

arena  
stage

# arenaspace

## study guide

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## the play

Transporting the audience to a day in September, the narrator, **El Gallo**, tells a story of love and growing up. Two young lovers, **Luisa** and **Matt**, must meet in secret, because their fathers, **Hucklebee** and **Bellomy**, are sworn enemies. Hucklebee and Bellomy have built a wall between their gardens to separate the young people, but Luisa and Matt are sure their love can conquer anything – even a wall – and they will be together forever.

Not everything goes according to plan, however, and ultimately Matt and Luisa venture out into the world alone. Finding themselves at the mercy of a cruel world, they start to wonder: is adulthood nothing but a place of pain and broken dreams, or is happiness waiting somewhere just out of sight?



*"Love. You are love. Better than a metaphor can ever, ever be."*  
– Matt, *The Fantasticks*

## the fantasticks

Now Playing at the Lincoln Theatre  
November 20, 2009 – January 10, 2010  
Book and Lyrics by Tom Jones  
Music by Harvey Schmidt  
Directed by Amanda Dehnert

## meet the creators

Tom Jones  
& Harvey Schmidt



Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt met at the University of Texas while working on the musical revue *Hipsy-Boo!* They started writing songs together, even exchanging lyrics and musical tapes during their active duty in the Korean War. Jones generally wrote the words, and Schmidt composed the music. After the war, they moved to New York City.

In 1959, a friend approached them about writing a one-act musical for a college theater festival. They completed *The Fantasticks* in three weeks. After a summer at Barnard College, they moved the show **Off-Broadway** to the Sullivan Street Playhouse, where it ran for a record 17,162 performances before closing in January 2002.

Jones and Schmidt continued to work together on musicals, including *110 in the Shade* and *I Do! I Do!* In the late 1990s, they appeared as actors in an Off-Broadway musical revue of their work entitled *The Show Goes On*. Then in 2006, Jones and Schmidt celebrated the opening of the Off-Broadway revival of *The Fantasticks*.

*"This is the wall their fathers built between their houses."*  
– El Gallo, *The Fantasticks*

# Literary Influences

**W**hen Jones and Schmidt wrote *The Fantasticks*, they drew inspiration from the work of two earlier playwrights, **Edmond Rostand** and **William Shakespeare**.



## William Shakespeare

*Romeo and Juliet*, the most famous tragedy of English playwright William Shakespeare (1564-1616), is about a young couple whose families are embroiled in a bitter feud. Their love is cut short as a series of tragic events leads to their deaths.



## Edmond Rostand

Inspired by Shakespeare's tale of star-crossed (cursed) lovers, French playwright Edmond Rostand (1868-1918) decided to write a lighthearted version of the play. In *Les Romanesques*, two children from feuding families fall in love, but not all things are as they seem.

Jones and Schmidt also drew inspiration from Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In one of its subplots, an amateur acting troupe puts on a play called *Pyramus and Thisbe*, in which two lovers speak to each other through a crack in a wall. Just as in *The Fantasticks*, the wall is portrayed in minimal fashion by an actor miming the dividing structure. ●



**Activity!** Read and perform *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the humorous, over-the-top play presented by the acting troupe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. You'll find it in Act V, Scene i. In what ways does this play remind you of Luisa and Matt's courtship in *The Fantasticks*?

*"Now, let me tell you a few things you may want to know before we begin the play."* – El Gallo, *The Fantasticks*

## The Fourth Wall

**W**hen the actors in *The Fantasticks* speak directly to the audience, they are doing what's called **"breaking the fourth wall."** This "wall" is the divide between actor and audience. Imagine the stage space as a box. Now, envision a clear "wall" that stretches from the front edge of the stage up to the ceiling to complete the box: this is the fourth wall. When actors address the audience, thereby acknowledging a world beyond the one in their play, they break through this wall. ●

# A Record-Setting Show

At the close of the Barnard College production, a producer commissioned Jones and Schmidt to turn *The Fantasticks* into a full-length musical, and on May 3, 1960, it opened Off-Broadway in Greenwich Village.

Despite some early mixed reviews, the show enjoyed packed houses. *The Fantasticks* became wildly popular with audience members, many of whom came back multiple times.

When the producer announced in 1986 that the show was closing, he encountered serious resistance from the public and those involved in the production. In the end, he relented, and the show continued until its final show on January 13, 2002.

Its 17,162 performances at the Sullivan Street Playhouse earned *The Fantasticks* the title of world's longest-running musical, and the show continues to dazzle audiences today, both in New York and around the world.

## Magic, Marvels & Design

The magical innocence of early amusement parks and their more unsettling counterparts – sideshows – inspired the design of this production of *The Fantasticks*.

The director, Amanda Dehnert, and designers used their research into these bygone places to create the sets, costumes, lighting, sound and direction of the play. The result is not a realistic representation of a park. Instead, says Dehnert, it evokes the atmosphere of a place people once went to escape their cares, which is now full of the ghosts of happiness and joy. It is a place where “magic makes the impossible seem possible even for a moment” and a world where things do not always turn out the way we expect. ●

The original sign (legally obtained!) from the abandoned Rocky Point Amusement Park in Rhode Island adds authenticity to the set, though the play is not set in any particular park. *Set Designer Eugene Lee*



El Gallo's coat is made with illustrations from sideshow posters. *Costume Designer Jessica Ford*



Sullivan Street Playhouse, the long-time home of *The Fantasticks*

**a!** Activity Musicals such as *A Chorus Line*, *Cats*, and *The Phantom of the Opera* are known for their long runs on Broadway. Create a graph charting Broadway's most successful shows in terms of total performances. How do they compare to this Off-Broadway musical? What do these plays have in common with *The Fantasticks*? Consider genre, cast size, spectacle, star power, etc.



*"Why invite regret, when you can order an abduction you will never forget!"*

– El Gallo, *The Fantasticks*

# Ending the Controversy

**rape:** to seize and take away by force, from the Latin *rapere*

In the original version of "It Depends on What You Pay," El Gallo uses the word "rape" — not "abduction" — to describe his kidnapping schemes. To avoid confusion, he explains his use of the word, citing its Latin roots and its presence in classical works, such as Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, in which a woman's lock of hair is stolen.

Today, however, the word "rape" instead brings to mind a violent crime. Not wishing to confuse audience members or appear insensitive to violence against women, Jones and Schmidt rewrote the song several years ago. In every line but one, they replaced the word "rape" with "abduction." In that one instance, they left it in solely to preserve the rhythm. ●



**Activity** Listen to lyricist Tom Jones explain the changes to "It Depends on What You Pay" on NPR's *All Things Considered*. Find the interview at [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5697901](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5697901).

## Additional Resources

### Books/Plays:

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare  
*Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand  
*Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare  
*Masks, Mimes and Miracles* by Allardyce Nicoll  
*The Amazing Story of the Fantasticks: America's Longest-Running Play* by Donald C. Farber & Robert Viagas

### On the Web:

*The Fantasticks* Official Website: [www.thefantasticks.com](http://www.thefantasticks.com)

### On DVD:

*The Fantasticks*, Rated PG, 1995

## Sub/Text

For links and research related to Arena Stage productions, compiled by Arena Stage **dramaturgs**, please visit **Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg** at [www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/](http://www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/).

**dramaturg**— a theater specialist who does research for productions and represents the intentions of the playwright

## Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

**Enjoy the show!**



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Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org) for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.