

The English Theatre of Hamburg

Established 1976

presents

QUARTET

A Play by

Ronald Harwood

Premiere on 10 September, 2009

Preview Performances on 7, 8 and 9 September, 2009

Performances Tuesday through Saturday at 19.30 hours;

Matinee Performances at 11.00 hours on Tuesdays

and Fridays beginning 15 September

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Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere **QUARTET** by Ronald Harwood on 10 September, 2009, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 7, 8, and 9 September. Bookings for this amusing play have already started. See the cover of this study guide for dates and times of performances. The text of the play may be ordered from The Internet Theatre Bookshop: <http://www.stageplays.com/index.htm>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Born in South Africa in 1934, Ronald Harwood is one of the most accomplished and critically celebrated of contemporary dramatists. After moving to England in 1951, he first pursued a career as an actor and then later as a playwright, novelist and writer of screenplays. He is best known, however, for his plays for the British stage, which total more than 21. One of the recurring themes in Harwood's plays is his fascination for the stage and its performing artists, as shown in **THE DRESSER** (based on his experience working with the famous British actor, Donald Wolfit), **ANOTHER TIME** (about a gifted South African pianist), **AFTER THE LIONS** (based on the life of Sarah Bernhardt), and **QUARTET** (about aging opera singers). He also has a strong interest in World War II, as displayed in **TAKING SIDES** and, more recently, **COLLABORATION**. His other plays include **MAHLER'S CONVERSION**, **AN ENGLISH TRAGEDY** and **REFLECTED GLORY**. Ronald Harwood has also written more than 16 screenplays, some of them based on his works for the stage. His script for **THE PIANIST** won an Oscar in 2003 for Best Adapted Screenplay. The author was made Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1974 and was appointed CBE in 1999.

ABOUT THE PLAY:

QUARTET had a sell-out season in London's West End in 1999 and was nominated for a New Comedy Olivier Award in the same year. The setting is a home for retired opera singers where Cissy, Reggie and Wilf (all in their 70s) are living out their lives now with more aches, pains and regrets than curtain calls. In spite of this, their motto is "NSP" – "No Self Pity". Cissy listens to her old opera recordings. She has grown a bit senile, often thinking that someone is either leaving for or returning from Karachi. Reggie spends time writing his autobiography and raging against a nurse in the home who will not give him marmalade for breakfast. Wilf, a little in love with Cissy, thinks mostly about sex, wishing he were the man he used to be.

As the play opens, plans are in motion to celebrate the birthday of Giuseppe Verdi with a gala concert for which all the residents have been asked to perform something. Cissy, Reggie and Wilf are trying to decide what they will sing when a newcomer takes up residence in the home. It is Jean, a former colleague and star of the opera world who was married briefly (nine hours, to be exact) to Reggie. Her arrival sparks old jealousies and painful memories. It also gives the four of them the opportunity to reprise their former stage triumph – the famous quartet from Verdi's **RIGOLETTO** – for the gala concert! But Jean, a diva embittered by her reduced status, refuses to be humiliated in public by trying to sing again. Can they change her mind? More to the point, are they still able to raise their voices in song? The play ends with a musical twist that celebrates the triumph of life and art over old age and bitterness. The moving finale is an affirmation that life is to be lived to the full.

Summary of QUARTET

Setting: The music room and terrace of a home for retired opera singers in Kent, England.

Time: the present

Characters: Cissy, Reggie, Wilf and Jean (all aged over seventy)

Act One

It is a hot summer's day just before noon. Cissy and Reggie are sitting on the terrace at some distance from each other. Cissy is listening to an opera through a headset attached to a CD player. Reggie is reading a book on Richard Wagner and making notes. After a moment, Wilf enters, using a walking stick. He sits next to Cissy, with whom he is a little in love. She is lost in her CD. Knowing that she cannot hear him, Wilf tells Cissy how beautiful her breasts are and how much he has always wanted to have sex with her, even in their early days as opera colleagues. Reggie finds Wilf disgusting and asks him to stop. He finally does so, but only after Cissy turns off her CD player and removes the headset. She has been listening to a re-issue of their old recording of RIGOLETTO. "We were so lovely," she says nostalgically. Reggie reminds them that they have to decide what to sing for the gala concert celebrating Giuseppe Verdi's birthday on the tenth of October. Each year the residents in the home are asked to perform something for the occasion.

