

The English Theatre of Hamburg

Established 1976

presents

The Subject Was Roses

A Play by

Frank D. Gilroy

Premiere on 25 February, 2010

Preview Performances on 22, 23 and 24 February, 2010

Performances Tuesday through Saturday at 19.30 hours;
Matinee Performances at 11.00 hours on Tuesdays
and Fridays beginning 2 March

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Dear English Teachers and Friends,

The English Theatre will premiere **THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES** by Frank D. Gilroy on 25 February, 2010, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 22, 23 and 24 February. Bookings for this powerful and heartfelt modern classic 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 Samuel French Ltd., 52 Fitzroy Street, Fitzrovia, London W1T 5JR, England. The telephone number from Germany is: 0044 207 255 4300. Their website is <http://www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND PLAY:

Frank D. Gilroy, the son of a coffee broker, was born in New York City in 1925. After serving in the military in World War II he attended Dartmouth College, graduating magna cum laude, and completed his education at the Yale School of Drama. In the 1950s he worked as a writer for television shows such as Playhouse 90 and Kraft Theatre. Gilroy turned to writing for the stage in the 60s, winning the Obie Award for his off-Broadway play **WHO'LL SAVE THE PLOWBOY** in 1962. But it was his second play, **THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES**, which won the unanimous praise of both the public and critics. After having been turned down for two years by practically every producer in the business, the play finally reached the Broadway stage in 1964 and ran for two years with a total of 832 performances. In 1965, **ROSES** walked away with the most prestigious awards the American theatre can bestow on a play: the Pulitzer Prize for Drama as well as the Tony and New York Critics' Circle Awards for Best Play. It also launched the career of an unknown young actor, Martin Sheen, who starred in the original production as well as in the author's adaptation of the play for the screen in 1968. Since the phenomenal success of **ROSES**, Frank D. Gilroy has continued to write for film and the theatre. His latest best known work for the stage was the Broadway play **ANY GIVEN DAY** (1993) in which he revisits the family he dealt with in **THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES**.

SHORT SUMMARY OF THE PLAY:

It is the Bronx, New York, 1946. Twenty-one-year-old Timmy has just returned home safe after serving in the army during World War II. His Irish-Catholic parents, John and Nettie, celebrate their son's homecoming with a party, but Timmy soon realizes that the family tensions he left behind three years ago have gotten worse. Over the years John has broken Nettie's heart with constant drinking and affairs with other women. Her rejection of her husband and her concentration on their son have made John jealous, irritable and bitter. Now trapped in a troubled marriage, they compete for Timmy's affections, and are shocked by the changes in him. Nettie quickly sees that he is no longer the mama's boy she could count on to side with her against her husband. She is distraught when he insists on going to a baseball game with his dad rather than visiting a handicapped relative with her. John is enraged when Timmy refuses to attend Mass with him, and is crushed by the realization that his son will no longer accept his values without question. With the new maturity he gained in the army, Timmy tries to cope with the hostility between his parents. He buys roses for his mother and innocently persuades his father to take credit for the purchase. Things seem to improve for a while, but, when Nettie learns of the deception, old resentments rise again to the surface and threaten to break up the family completely. Timmy first blames his father, then his mother for the situation. He feels his father never loved him and that his mother has been too controlling and possessive of him at the expense of his dad. Finally, as he prepares to leave home, he shows how much he has matured by accepting and loving his parents as they are. They, in turn, are forced to recognize the man their child has become.

"Impressive... an honest and touching work...with simplicity, humor and integrity." –The New York Times

Long Summary of
THE SUBJECT WAS ROSES

Setting: The kitchen and living room of a middle-class apartment in the Bronx, New York

Time: Spring, 1946

Act I, Scene 1

It is Saturday morning. John Cleary (50) stands admiring an army jacket which is hanging in the kitchen. The jacket belongs to his son Timmy (21) who is still asleep in his bedroom. The young man returned home yesterday after serving three years as a soldier in World War II. John puts the jacket on. He enjoys wearing it until he hears a key turn in the front door. It is his wife Nettie (45) returning home with some groceries. John quickly takes off the jacket and returns it to its hanging place. He sits down at the kitchen table and pretends to be engrossed in the newspaper when Nettie enters the kitchen.

While she unpacks the groceries, he drinks coffee. As they talk about their son Timmy, the tension between them is obvious. John's constant drinking over the years and affairs with other women have numbed Nettie's feeling for him. Her rejection of him and closeness to her son have made John jealous and bitter. She now blames him for allowing Timmy to drink too much alcohol during the homecoming party they gave for him the previous evening. In John's opinion she is simply jealous that Timmy spent so much time with him at the party and ignored her. The good time he had with his son last night is significant for John because the relationship between them in the past was never the best. John always felt that his wife spoiled their son too much and that she and Timmy were always joined together in an alliance against him. He is aware that Nettie would prefer to have breakfast alone with Timmy, so he quickly finishes his coffee and prepares to leave for

a business appointment. She stops him by asking for more money for the household. He complains that he just gave her some money yesterday and that the party cost him close to a hundred dollars. As they bicker about money, Timmy, who is up and awake now, enters the kitchen. He is disappointed when he learns of his dad's appointment. He was hoping the two of them could go to a baseball game that afternoon. John promises to do that with him next Saturday and leaves.

