



A PLAY BY
MIKLOS LASZLO

Parfumerie

Study Guide

NOVEMBER 18 TO DECEMBER 20, 2011



PARFUMERIE

Adapted by E. P. Dowdall
from the Hungarian play *Illatszertar* by Miklos Laszlo

DIRECTED BY	Adrienne Sweeney
Assistant Director	Megan K. Pence
Production Stage Manager	Jason Underferth
Dramaturg	Eric Decker
Costume Designer	Jeff Stolz
Lighting Designer	Jason Underferth
Sound Designer	Stan Peal
Set Designer	Kit Mayer
Props	Carla Joseph, Stef Dickens, Brandon Grayson

CAST

Mr. Miklos Hammerschmidt	Thom Pinault
Mr. George Horvath	Scott Dixon
Mr. Sipos	David Hennessey
Mr. Steven Kadar	Daniel Stock
Miss Amalia Balash	Irene ErkenBrack
1st Lady, Miss Ilona Ritter	Stef Dickens
Miss Elizabeth Molnar	Rachel Kuhnle
Arpad Novack	Gary Danciu
Policeman, Fritz	Brandon Grayson
Detective, Old Gent	Hal Cropp
2nd Lady	Megan K. Pence
Mrs. Mezei's maid	Carla Joseph

Setting

December, 1937
Hammerschmidt's Parfumerie on Vaci Street in Budapest, Hungary.

This play will be performed with one intermission.

Underwritten by:

PAPASEA: CONCEPT + DESIGN

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Miklos Laszlo was born Nicholas Laszlo Leitner in Budapest, Hungary in 1903. He grew up in a wealthy household that valued a steady patronage of the arts. Purportedly, a young Laszlo mixed socially with the Hungarian literati, including playwright Ferenc Molnar, famous for his play *Liliom*, which would go on to inspire the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel*. Unfortunately, very early in Laszlo's writing career, his father died leaving him the sole provider for his mother and eight siblings. He began working a number of jobs including candy maker, collar salesman, and "necktie agent" as a way of making ends meet. He did, however, continue to write, and in 1934, his first full length play *Legboldogabb Ember (The Happiest Man)* won the Hungarian Royal Academy Award for Literature—Hungary's equivalent to the Pulitzer Prize.

Laszlo came into his element as a writer during a very tremulous time in his country's history. During the Great Depression in the early 1930s, Hungary began aligning with very strong fascist and nationalistic forces, all of them anti-Semitic. "Jewish Laws" were enforced, limiting ownership, university enrollment, and voting rights. Jews were soon required by law to wear the identifiable Star of David. Between 1937 and 1941, a series of laws were put into place to appease occupying German forces. No business could be by owned by a Jew, they could no longer hold any government position, and marriages between Jews and Christians were deemed illegal. Citizenship for Jewish families not resident in Hungary before 1914 was revoked, and all non-citizens were deported. As a result of these changes, Laszlo chose to immigrate to America in 1938. It was then that he changed his name to Miklos Laszlo and set himself up in a Hungarian community on the lower east side of New York City. Shortly after his arrival, he met and married Florence Hermann.

In America, Laszlo began writing screenplays with MGM and did so until his death in 1973. Laszlo's most famous play, *Illatszertar (Parfumerie)*, was adapted for the screen by Samson Raphaelson and became the 1940 major motion picture *The Shop Around the Corner*, starring James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan. In 1949, it was remade as a semi-musical, *In the Good Old Summertime*, featuring Judy Garland. Next adapted as a stage musical with book by Joe Masteroff, *She Loves Me* premiered on Broadway in 1963. The timeless story was used yet again by writer Nora Ephron for the 1998 movie *You've Got Mail*, starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan.

In 2009, the truest adaptation to the original was produced for the first time in America at the Asolo Repertory Theatre in Sarasota, Florida. The play, called *Parfumerie*, is adapted by Laszlo's nephew, E. P. Dowdall, and based on an English translation by Laszlo's own wife, Florence. This version, unlike the film adaptations, is truer to the original story because it gives equal importance to the lighthearted love story as well as the shop owner Hammerschmidt's dilemmas and troubled marriage.

E.P. Dowdall, a writer and composer, lives in New York with his wife.

HISTORY OF “ROM-COMS”

The Commonwealth's *Parfumerie* is directed in the style of 1930s and 40s Hollywood romantic comedies—a genre playwright Miklos Laszlo's script would be reinvented in again and again, first as *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) starring James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan and, most recently, as *You've Got Mail* (1998) starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan.

Historically, the romantic comedy has its roots in the Commedia dell'Arte tradition of the late-Renaissance Italy. Commedia troupes performed largely improvised theatre, relying heavily on stock characters whose roles, characteristics, and costumes were easily identifiable to audiences. By and large, plots centered on two young lovers, the *inamorato* and *inamorata*, being kept apart by the humorous mishaps of other characters. Often, physical humor was employed by use by “lazzi,” which was a carefully choreographed “bit” such as unified movement, a catch phrase, or pantomimed action used to ensure a frequency of laughs.



“Pantalone” often foiled the young lovers’ happiness.

