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# The Sisters Rosensweig

A Play

Wendy Wasserstein

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL  
FRENCH**  
FOUNDED 1830

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## **THE SISTERS ROSENSWIEG**

First presented at Lincoln Center Theater at the Mitzi E. Newhouse, New York, on 22nd October 1992, with the following cast:

|                            |                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Tess Goode</b>          | Julie Dretzin      |
| <b>Pfeni Rosensweig</b>    | Frances McDormand  |
| <b>Sara Goode</b>          | Jane Alexander     |
| <b>Geoffrey Duncan</b>     | John Vickery       |
| <b>Mervyn Kant</b>         | Robert Klein       |
| <b>Gorgeous Teitelbaum</b> | Madeline Kahn      |
| <b>Tom Valiunus</b>        | Patrick Fitzgerald |
| <b>Nicholas Pym</b>        | Rex Robbins        |

Directed by Daniel Sullivan  
Designed by John Lee Beatty  
Costumes designed by Jane Greenwood

The play transferred to the Barrymore Theatre, Broadway, in March 1993. Christine Estabrook replaced Frances McDormand in the role of Pfeni Rosensweig.

Presented at the Greenwich Theatre, London, on 9th August 1994, with the following cast:

|                            |                  |
|----------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Tess Goode</b>          | Hellena Schmied  |
| <b>Pfeni Rosensweig</b>    | Lynda Bellingham |
| <b>Sara Goode</b>          | Janet Suzman     |
| <b>Geoffrey Duncan</b>     | Brian Protheroe  |
| <b>Mervyn Kant</b>         | Larry Lamb       |
| <b>Gorgeous Teitelbaum</b> | Maureen Lipman   |
| <b>Tom Valiunus</b>        | James Arlon      |
| <b>Nicholas Pym</b>        | Robert East      |

Directed by Michael Blakemore  
Designed by Lez Brotherston

The play transferred with the same cast to the Old Vic Theatre, London, in October 1994.

## **CHARACTERS**

**Tess Goode**

**Pfeni Rosensweig**

**Sara Goode**

**Geoffrey Duncan**

**Mervyn ("Merv") Kant**

**Gorgeous Teitelbaum**

**Tom Valiunus**

**Nicholas Pym**

Scene — the sitting-room of Sara Goode's house in  
Holland Park, London

Time — August, 1991

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words and music by Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier and Eddie Holland

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“You Can’t Sit Down”

by Cornell Muldrow, Delecta Clark and Kal Mann

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## ACT I

### SCENE 1

*A sitting-room in Holland Park, London. Late morning. August, 1991*

*The room is decorator “done” with cosy, comfy, but expensive chintz couches, chairs, and window treatments. Tables, bookshelves, a stereo unit (with record-player), a bar, a desk, a wine rack, a fireplace, a phone, etc. There is a dining-room UR and a staircase UL leading to the bedrooms. There is a door to a downstairs apartment belonging to Pfeni*

*Tess, seventeen, in blue jeans and T-shirt, is listening to Sara’s collegiate all-women’s singing group doing an a cappella version of “Shine on Harvest Moon”. She speaks into a tape recorder*

**Tess** Elongated note on moon. A harvest moon is a full September moon.

*The doorbell rings*

Also notice the use of the vernacular — “I ain’t had no lovin’ ”.

*The doorbell rings*

**Sara** (off) Tessie, get the door!

*The doorbell rings*

*Tess lowers the music and races towards the door*

*Her aunt, Pfeni, forty, enters. She carries at least five shopping bags*

**Tess** Aunt Pfeni!

**Pfeni** His name was Jesse. Jesse the Sheikh.

**Tess** We’ve been waiting for you. Mother and I had no idea what time you’d be coming.

**Pfeni** Blame it all on Jesse.

**Tess** Who?

**Pfeni** That was the name of my taxi driver. He was a sheikh. The lion of India. He drove me all last night around Bombay until all I could catch was the last plane.

**Tess** Well, my mother's going to be delighted you actually showed up.

**Pfeni** And you, are you delighted?

*They embrace*

What are you listening to?

