

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING

ADAPTED BY

JULIE KRAMER

BASED ON THE BOOK BY

RONA JAFFE



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

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THE BEST OF EVERYTHING
adapted by Julie Kramer
based on the book by Rona Jaffe

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Developed with Amy Wilson

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*For my parents Rita and Howard Kramer,
my husband Niko Triantafillou,
and Amy Wilson, my friend.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

So many people helped to make this play possible: Robert Wishnew, Richard Agins, and The Rona Jaffe Foundation; Jenny Lyn Bader, David Diamond, Bixby Elliot, Benjamin Feldman, David Flannery, Nagle Jackson, Jill Kurland-Rak, Leah Michalos, Jessica Provenz, Robin Rothstein; Beth Bickers and Peter Hagan and everyone at Abrams; the wonderful actors from the readings at The Directors Company and New Georges; my spectacular cast from the HERE production; my darling casting director Paul Davis; my designers who helped me better understand my own work through their brilliant artistry; my beautiful stage manager Katharine Whitney who kept me almost sane; Susan Bernfield who gives me endless advice in all things, and whose support sustains my artistic life; and Wendy Weiner, who read this script more times than I can count and always believed in it and in me. And because it bears repeating, Amy Wilson, for Everything.

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING was presented by 95 WordsPerMinute and Hyde Park & Lafayette LLC at HERE in New York City, opening on Sept 29, 2012. It was directed by Julie Kramer; the set design was by Lauren Helpen; the lighting design was by Graham Kindred; the costume design was by Daniel Urlic; the sound design was by Jill BC DuBoff; the production stage manager was Katharine Whitney; the associate producer was Holly Rosen Fink; the general manager was Leah Michalos; and the casting was by Paul Davis/Calleri Casting. The cast was as follows:

CAROLINE	Sarah Wilson
BRENDA	Sas Goldberg
MARY AGNES	Molly Lloyd
APRIL	Alicia Sable
MISS FARROW	Amy Wilson
GREGG	Hayley Treider
EDDIE	Jordan Geiger
MIKE RICE/MR. SHALIMAR/ DAVID WILDER SAVAGE/RONNIE	Tom O'Keefe
VOICEOVER	Susan Bott

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING also had a workshop in April 2011 as part of "This is Your Week" at New Georges: Susan Bernfield, Producing Artistic Director; Sarah Cameron Sunde, Deputy Artistic Director; Jaynie Saunders Tiller, Managing Director; Kara-Lynn Vaeni, Literary Manager.

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING had an invited reading in June 2010 at The Directors Company, Michael Parva, Artistic Director; Leah Michalos, Managing Director.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This play works best when performed with a nod to 1940s and '50s performance style — a slightly heightened manner, quick cue pick-up. But it should never be campy. These girls mean what they say, completely and utterly. For them the stakes are very real.

While a lot has changed for women since the '50s, a surprising amount hasn't. So as a director I embraced contemporary theatrical devices such as the toy-sized ship and the Men in the Grey Flannel Suit cardboard cutouts. The ship should be both kind of silly and rather lovely. In the New York production it was small enough to be easily held in two hands, but it still conveyed a sense of physical and emotional import. The cardboard cutout men should be handsome but generic.

This is a story about the girls in the typing pool, not the men in the offices, so most of the male characters are played by one actor. Only Eddie is played by a separate actor, because to Caroline, he's not like all the others. Whether she's right about that or not remains to be seen.

CHARACTERS

CAROLINE BENDER (Early 20s.) Pretty and very smart with a broken heart beneath her polished exterior.

BRENDA ZALESKI (20s.) A schemer with slight Queens accent.

MARY AGNES RUSSO (20s.) Naïve and gossipy but in a funny rather than mean-spirited way.

APRIL MORRISON (Early 20s.) Beautiful small-town girl. Says funny things without knowing they're funny. Catnip to men (and doesn't really know that either).

AMANDA FARROW (Mid-to-late 30s.) Smart, put-together and intimidating. Unmarried at 36, she's the only female editor at Fabian Publishing, and determined to keep it that way.