Nettie is disappointed when Timmy forgets that his favorite breakfast is waffles, which is what she plans to prepare for him. She is surprised when he makes a disparaging remark about a long time neighbor. This is not the boy she remembers. She gets upset when he repeats some of the nonsensical sayings that her husband employs. The boy used to cover his ears when his father did that. When the waffles stick, she bursts into tears, explaining that she has been looking forward to this morning for three years and nothing is right. She does not like the things Timmy has been saying --- or his new attitudes. He cheers his mother up by turning on the radio and dancing with her to some popular music of the period. As they finish dancing, John enters the apartment. He has changed his mind and wants to go to the baseball game with Timmy today. Timmy quickly accepts the invitation, forgetting that he already promised Nettie to visit a handicapped cousin with her that afternoon. Timmy and his father leave excitedly for the game. Nettie is mad at her husband and hurt that her son has deserted her.

Act I, Scene 2

It is late afternoon the same day. Nettie is out when John and Timmy return to the apartment. They obviously had a lot of fun at the game and are enjoying their new relationship with each other. Timmy carries some roses which he bought on the way home. After putting them in a vase, he suggests that his dad tell his mom that the roses were his (John's) idea. John is

reluctant at first, but then agrees to do it. They settle down in the kitchen with beers and talk about Timmy's experience in the war. The young man tells his father that he was not a very good soldier because he only did the minimum and never volunteered for anything. John regrets that he was unable to serve in World War I. He was turned down because he was the sole support of the family. He confesses that he did not expect Timmy to do well in the army because he was always sick as a child. He apologizes for underestimating his son and wants to help pay for his college expenses. Having heard that the coffee trade, in which John works as a broker, is not doing well, Timmy wonders if his dad can really afford to help him financially. John assures his son that he can, but is uneasy when Timmy asks how much money he has. Their talk turns for a while to John and Nettie's courtship, during which John's parents referred to Nettie as "the Lady" because she came from a higher class than they did.

Nettie comes home and sees the roses. John goes along with Timmy's suggestion and tells her they are from him. She is touched by this warm gesture from her husband and happily agrees to drink a glass of beer with him and her son. They reminisce about old times for a while. At one point she touches John's arm, but the contact startles them both and she turns away from him. He then insists on taking them all out to dinner that evening.

Act I, Scene 3

It is very late when they return home. John and Timmy are tipsy and attempt to sing an old World War I song. Nettie, concerned that they will wake the neighbors, tells them to quiet down and go to bed. When John tries to dance with her, she breaks away. So he and Timmy sing and dance together in the manner of vaudeville performers. Afterwards, Timmy goes to bed, leaving his parents alone in the living room. She wants to know why John gave her the roses. "I just thought it would be nice to do," he replies. "It was," she says.

He is happy that they were able to have a good time together again. She points out that one nice evening cannot solve the problems between her and him. John believes they have to make a start in that direction, so he kisses Nettie on the neck and puts his hands on her breasts. She breaks away, exclaiming, "That's not my idea of a start ... I'm not one of your hotel lobby whores." When he refuses to stop his sexual advances, she picks up the vase of roses and throws it on the floor. The noise brings Timmy out of his bedroom. Nettie pretends that she inadvertently knocked the vase over and sends her son back to bed. John then tells his wife that the roses were Timmy's idea, not his.

Act II, Scene 1

It is Sunday morning. John and Nettie are sitting in silence at the breakfast table. The incident with his wife the previous evening has put John in a bad mood. He complains that the coffee is weak. When Timmy arrives late for breakfast, John reminds him that they have their meals at definite times. He continues to take out his frustration on his son. Timmy is confused by his father's change in attitude toward him, but manages to remain calm. John tells his son to hurry up with breakfast or they will be late for Mass. Timmy informs his dad that he has stopped going to Mass because he no longer considers himself a Catholic. John is shocked. The Clearys have been Catholic for generations. He calls his son an atheist, which Timmy denies. John insists that he is the boss here and that as long as Timmy is living in his house he will go to church. When Nettie defends her son, John is not surprised. He tells her he expected they would join together against him as in the past. Timmy tries to calm the situation by agreeing to go to Mass, but John tells him to forget it and angrily leaves the apartment. Timmy wishes now he had simply gone to church instead of provoking his dad. He realizes that he and his mother have ganged up on his dad over the years and tells her this must stop. Timmy points out incidents in the past to

prove his point. Nettie is distressed that her son is siding with his father against her. They continue to argue. When Timmy angrily shouts at her, Nettie is stunned. She sees that she no longer has the emotional control over her son that she had in the past. She gets her coat and purse and prepares to leave the apartment. When Timmy asks where she is going, all she says is, "Thank you for the roses."

