

A DELICATE SHIP

BY ANNA ZIEGLER



DRAMATISTS
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A DELICATE SHIP
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A DELICATE SHIP was originally produced by Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park (Blake Robinson, Artistic Director; Buzz Ward, Managing Director) on March 22, 2014. It was directed by Michael Evan Haney, the set designer was Narelle Sissons, the costume designer was Gordon DeVinney, the lighting designer was Kirk Bookman, the sound designer was Fabian Obispo, and the stage manager was Becky Merold. The cast was as follows:

SARAH Janie Brookshire
NATE Karl Miller
SAM Ben Diskant

The Off-Broadway premiere of A DELICATE SHIP was produced by The Playwrights Realm (Katherine Kovner, Artistic Director) on August 18, 2015. It was directed by Margot Bordelon, the set designer was Reid Thompson, the costumer designer was Sydney Maresca, the lighting designer was Nicole Pearce, and the sound design and composition was by Palmer Hefferan. The cast was as follows:

SARAH Miriam Silverman
NATE Nick Westrate
SAM Matt Dellapina

CHARACTERS

SARAH: early – mid-30s. Sensitive and kind and indecisive, big-hearted with an easy laugh, the kind of woman who doesn't realize men are in love with her and struggles with fear in a way that makes her sidestep her life a little bit.

NATE: early – mid-30s. A deeply wounded poet-type, quick-witted and razor-sharp, with an epically ranging emotional scale; he is too smart for his own good, obsessed with his own self-hatred, but appreciative of honesty in any form.

SAM: early – mid-30s. A dreamer and former dork, the sweet guy you'd want your daughter to marry, who never wants to offend anyone; he is honest and smart, and tries very hard to fit in. He's also a musician who plays a guitar.

SETTING

Nominally, an apartment in Brooklyn, on Christmas Eve. The present day. The play also occupies a memory space that exists before and after the night when the action of the play takes place.

I'm nostalgic for conversations I had yesterday. I've begun reminiscing events before they even occur. I'm reminiscing this right now.

—Noah Baumbach, *Kicking and Screaming*

When I asked him why he had never married . . . quietly, almost in a whisper, he said his parents had been “twin souls,” and he knew it would “always remain impossible to match what they had had.”

—Dmitri Nabokov (Vladimir's son)
to Lila Azam Zanganeh, as reported
in her essay “His Father's Best Translator,”
The New York Times, July 20, 2012

And this is the simple truth — that to live is to feel oneself lost. He who accepts it has already begun to find himself; to be on firm ground. Instinctively, as do the shipwrecked, he will look around for something to which to cling, and that tragic, ruthless glance, absolutely sincere, because it is a question of his salvation, will cause him to bring order into the chaos of his life. These are the only genuine ideas; the ideas of the shipwrecked. All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce.

—Søren Kierkegaard

*I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.*

*The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd
wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.*

—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

We must love one another or die.

—W.H. Auden, “September 1, 1939”

For a 1955 anthology text Auden changed this line to “We must love one another and die” to circumvent what he regarded as a falsehood in the original.

A DELICATE SHIP

Lights up on an almost bare stage. Three actors are arranged around it — Sarah and Sam sit together, and Nate stands a little apart from them. It is late in the evening, well after dinner. A Christmas tree sits undecorated in the middle of the room.

NATE. *(To the audience.)* They were discussing how consciousness emerges from suffering. He was arguing that:

SAM. You can only be truly self-aware when you're in pain.

SARAH. I disagree.

NATE. *(Dryly and with obvious disdain.)* He was something of a philosophy nut. In college, he took both semesters of the Russian lit survey. You know, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Pushkin. That sort of thing got him going.

SAM. If you're happy, you're not thinking. Not really. Think about the happiest moments in your life. Are you analyzing them? No, you analyze the bad stuff. You relive the bad stuff over and over again.

SARAH. I analyze everything. I analyze the good stuff to make sure it's not actually bad.

NATE. It was snowing. That night. *(It snows. Sarah turns to the audience.)*

SARAH. This is Nate.

NATE. It was Christmas.

SARAH. This is years ago.

NATE. We grew up together. In an apartment building in the city at the center of the world. I lived just above her. 6A.

SARAH. 5A.

NATE. *(Wryly lewd.)* We had the same bedroom. Every night I slept on top of her.

SARAH. Nate still lives in that building. I mean, he doesn't, really. But he does. *(Sam turns to the audience.)*

SAM. When I met Nate —

SARAH. Christmas, years ago now.

SAM. He knocked on the door. We weren't expecting him.

NATE. It was snowing.

