students will perceive and analyze artistic work.

R.8.THI.1-2, R.8.THII.1-2, R.8.THIII.1-2 Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

R.9.THI.1-2, R.9.THII.1-2, R.9.THIII.1-2 Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

R.7.TA.2-4, R.8.TA.1-2, R.9.TA.2 Students will perceive and analyze artistic work.

CN.11.TA.2-9 Students will relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

R.7.SCI.1-2, R.7.SCII.1-2, R.7.SCIII.1-2 Students will perceive and analyze artistic work.

R.8.SCI.1, R.8.SCII.1, R.8.SCIII.1 Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

R.9.SCI.1-2, R.9.SCII.1-2, R.9.SCIII.1-2 Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

CN.11.SCI.1-9, CN.11.SCII.1-9, CN.11.SCIII.1-9 Students will relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

R.7.2.1, R.7.3.1, R.7.4.1 Students will perceive and analyze artistic work.

R.8.2.1-3, R.8.3.1-3, R.8.4.1-3 Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

R.9.2.1, R.9.1.1, R.9.2.1-3, R.9.3.1-3, R.9.4.1-3 Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

R.7.5.1, R.7.6.1, R.7.7.1, R.7.8.1 Students will perceive and analyze artistic work.

R.8.5.1-3, R.8.6.1-3, R.8.7.1-3, R.8.8.1-3 Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

R.9.5.1-3, R.9.6.1-3, R.9.7.1-3, R.9.8.1-3 Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

CN.10.5.1, CN.10.6.1, CN.10.7.1, CN.10.8.1 Students will synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

CN.11.5.2-3, CN.11.6.2-3, CN.11.7.2-3, CN.11.7.2-3, CN.10.8.2-3 Students will relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

DRAMATIC LITERATURE

DE.1.DL.1-11 Students will demonstrate understanding of the elements of drama through the study of a variety of dramatic texts.



OUR STORY

Founded in 1976 and enjoying its 40th Anniversary Season, Arkansas Repertory Theatre is the state's largest non-profit professional theatre company. A member of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT D), The Rep has produced more than 300 productions including 40 world premieres on its 377-seat MainStage located in its historic Galloway building in downtown Little Rock. The Rep relies on season subscriptions, special events, foundation support, corporate and individual donations, and several grants, including Shakespeare in American Communities, The Shubert Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts.

OUR MISSION

Arkansas Repertory Theatre exists to create a diverse body of theatrical work of the highest artistic standards. With a focus on dramatic storytelling that illuminates the human journey, The Rep entertains, engages and enriches local and regional audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For questions or comments concerning this production of *The Bridges of Madison County* or Arkansas Repertory Theatre, contact our offices at (501) 378-0445. Additional information may also be found at TheRep.org. The Box Office may be reached at (501) 378-0405.

THANKS TO OUR EDUCATION SPONSORS

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