Wilf has heard that a new person will be taking up residence in the home today. Cissy, extremely upset that no one informed her about the matter, exits to find out who the new arrival is. As she leaves, she tells Reggie that she is so glad that he has returned safely from Karachi. Since Reggie never went to Karachi, both he and Wilf are alarmed. They have noticed that Cissy has grown a bit senile lately, often becoming confused like this, especially when something upsets her.

The men wonder if they will be receiving a cheque for the re-issue of their old recording of RIGOLETTO. Looking at the booklet from the CD, Wilf wishes that their photos had been put on the cover instead of just their names. He asks Reggie how he is coming along with the writing of his autobiography. Reggie replies that he has got as far as his first piano lesson when he was seven. "Tell me when you get to puberty," Wilf says. "That's when it'll get interesting."

Cissy returns in a state of high excitement. She knows who the new arrival is, has seen the

woman in fact, but cannot remember her name. She can only remember that she is the famous soprano who sang the role of Gilda with them in RIGOLETTO. Wilf and Reggie know right away that it is Jean Horton, who was married briefly to Reggie. He is outraged that the home has admitted Jean without consulting him. He would like to leave the place immediately, but sadly admits that he has nowhere else to go, no one who would take him in. Wilf reminds Reggie that their motto is NSP – No Self Pity. Cissy, who is aware of Reggie's disastrous marriage to Jean, says to him: "If it's any consolation, she's aged terribly." Cissy then hurries off to "see what's going on".

Wilf asks Reggie how long he and Jean were married. Reggie evades the query by answering, "Not all that long." He refuses to discuss the matter further, saying that he does not wish to be reminded of his past failures. Wilf talks about how he has hated growing old. He enumerates all the health problems he has, from hearing loss to cataracts. "And when it comes to sex, I tell you, it's adiós Speedy Gonzalez", he says.

Cissy returns, followed by Jean. Reggie turns away as Jean enters. Like Wilf, Jean has to use a walking stick. She nevertheless has the manner of a grande dame. Wilf greets her and they kiss on both cheeks. She then goes to Reggie. "Reggie? It's me. Jean," she says. "I know who you are," he replies, keeping his back to her. She begs him not to be hard on her after all these years. She regrets coming to the home and making things difficult for him, but claims she had no alternative. Reggie does not respond, so Jean asks Wilf and Cissy to tell her about the home. They inform her about the music room, terrace, garden, group activities etc., as well as the musicians in the home with whom they all worked in the past. Jean proudly points out that some of the residents still recognized and applauded her when she arrived. Cissy tells Jean how much they are looking forward to the celebration of Verdi's birthday and that everyone wants Reggie to sing 'La donna è mobile' from RIGOLETTO. Jean remarks that she fell in love with Reggie the first time she heard him sing that. Her attempt to draw Reggie into the conversation irritates him. When she suggests that he show her the garden, he explodes. "Leave me in peace, Jean, for Christ's sake, leave me in peace," he says. Jean bursts into tears. As she continues to cry quietly, Reggie hands her a handkerchief. She wipes her tears and is about to blow her nose when she smells the cologne on the handkerchief. That smell, she says, takes her back. "It takes me back to you, Reg," she says. They manage to smile at each other. Wilf notices

this, so he tells Cissy that he has just seen Nobby (whom he knows Cissy is attracted to) disappear behind a tree in the garden. Cissy exits immediately in that direction. Wilf then excuses himself, telling Reggie and Jean that he is going to see if his copy of "Erotica" has arrived.