GREGG ADAMS (Early 20s.) An actress and a temp. She has the face of a 16-year-old and the sophistication of a 40-year-old. Not as devil-may-care as she seems.

EDDIE HARRIS (Early 20s.) Caroline's ex-fiancé. Harvard man. Sees himself as the hero of a romantic novel.

One actor plays the following roles:

MIKE RICE (40s.) Handsome but dissipated. An alcoholic and a cynic but a good man.

DAVID WILDER SAVAGE (30s.) Dashing, smart, the devil. Makes every woman feel like the only girl in the world.

MR. SHALIMAR (60s.) The editor-in-chief of Fabian Publishing. Sophisticated, with a possibly affected British accent and lots of impressive stories. A drinker and garter snapper of the worst order.

RONNIE WOOD (20s.) Small-town boy, handsome, sweet, a slight stutter.

PLACE

Desks, chairs and props become the typing pool
and offices of Fabian Publishing.

TIME

September 1952 – January 1954.

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING

Scene 1

In darkness, the sound of a ship's horn. Lights come up on a toy-sized cruise ship.

Caroline Bender enters. She's waving her handkerchief and looking longingly at the ship.

Eddie Harris enters. While he and Caroline are not literally together, it's nice if there can be some sense of connection between them during the following.

EDDIE. Dear Caroline, This is the fourth letter I've written to you, the other three efforts I've torn up. These six weeks in Europe have changed me so. How much easier it is to declare love than to withdraw it, especially from someone you still like very much. *(Caroline stops waving.)* By now you know I'm not on the ship. *(Caroline walks to the ship and looks at it closely.)* Instead, I will be returning with Helen Lowe and her parents to Dallas, and marrying Helen next month. *(Caroline picks up the ship and stares at it, as if it were Eddie's letter.)* I hope you appreciate how unpleasant a predicament this is for me. You are lucky you have only to read this letter rather than write it. I certainly wish you the best of everything, Eddie. *(Lights shift. Music, upbeat but jarring. Caroline stands in shock as Mary Agnes, April and Gregg rush in and start setting up the typing pool. One of them takes the ship out of Caroline's hands and puts it in a filing cabinet. Brenda enters and makes a beeline for Caroline as the music fades. Brenda is from Queens.)*

BRENDA. How do you want your coffee? You'd better take it in a jar instead of a paper container.

CAROLINE. (*Thrown.*) Coffee? Thank you. (*Brenda exits, and Mary Agnes rushes over. Mary Agnes has a lot to say.*)

MARY AGNES. That's Brenda. Watch out for her. She makes you pay for the coffee and the jar, and then she gives back the jars and keeps all the deposit money. Don't let her get away with it.

CAROLINE. Okay.

MARY AGNES. Did you notice her teeth? She's engaged to be married and she's having all her bad teeth pulled so her husband will have to pay for the new ones. Did you ever hear of such a thing?

CAROLINE. I don't think that I have. I'm Caroline Bender.

MARY AGNES. I'm Mary Agnes Russo. You can have that desk. (*She points to the closest one.*)

CAROLINE. I'd like to get started. Is there anything for me to type?

MARY AGNES. Oh there's plenty of time for all that. Miss Farrow comes in around ten o'clock. She'll take you around and introduce you to everybody.

CAROLINE. Miss Farrow? Is she the head secretary?

MARY AGNES. Don't let her hear you say that! She's an editor!

CAROLINE. I didn't know women could be editors. I thought they could only be secretaries.

MARY AGNES. Well, Miss Farrow is the only female editor at Fabian Paperbacks. She wears her hat in the office all day long just so no one will mistake her for one of us. She's 36 and she's not married! (*Beat.*) You'll be working for her temporarily because her secretary quit.

CAROLINE. Me?

MARY AGNES. We have a temp, Gregg Adams, but she's not here every day because she's an actress. Do you have plans for lunch?

CAROLINE. No. Would you like to eat together?