This formula for accessible story telling developed by Commedia performers was important to the comedies of William Shakespeare. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Taming of the Shrew* and *As You Like it*, for example, all possess the ingredients—two young lovers meet and fall in love, conflict keeps them apart, conflict is overcome, and the two unite to live happily ever after. The primary dramatic tension of a romantic comedy lies in one simple question—*will they find love?* And, of course, they always do.



Romantic comedies were all the rage on the 1930s silver screen. Many movies, like *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) starring Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant, and *His Girl Friday* (1940) with Grant and Rosalind Russell, were considered “screwball comedies” for their extreme themes. They also employed a great deal of slapstick and farce—mistaken identities, humorous misunderstandings, odd-couple pairings, and differences of social and economic status were often the obstacles the lovers had to overcome. The dialogue of screwball comedies was meant for rapid-fire delivery and was full of witty repartee, often written to be overlapping.

The popularity of romantic comedies petered out in subsequent decades due to changes in the cultural zeitgeist—Americans began to want something more honest. Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979) were steps in that direction, however the genre wasn't truly rejuvenated until the late 1980s with *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) by screenwriter Nora Ephron, starring Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal. Romantic comedies had evolved to be more grounded and less farcical, relying on the quirks of human behavior and relationships to provide the comedy as opposed to outlandish circumstances. Ephron would go on to adapt and direct the *Parfumerie* based *You've Got Mail*.

NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR

I know a couple in their “Senior” years, the husband in the early stages of Alzheimer’s. Every single major holiday since they’ve been together, the wife would wake up to a card, sealed, on the kitchen table signed, “Your Loving Husband.” And then, in case there might be a doubt, he’d add his name.

Last Valentine’s Day she came downstairs, and for the first time ever, there was no card.

Little cracks occurred in many hearts that morning – hers, their children’s and nieces’ and nephews’, the children’s friends, whoever was in the line of the emotional sharing. The children and cousins and grandchildren rallied and sent bouquets and chocolates and balloons, but none of those would bear the signature: “Your Loving Husband.”

And then the magic happened.

When she returned home from work that evening, there was a card on the kitchen table signed, “Your Loving Husband.”

It turned out that when the gentleman arrived at the Senior Facility where he spends his days, they were selling generic Valentines cards for \$1. And the strength of this man’s love for his wife punctured the grey cloud of Alzheimer’s – maybe for the last time. No one knows. Nor do I care because THIS time, THIS moment, love really did conquer all.

If you watched that scene in a movie (a befuddled Craig T. Nelson would present a stoic Diane Keaton with the card while the children looked on, hugging each other), you’d scoff, “Well THAT never happens!” But it does. And it did. And when my mom scanned the card and emailed it to all of us, my family and friends wept.

And that’s why I wanted to direct *Parfumerie*. Because I really, truly believe in the power of love to make the world a better place. I’ve seen it firsthand, and I’ve experienced this power personally.

This probably goes without saying, but I am a romantic comedy junkie. Anything with Hugh Grant – I’m in. Add a little Sandra Bullock, and I’m taking root on the couch. I love my rom-coms sprinkled with a bit of bite to take the edge off the sweetness. Gives it a more “realistic” feel.

That’s what I love about *Parfumerie*. For as sweet and cute as it is, there’s a bit of a bite. And that bite – the older couple dealing with infidelity and the possibility of facing life alone after decades of marriage – puts the young love into perspective. It’s life. It’s real. It gives us that range, that gamut. Yes, love is sweet and patient and gentle and kind, and sometimes it also really sucks. It’s when you can navigate through the horrible times – that’s when you know you’ve got something special. And (here’s the part I love MOST about this play) the only way to navigate through the darkest times is with the support and love of your friends.

I hope you come see *Parfumerie*. And when you leave the theatre, I hope that you will turn to the ones you love and tell them that you love them. But more than that, I hope you will SHOW them your love. Because as Miklos Hammerschmidt says:

**“It’s time to take notice of the people and friends that are true.
The proven friendships that have shown more in deeds than any words or vows could say.
All I need do is look around me to see a faithful family that has been near and dear to my heart.”**



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.) What are some of your favorite romantic comedies? What are some stock characters that these movies have in common? Are any of these stock characters found in *Parfumerie*?
- 2.) For a play advertised as a romantic-comedy, *Parfumerie* has some very serious and poignant moments. How did the bickering in the first Act and the dramatic ending before the intermission affect your experience watching the play?
- 3.) Much of the dramatic tension in *Parfumerie* has to do with characters keeping secrets from each other. What are some examples? Why does Horvath keep his revelation about Amalia a secret from her for so long? Is this realistic? Why or why not?
- 4.) How important is it to you that a story has a happy ending? What purpose do happy endings serve?
- 5.) This play was written in 1937 and is set in Europe at that time. What historically was occurring in the world in the late 30s? Knowing that Hungary was severely affected by the Holocaust in the years to follow this play, how does that change your interpretation of the stakes each of these characters were facing in 1937? What might make audiences of that time want to escape into stories with a happy ending?
- 6.) The Commonwealth selects our plays with specific thematic messages in mind that we believe will enrich our audiences. It is very important to us what plays “say.” What does this mean to you? What is the overall message of *Parfumerie* and what purpose does it serve as a Christmas play?