SARAH. This was years ago.

NATE. Everything was years ago.

SAM. We were ... *(Sarah and Sam kiss. Then he looks into her eyes.)*

The last few months were almost too good to be true. Every night we stayed up so late talking that the next day I was in a fog of Sarah.

SARAH. I'd fall asleep in my chair at work. I'd sit with my back to the door so no one would see.

SAM. Every song I heard was suddenly about her. About us.

SARAH. There was something in his eyes that made me think of my dad. And that was nice.

SAM. *(A little abashed.)* I told her I loved her on our third date. *(Then, to her.)* I'd never said it to anyone before. Did you know that?

SARAH. *(Sadly.)* I didn't know that.

SAM. And then there was this knock. *(A knock on the door.)* Are you expecting someone?

SARAH. *(To the audience.)* What if we just hadn't opened the door? I sometimes get trapped in the loop of that question. To this day, it can take hours to get out of that loop. *(Another knock.)*

SAM. Sarah?

SARAH. *(Calling out.)* Who is it?

NATE. It's me.

SAM. *(To Sarah.)* Who's me?

SARAH. *(Letting him in.)* Nate! *(Sarah and Nate embrace.)*

NATE. Merry Christmas.

SARAH. *(Happily.)* What are you doing here? *(Sam is hanging back, waiting to be introduced. Nate notices him.)*

NATE. Your manners, Sarah.

SARAH. Oh, okay. Right. Nate — this is Sam.

SAM. Hey.

NATE. He doesn't know about me?

SARAH. *(A little warily.)* What are you doing here?

NATE. I was in the neighborhood.

SAM. *(To the audience.)* This wasn't true. He wasn't in the neighborhood.

NATE. *(To the audience.)* This is Sarah. She wouldn't want me to define her by what she does every day, even though what she does every day is perfectly interesting.

SARAH. *(To the audience.)* This is Sam. My boyfriend. He's a singer-

slash-philosopher-slash-legal-secretary. He's a paralegal who takes philosophy courses and is in a band. He thinks he's shy, but I think he's quiet. I like that he doesn't always have something he feels he has to say ... And one day he'll be famous.

NATE. (*To the audience.*) But not yet.

SARAH. (*To Nate.*) Well, it's good to see you.

SAM. So how do you and Sarah...?

NATE. Me and Louise here?

SARAH. (*Not knowing how to explain.*) He calls me Louise.

SAM. Is that like a nickname?

NATE. Like a nickname.

SARAH. We had this class together and —

NATE. It's fucking freezing out there. I thought my ears were gonna fall off.

SARAH. Well, you should wear a hat. You never wear a hat.

NATE. (*Matter-of-fact.*) And the streets were empty, and the subway was empty. I think it was colder because everything was so empty.

SAM. Well, it's Christmas Eve.

NATE. I know.

SAM. Where are you coming from?

NATE. In what sense? Physically? Intellectually? Emotionally?

SARAH. Sorry — he's crazy.

NATE. Only for you.

SAM. So, did you guys go to college together, or?

SARAH. We grew up together.

SAM. Okay, awesome. Awesome. (*A breath.*)

SARAH. (*To Nate.*) Do you want a drink?

NATE. Would I ever turn down a drink?

SARAH. Well, are you staying?

NATE. What kind of question is that? I'm here, aren't I?

SARAH. For all I know you're just stopping by.

NATE. (*A little sharp/pointed.*) Aren't you happy to see me?

SARAH. I said I was.

NATE. (*To Sam.*) See, every Christmas Eve, we'd meet in the stairwell of our building. And we'd smoke a joint and gossip like old hens about everything — our friends and classmates, who was fucking who and how dreadful it must be to be them when of course all we wanted was to be them.

SARAH. Remember the year when one of the Jorges caught us — (*To Sam.*) our building had two supers both named Jorge —

NATE. It was the grouchy one. Grouchy Jorge.

SARAH. But he just sat down and was like, "Can I have a hit?"

NATE. And then a couple weeks later, he got busted for dealing drugs to high-schoolers.

SARAH. (*That puts a damper on things.*) Oh yeah, I forgot that part. (*Amazed.*) God, it all feels like such a long time ago. It's crazy.

NATE. (*Honestly, serious.*) I didn't want to be on my own tonight, okay? (*Beat. Nate and Sarah look at each other.*)

SAM. You know, Kierkegaard said that loneliness makes us poets.

NATE. What?

SAM. He said the only genuine ideas are the ideas of the shipwrecked. So, like, the best thinking, the clearest thinking, is done by people who are lost or suffering or lonely.