MARY AGNES. Oh, I can't. I always have lunch with my boyfriend. Some days he brings his lunch up here, and some days I bring my sandwiches downtown. We're saving up to get married one year from this coming June. (*April Morrison rushes in. She has messy blonde hair and a beautiful face, and she's so small town she should be carrying a sunbonnet.*)

APRIL. Oh my goodness! Am I terribly late?

MARY AGNES. Yes.

APRIL. I was so excited for my very first job I forgot to set my alarm.

CAROLINE. It's my first job as well. I'm Caroline.

APRIL. I'm April Morrison from Springs, Colorado. I just graduated from junior college. My parents gave me five hundred dollars and a bus ticket for my present and said I could stay as long as the money lasted. It's been two weeks and I just don't know where it all went! So I said to myself, "April Morrison, you belong here. Get yourself a job." And here I am! *(As April talks, Mike Rice walks across the typing pool. He seems mid-40s, and looks like he's had a rough night. He's wearing a camel's-hair coat with a large cigarette burn on the lapel. He looks at the girls, then heads to his office.)*

CAROLINE. Who's that?

MARY AGNES. Mike Rice. He's the editor of *The Cross*.

CAROLINE. The religious magazine? He doesn't seem like the type.

MARY AGNES. Have you read *The Cross*? It will sicken you.

CAROLINE. It's very pious.

APRIL. My Nana loves *The Cross*.

MARY AGNES. He writes those articles, but he doesn't believe in anything. He hangs around in those Third Avenue bars every night, drinking and reciting poetry and talking to any stranger he can lay his hands on.

CAROLINE. He's not married?

MARY AGNES. He had a wife, but she left him. He lives in a real rundown hotel on the West Side. He has a daughter ten years old who he never sees.

APRIL. Oh how sad!

MARY AGNES. *(Kind.)* I always feel sorry for a person like him. If he was married and lived with his wife and child he wouldn't be like that.

CAROLINE. *(Upset.)* So marriage solves everything?

MARY AGNES. *(Explaining.)* There are only two ways to live, the right way and the wrong way. If you live the right way you're happy, and if you live the wrong way you're miserable. If you get married it doesn't mean positively you're going to be happy, but if you get married and walk out on it then you can't be happy. You'll always know you gave up on a responsibility.

CAROLINE. What if the other person walks out on you?

MARY AGNES. *(Eyes widening.)* Were *you* married?

CAROLINE. Engaged.

APRIL. Oh how terrible.

MARY AGNES. I'll never talk about it again. Unless you bring it up. If you ever want to talk about it, you just tell me.

CAROLINE. I took this job so I would have something else to talk about. (*Miss Farrow enters. She's slim and fashionable and wearing a chic hat. She looks at Caroline and April.*)

AMANDA. Which one is mine?

MARY AGNES. (*Jumping in.*) This is Caroline Bender, Miss Farrow.

CAROLINE. I'm so pleased to have the opportunity to — (*Miss Farrow starts walking to her office.*)

AMANDA. Come. (*Caroline follows.*) First you can order me some coffee from the coffee shop downstairs, black with sugar. All the filing to be done is in that box. My secretary left last week and the place is a mess. The mail comes four times a day, you open it, and anything that requires a personal answer goes in that box. (*She points.*) Some of the letters you can answer yourself, if they're from cranks, for instance. But show me everything you write before you send it out. Everything you do has to go through me first. You get one hour for lunch and I want you back here on time so you can answer my phone. Oh, and Miss Bender, if Mr. Bossart calls make sure you put him right through. He's the vice-president of the company. We have a very important relationship. (*Caroline is trying to take notes.*)

CAROLINE. I'm sorry Miss Farrow. Which box is for mail that requires a personal response? (*Amanda points.*) Thank you. And how will I know if something requires a personal response?

AMANDA. That is an excellent question, Miss Bender. I would say to use your common sense, but it is becoming apparent that you have none. So open everything and let me see it all.

CAROLINE. Of course, Miss Farrow. (*Caroline picks up the phone.*)

AMANDA. (*Aghast.*) What are you doing?

CAROLINE. Calling the coffee shop?