Act II, Scene 2

It is ten o'clock that evening. In the living room John is pacing and Timmy is on the sofa drinking whisky. They are waiting for Nettie to return home. None of the relatives they phoned knows where she is. Timmy, in his drunken state, recounts some childhood memories. He talks about his older brother who died in infancy, and about the time he got hysterical trying to force his dad to say he loved his mother. John is so worried about his wife that he pays no attention to his son until Timmy starts talking about his father's drinking in bars and affairs with whores. Timmy says he always dreaded his father coming home because he was sure his parents would fight. John pretends not to understand what his son is talking about and tells Timmy to stop drinking so much. They quarrel about which one of them drinks the most, and John tries, unsuccessfully, to take the whisky bottle away from Timmy. He suspects his son is hiding from him the reason Nettie left. All Timmy will reveal is that he and his mother had an argument. He presses his father to explain why he told Nettie that the roses were not from him. John finally uses a vulgar expression to indicate that it was because she refused to have sex with him. Timmy calls his father a pig. John strikes his son across the face just before Nettie enters the apartment.

John demands that his wife explain where she has been for the last twelve hours. She replies that she went to the movies and saw the same show several times. It was the only real freedom she has ever known, she says. Timmy, suddenly feeling the effects

of the alcohol he has been drinking, becomes sick and runs to the bathroom. John blames his son for what has happened. He wrongly assumes that his wife left home because she had an argument with Timmy about his drinking. When Nettie informs John that the argument was about him and that Timmy believes they have to stop ganging up on him, John is stunned.

Act II, Scene 3

It is two o'clock Monday morning. The apartment is in darkness. Timmy, who cannot sleep, enters the living room to get a magazine. He turns on a lamp and sees his mother sitting alone on the sofa. As they talk, he takes the opportunity to tell her that he has decided to move out the next day. She does not object, having already expected he would do this. She is lost in thought about how she first met John. She knew the first time she saw him that they would become involved. She realized they were not right for each other, having come from very different backgrounds, but she was attracted to his energy and Irish good looks. At twenty-four he was already doing very well in his career. This continued until the economic crash of 1929 destroyed everything. Her great disappointment is that John, although quite successful in social and business relationships outside the home, has never been a real family man. Timmy takes his mother's hand and says, "When I left this house three years ago, I blamed him for everything that was wrong here....When I came home, I blamed you....Now I suspect that no one's to blame....Not even me."

Act II, Scene 4

It is nine o'clock that morning. John and Nettie are in the kitchen. Timmy is still in his bedroom. Over coffee, John tries to get his wife to persuade Timmy to stay at home. She refuses, saying that the break will be more difficult the longer he remains. John claims he never wants to see his son again if he leaves, and insists on speaking to Timmy alone. While Nettie is waking Timmy up, John practices different

ways of telling his son he cannot leave. After Timmy enters the kitchen, they quarrel. John apologizes for hitting his son, but Timmy says that is not the reason he is leaving. He had always intended to leave, sooner or later. John confesses that he has made a lot of mistakes in dealing with his son and wants Timmy to admit that he is making a mistake by leaving home. Timmy remains firm. "Then go and good riddance!", John shouts. Timmy reveals that he always wanted his father to say he loved him. John is clearly uneasy,

pretending not to know what Timmy is talking about. So Timmy says, "I love you, Pop." John fights to repress what he feels. Timmy repeats the words, "I love you." John, overwhelmed with emotion, extends his arms. Timmy goes to him and they embrace, both in tears. When Nettie enters the kitchen, they separate quickly. She pours coffee for them. Timmy offers to stay at home a few more days, but both parents believe he should leave as planned. John changes the subject by complaining about the coffee as the curtain falls.

Multiple Choice Exercise

1. The play takes place shortly after (a. World War I, b. World War II, c. the Vietnam War).
2. Timmy served three years in the (a. army, b. navy, c. air force).
3. When Timmy returns home, the relationship between his parents is (a. excellent, b. better than it used to be, c. tense).
4. Nettie is unhappy because Timmy (a. has changed so much, b. will not tidy his room, c. smokes all the time).
5. Timmy goes (a. camping, b. to a bar, c. to a baseball game) with his dad.
6. At first, Nettie is told that the roses are from her (a. son, b. mother, c. husband).
7. John gets angry and leaves the apartment after Timmy refuses to (a. drink with him, b. go to church, c. talk about the war).
8. Nettie is stunned and leaves home for twelve hours after (a. Timmy, b. John, c. a relative) angrily shouts at her.
9. At the end of the play, Timmy says he blames (a. his father, b. his mother, c. no one) for the family problems.
10. Timmy decides to (a. move out, b. stay at home, c. rejoin the army).

Answer Key:

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

Interpretative Exercise

1. Discuss why John and Nettie's marriage is not working.
2. Give some examples of how Timmy has changed and the effect it has on his parents. Do these conflicts exist today between parents and children?
3. Do you think Timmy makes the right decision at the end of the play? Or should he stay at home for a while and help his parents solve their problems with him and with each other? Give reasons for your opinion.