Alone now with Reggie, Jean tells him that they must come to some arrangement since they both have to live there. She apologizes for hurting him in the past. He tells her to stop. He does not want to "re-live ancient history," he says. After a brief silence, she says she knew at their wedding that their marriage was going to be a disaster, because the priest had sunken cheeks and deep circles under his eyes. Reggie smiles again, in spite of himself. He catches sight of someone passing through the garden and becomes vicious. It is Angelique, he tells Jean, a nurse in the home who, instead of giving him marmalade for breakfast gives him apricot jam which he hates. "Bitch! Cow!", he shouts at the nurse. Jean is taken aback by Reggie's outburst, then tries to continue normally. She talks about her two children and the three unhappy marriages she had after Reggie. "I'm such a bad picker of men," she admits. "Thank you," says Reggie.

Cissy returns excitedly from the garden. She has something important to tell them, a message from someone she was talking to in the garden, but now she cannot remember who it was or what the person said. After Wilf re-joins them, she remembers that the person she talked to was wearing chiffon. Wilf points out that it must have been Cedric, the chairman of the committee planning the celebration for Verdi's birthday. Cissy then remembers what Cedric told her. He wants the four of them to sing for the gala concert the thing that made them famous in the past—the quartet from Verdi's RIGOLETTO. "What a damn fool idea," Jean says. In her opinion, it is insanity for them to try to sing in public again at their age. She laughs hysterically. "What shall I tell Cedric?", Cissy asks. "That he should only wear chiffon at night," Wilf replies. Jean gets up and hobbles off, but she returns almost immediately in a state of shock. Cissy welcomes her back from Karachi. Jean claims that she is not in a retirement home but a madhouse. She was just surrounded, she says, by a lot of toothless crones who are expecting to see her perform once more the role of Gilda in RIGOLETTO. "I want it understood here and now that I consider the whole notion utterly ridiculous," she says. Reggie begs her not to be hasty and to discuss the matter with them. But Jean absolutely refuses to sing Gilda or anything else. On the verge of tears, she reminds them

how much her voice was admired in the past and how effortlessly she could make it soar.

A gong sounds. "Lunch!", says Wilf. He, Cissy and Reggie go as fast as they can. Reggie pauses briefly. "Lunch, Jean, hurry, otherwise the mashed potatoes will all be gone." He follows the others and exits. Jean bursts into tears.

Act Two, Scene 1

The next day. Mid-morning. Reggie is sitting in the music room at the piano, picking out with one finger the theme of the quartet from Verdi's RIGOLETTO. From somewhere in the building a crash of china and a scream are heard. Reggie does not hear and goes on playing. After a moment, Wilf enters, wondering what the noise was. Since Jean refuses to sing with them at the celebration, he suggests that they do the trio from THE BARBER OF SEVILLE. Reggie, however, believes he can persuade Jean to change her mind. Cissy enters, tearfully and a little dizzy. Wilf helps her to sit down. She reports that she entered Jean's room to comfort her when she heard her crying. But Jean was not interested in being comforted and threw a saucer at her. Cissy screamed. After she left Jean's room, Dr. Coggan gave Cissy a pill to calm her down. The pill is apparently working, because Cissy now drops off to sleep in her chair.

Jean enters. She says she has come to apologize to Cissy. "She's asleep," Reggie points out. Jean has brought with her a small package which she hands to Reggie. It is a gift, she says, and tells him to open it. It is a jar of lime marmalade, his favourite. "Oh, Jean ... just what I wanted," he says. He turns away, overcome with emotion. Jean says she is ready now to explain why she will not sing with them. As she starts her explanation, Cissy wakes. When she sees Jean, she asks her if it was very awful in Krishnapaur. Wilf laughs. After a moment, Jean continues with her explanation. She is embittered by old age and having to spend her last years living on charity in a retirement home. She reminds them of the great star she once was and does not want to tarnish that reputation by trying to sing again in public at her age. Reggie points out that it would be therapeutic for her to sing again. It would help her face the future. "We're alive now and not for very much longer," he says. "Let's celebrate that. We're artists and we're meant to celebrate life. What else were we doing for all those years? It's an obligation. Sing with us." He suddenly sees the nurse, Angelique, in the garden and becomes vicious. He calls out her name, holding up the jar of marmalade and shaking it at her triumphantly. He then turns back to Jean. She has decided to tell them the entire truth about why she will not