AMANDA. Not here! You use your phone outside. You always answer my line at the telephone on your desk and say "Miss Farrow's office." Do you think you can manage that?

CAROLINE. Yes, Miss Farrow.

AMANDA. Wonderful. (*Beat.*) The coffee? (*Caroline returns to her desk. Mary Agnes swoops in.*)

MARY AGNES. How do you like your new boss?

CAROLINE. So far it's like hell week for getting into a sorority.

MARY AGNES. Hey that's cute!

CAROLINE. I'm glad she's only my temporary boss. I was an excellent student, but Miss Farrow seems to think I'm a complete fool.

MARY AGNES. It's not personal. She treats all of us that way.

CAROLINE. I'd like to make a good impression.

MARY AGNES. I wouldn't count on it. She always says she wants a secretary like you, a college graduate who's pretty and sophisticated, and then she always hates the poor girl's guts. (*April enters.*)

APRIL. Caroline! I'm working for someone important also. Mr. Shalimar. He's the editor-in-chief!

MARY AGNES. His regular secretary is sick.

APRIL. He is the most fascinating person I have ever met. He knew Eugene O'Neill! (*Caroline's phone rings. She picks up.*)

CAROLINE. (*Tentative.*) Miss Farrow's office? Yes, Miss Farrow. I was just about to call the coffee shop. I'm sorry, Miss Farrow. (*She hangs up and puts her head in her hands, then takes a breath.*) Please excuse me, April, I have some work to do.

APRIL. Of course! It's so busy here. Mr. Shalimar said he may need me to work through lunch, and he'll pay for the sandwiches! I've been so *hungry* since I got to New York. I can't afford anything but Fig Newtons for supper! (*Caroline picks up the phone and dials as April exits.*)

CAROLINE. Hello operator, please connect me to the coffee shop downstairs. (*Listening.*) Good morning, I'd like to place an order for Miss Farrow. One coffee, black with sugar. Whose account? Hers, I suppose? Thank you. (*She hangs up. The phone rings and she answers.*) Miss Farrow's office. Mr. Bossart? One moment please. (*Caroline looks at the buttons on the phone, panicked. Mary Agnes comes over and presses a button.*) Mr. Bossart for you, Miss Farrow. (*She exhales, relieved, and turns to Mary Agnes.*) Thank you!

MARY AGNES. You're welcome. (*Beat.*) People say she's having an affair with him. Mr. Bossart.

CAROLINE. Really?

MARY AGNES. They say that's how she got to be the only female editor.

CAROLINE. Do you think that's true?

MARY AGNES. I don't. He's a married man!

CAROLINE. I thought that sort of thing only happened in Fabian Paperbacks. That is terrible, to ... be with ... someone else's husband.

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING

adapted by Julie Kramer

based on the book by Rona Jaffe

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A new adaptation of Rona Jaffe's 1958 bestseller about ambitious secretaries in the big city. These girls want thrilling careers and gay adventures — and husbands and children too, in due time. Today we call that “having it all”; these girls call it “the best of everything.” They're not sure it's possible either.

“To my surprised pleasure, THE BEST OF EVERYTHING is neither a delirious sendup nor a mordant, finger-wagging deconstruction. It's a respectful, hysteria-free, streamlined and appealingly modest effort that lets Jaffe's working girls speak for themselves ... The whole show is refreshingly free of the 'aren't-we-clever' self-consciousness that often accompanies such excursions into pop-culture past ... There is a welcome humility at work here, which in turn creates a feeling of unvarnished transparency. This approach gently and divertingly reminds us that Jaffe's novel focused a clear and abidingly useful gaze on women caught in a moment in time that isn't as distant as you might suppose.”

—The New York Times

“It's Stage Door in a Mad Men world, with a jigger of Peyton Place, and Kramer treats its soapiness like a bubble bath whose froth conceals some pretty dirty water.”

—Time Out New York

“This clever adaptation of Rona Jaffe's novel about secretaries in the 1950s is an absolute treat ... THE BEST OF EVERYTHING nimbly lives up to its title.”

—TheaterMania

ISBN 978-0-8222-2869-1



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