NATE. (*As in "where'd you find this guy?"*) Who is this guy?

SARAH. He's my boyfriend.

NATE. (*Without snark.*) Your boyfriend.

SAM. I sort of — perversely, I know — but I like the idea that to live is to be lost. And that only when we accept that state of being lost, of being lonely, can we create some order in our lives.

NATE. You like that idea?

SAM. Yeah. I do.

NATE. Then you must not have experienced it.

SARAH. Nate —

NATE. (*Intense but also matter-of-fact.*) You must never have really grieved in your life, really lost anything. Losses that big don't make us poets. The past doesn't disappear so that we can write about it.

SARAH. Nate lives in the past. Sometimes I have to go back there just to find him and drag him back here.

SAM. Some philosophers argue the past isn't real. Isn't that an incredible concept?

NATE. Hey, so I brought weed. Or we can keep talking about this stuff.

SAM. You brought dope?

NATE. Do you smoke dope?

SAM. Not in a long time, but ...

NATE. Well, if you smoked it in the past and the past isn't real then ...

SAM. It's really more figurative ...

SARAH. Don't be a child, Nate.

NATE. I don't actually see why anyone would want to be anything but a child.

SARAH. Oh god, this is his theory —

NATE. It's not a theory. It's a statement about life. That the primary joys we experience are as children.

SARAH. I don't agree.

NATE. Because agreeing would be admitting your life is getting gradually but steadily worse and that's an existential predicament you do not wish to acknowledge.

SARAH. Probably. But who cares?

NATE. *(To Sam.)* So what have you heard about me exactly?

SAM. What do you mean?

NATE. I mean, have I come up in conversation?

SAM. *(To Sarah.)* Has he?

SARAH. *(To Nate, skeptically.)* Why do you ask?

SAM. To be honest, the last few months have been a bit of a blur.

NATE. A blur, huh.

SAM. But what should I know about you? Why don't you tell me.

SARAH. *(To the audience.)* I am tweed skirts and tall boots and insomnia. I am sleeping with the light on when I'm home alone. I am the woman reading *The New Yorker* on the subway, mostly the cartoons and the movie reviews and occasionally an essay about the failures of doctors and hospitals and how we could, all of us, die very young. I am hoping for so many things but assume I won't get any of them. In this memory, tonight, I am thirty-three. I am older than my mother was when she had me. And I have been alone a long time. I've had boyfriends but when you're thirty-three and not married and a woman, you've been alone a very long time. I still own cassette tapes. I'm a social worker but not particularly social. Nate is my best friend but I would never tell him so. Maybe I live in the past too.

NATE. And I come bearing more gifts. I bring you champagne — *(He produces some from a bag.)* Voila.

SARAH. Nate —

NATE. And the biggest bag of Cheez Doodles I could find — *(Out it comes.)*

SARAH. *(Sarcastic.)* Reading my mind again.

NATE. Come on: Deep inside, you know you love Cheez Doodles.

SARAH. Do I? Or did I say that once — once — when we were kids?

NATE. In sixth grade, you ate Cheez Doodles every Tuesday and Thursday on your way home from ballet in the car service with your mom. Then you got sick of them and we made up a No-More-Cheez-

A DELICATE SHIP

by Anna Ziegler

2M, 1W

A haunting love triangle triggers an unexpected chain of events in this poetic play. In the early stages of a new relationship, Sarah and Sam are lovers happily discovering each other. Sarah and Nate know everything about each other, best of friends since childhood and maybe something more. But when Nate shows up unannounced on Sarah's doorstep, she's left questioning what and who she wants in this humorous and heartbreaking look at love, memory, and the decisions that alter the course of our lives.

"[I]n this memory play about the fragile dynamics of young relationships, and the mysterious workings of time ... the present and the past are in constant tension, or maybe in thoughtful, sorrowful conversation. ... Ms. Ziegler's quietly lyrical language has a luminous beauty, and her talent for creating characters whose complicated depths are just visible on their surfaces is still more remarkable."

—**The New York Times**

"Critic's pick ... Ziegler (who makes origami of time) ... digs beneath the laughs, of which there are plenty, to plumb the pain that lurks below."

—**Time Out (New York)**

"Ziegler has written a lovely piece that not only has the musicality of a fugue, but also contains an emotional center that will be familiar to anyone who has ever seen a relationship end. ... As in real life when we conjure a moment that did us extreme damage, it hurts us to an almost impossible degree. Ziegler doesn't sugar-coat this fact, and ... that's why A DELICATE SHIP is so notable."

—**TheaterMania.com**

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