sing. The fact is, she has not been able to sing for more than thirty years. That is the real reason she retired early, she confesses, not because of becoming a wife and mother, as people were led to believe. She simply lost her voice. She describes the terror she felt when this happened, and no one, not even the medical and psychological specialists, could tell her why. She says she would love nothing better than to sing for the birthday of Giuseppe Verdi—if only she could. She stops talking suddenly, noticing Cissy, who has put on her headset and is listening to music from her CD player. She is moving her lips silently to the words she is hearing. Wilf and Reggie are also watching Cissy.

Wilf Are we all thinking the same thing?
Jean Are we?
Reggie Would we get away with it?
Jean I would. It's the only way I could.
Wilf That's what we'll do, then.

Act Two, Scene 2

Three weeks later. Early morning. Wilf, Jean and Reggie, who do not want the other residents to know what they are doing, have locked themselves in the music room to practise for the gala concert. They all have CD players, CDs, earpieces and vocal scores of RIGOLETTO. Each plays the CD, listens and follows from the score. They move their lips silently to the words of the music, which only they can hear. There is a loud knock at the door. They all hide their CD players and try to look innocent. Wilf unlocks the door. He is relieved that it is only Cissy. She has brought the key to a theatrical skip which is standing in the room. The skip, they have been told, contains some historical costumes that they might be able to wear for their performance. Reggie takes the key and unlocks the skip. Then they start to take out the costumes, holding them up. Wilf looks for the hump he must have on his back as Rigoletto, the title role in the opera. He finds only a small piece of padding and no way to attach it to his body. Reggie finds the tights and doublet that he can wear as the Duke. Jean thinks the costumes are deeply unattractive and refuses to perform wearing them. Cissy finds a costume that she offers to alter for Jean. Jean admits that the colour suits her. Then Cissy finds a costume for herself, but Jean insists on having that one because it is nicer and of much better quality.

After they all find the costumes they can wear, Reggie calls a meeting to discuss their rehearsal schedule and everything else that must be done before the concert. Jean demands that the costumes must be dry-cleaned, which Cissy will take care of. Wilf must take responsibility for

getting the hump for his costume in order, and they must gradually increase the number of their rehearsals as they get closer to the performance. Reggie now wants to give them some background information on the RIGOLETTO opera. He is annoyed when Jean interrupts him, asking about who is going to do her make-up. He tells her she will have to do it herself and to shut up for now. This infuriates Jean, who points out that she has never done her own make-up and does not intend starting now. When Cissy offers to do the make-up for her, Jean calms down and Reggie continues his lecture on RIGOLETTO. He breaks off, however, when he sees Angelique in the garden. He sticks out his tongue, puts his thumbs in his ears and wiggles his fingers at her. Because she takes no notice of him, he becomes enraged and chases after her. After he has gone, the others put on their headsets and listen to their CD players, mouthing the words they are hearing.

Act Two, Scene 3

It is the 10th of October, the evening of the gala concert. A screen has been set up so that it divides the music room, making two dressing areas, one for the women and one for the men. Jean is seated, wearing the undergarments for her costume. She studies the score of RIGOLETTO. On the other side of the screen, Reggie is changing into his costume. Wilf, already in his tights, is fiddling with the padding for his hump, which has been greatly enlarged. Cissy enters and tells them that the gala has begun. She starts right away to make up Jean, who is annoyed that Cissy has kept her waiting. Wilf takes a couple of bottles of stout from his hold-all. Jean is appalled that he is drinking alcohol before a performance. As he swigs from the bottle, he makes a confession to Reggie. He says he was absolutely faithful to his wife Melissa for thirty-five years. All of his talk about sex is just talk, he says. He always had to fall in love with the girl before going to bed with her. As the women continue with their make-up, Cissy tells Jean that men have always been her great weakness, and that she regrets allowing them to be such an awful distraction. None of them treated her well, but she suspects it was because she encouraged that. And, to put it delicately she says, she was never quite able to be “fulfilled” by any of them. Cissy wants to know how long Jean was married to Reggie. “Exactly nine hours,” Jean answers. On their wedding night, she says, it was not so much a case of “This has never happened before”, but “This always happens and, according to the doctors, always will.” She tried to comfort and encourage Reggie, but to no avail. He was inconsolable over his failure. She finally fled to

another hotel and spent the rest of the night there. Years later, after several husbands, she discovered that sex was much overrated and wished that she had stayed with Reggie.

Jean cannot fasten the hooks on Cissy's dress because it is too tight for her. "Oh God, oh God," Cissy exclaims. In a panic she takes off the dress but suddenly stops and makes for the door. Jean wants to know where she is going. Cissy answers that she is going home to Karachi, and promises to send them postcards from the Suez Canal. Jean yells to the men, "Crisis!" She grips Cissy's hands and says sternly, "Cissy, your ship doesn't sail for two weeks." This apparently snaps Cissy out of her confusion. She quickly proceeds to let out the waist of her dress to make it fit. They all breathe sighs of relief and return to getting ready for the performance. Wilf admits to Reggie that he lied to him earlier about never being unfaithful to his wife. But it happened only twice, he says, once in Amsterdam and once in Hamburg. Wilf and Jean agree to try to perform without their walking sticks. If she needs some support, he tells her to lean on Reggie, who would be very pleased because he adores her. It

is nearly time for them to perform. Jean, in full costume and make-up, limps over to Reggie.

Reggie You look very beautiful, Jean.
Jean And you look very handsome.
Reggie And soon we will be young again.
Jean That remains to be seen.

The stage lights darken and Reggie steps into a bright spotlight. He says that they want to transport the audience back to times past when their voices were strong and beautiful. They are therefore going to sing something that they recorded many years ago. He hopes the audience will be moved, not by them, but by the glorious music. For art is nothing if it does not make you feel, he points out. He then introduces himself, Wilf, Cissy and Jean, and announces that they will sing the famous quartet from Act Three of *RIGOLETTO* by Giuseppe Verdi. He gives a signal to someone offstage and the recording of the quartet begins. They move their lips silently to the words of the music, losing themselves in the performance.

Multiple Choice Exercise

1. The play takes place in a (a. school, b. hospital, c. home for retired opera singers).
2. Plans are in motion to celebrate the birthday of (a. Mozart, b. Verdi, c. Beethoven) with a gala concert.
3. (a. Placido Domingo, b. José Carreras, c. residents in the home) have been asked to perform in the concert.
4. The motto in the home is (a. NSP—No Self Pity, b. Keep Smiling, c. You're Only Young Once).
5. Cissy is a bit senile, often thinking that someone is leaving for or returning from (a. London, b. Berlin, c. Karachi).
6. Wilf often thinks and talks about (a. art, b. sex, c. politics).
7. Reggie hates the nurse, Angelique, because she refuses to give him (a. strawberry jam, b. waffles, c. marmalade) for breakfast.
8. Jean was once married to (a. Reggie, b. Cedric, c. Wilf).
9. Jean refuses to sing because she (a. has a sore throat, b. lost her voice, c. dislikes opera music).
10. Cissy, Wilf, Reggie and Jean can finally present the quartet from Verdi's *RIGOLETTO* by (a. moving their lips silently to their old recording of the opera, b. using their own voices, c. hiring four other opera singers).

Answer Key:

1. c, 2. b, 3. c, 4. a, 5. c, 6. b, 7. c, 8. a, 9. b, 10. a

Interpretative Exercise

1. Briefly describe the four characters in *QUARTET*.
2. Discuss how the play celebrates the triumph of life and art over old age and bitterness.
3. "Art is nothing if it doesn't make you feel." Do you agree with this statement in the play?