*By now, the music has changed to an all-women's version of "Begin the Beguine"*

**Tess** My mother's college singing group. This was their signature song.

We're doing biographies of our parents' early years for our school summer project. It's pretentious. (*She shuts off the music*) I can't wait to leave London and go back home to college.

**Pfeni** Did your mother say you could?

**Tess** Are you kidding? The woman who named me for Tess of the D'Urbervilles? The only American who is convinced that Harvard and Yale are second-rate institutions. She won't even discuss it.

*Sara enters from upstairs*

**Sara** Tess, who are you talking to? Hallo my baby sister! I didn't know you were here. (*She kisses Pfeni on the cheek*) Tessie, I never said Harvard and Yale were second-rate institutions. I said they were floundering on their way to being second-rate.

**Pfeni** It's good to see you, Sara.

**Sara** Did you sleep at all on the plane?

**Pfeni** No.

**Sara** I was reading a very good piece in the *Financial Times* about the Russian coup by that friend of yours who won the Overseas Press Award this year. Isn't it time you won that?

**Pfeni** Tessie, come here and protect me from your mother.

**Tess** My English teacher at Westminster assigned Aunt Pfeni's book for next term.

**Sara** Really? Which one?

**Tess** *Life in the Afghan Village*. It's for our women's writing segment. She says when Aunt Pfeni began using her expertise to write travel columns she became counter-revolutionary.

**Pfeni** Did she tell you who my dentist is?

**Sara** Pfeni's books are super. Brilliant. Having a separate category for women's writing is counter-revolutionary.

**Tess** Well, it doesn't matter anyway. I'm going to study hairdressing so I can make my way in the world.

**Sara** Tess, my luv, if you want to be a hairdresser I'll still love you and be very proud of you. Of course the way the economy is going you'd be far more practical choosing a less luxury-oriented field.

**Pfeni** Tessie, have you considered welding?

**Sara** You're diverting the argument.

**Pfeni** (*with an accent*) Vell excuse me for living.

**Sara** We're discussing Tessie's future!

*The phone rings*

Yes, hallo. ... Oh, hallo Nick! How nice to hear from you.

**Tess** (*rolling her eyes*) Oh, God, it's him!

**Sara** Could you hold while I take this in the kitchen? Pfeni, please share with Tessie your worldly advice.

*She exits*

**Tess** My mother says she worries about me because I'm so much like you. She says you compulsively travel because you have a fear of commitment and when you do stay in one place you become emotional and defensive just like me.

**Pfeni** Tessie, honey, I'm so sorry. I didn't know it was contagious. (*Indicating her bags*) There's a valuable gift for you in one of these.

**Tessie** Aunt Pfeni, why don't you have any suitcases?

**Pfeni** Because your grandmother Rita told me that only crazy people travel with shopping bags. So I've made it my personal signature ever since.

*She hands a package to Tess which contains a figurine of Shiva, an Indian god*

Here it is. This god will destroy all evil and bring you hope, rebirth, and a lifetime guarantee that under no circumstances will you grow up to be like me.

**Tess** Why does it have so many arms?

**Pfeni** It's very versatile. Its name is Shiva the destroyer. I found it on Elephant Island off the coast of Bombay yesterday. A hot tip for where to shop in the Indian Ocean.

**Tess** Aunt Pfeni?

**Pfeni** Niece Tess?

**Tess** Can I give this to my mother? She is in desperate need of hope and rebirth. I think she's perfectly content to re-live her life through me.

*Sara enters*

**Sara** Good news. Nick Pym's coming to dinner tonight.

**Tess** You know, Mother, there are homeless people sleeping under Charing Cross station.

**Sara** Do you think Nick Pym would prefer to have my birthday dinner with them?

**Tess** Mother, I just don't think it's right to have bourgeois dinner-parties with capitalists like Nicholas Pym when people are living in boxes under Charing Cross station.

**Sara** (*staring at Tess*) Pfeni, hasn't Tess grown up brilliantly.

**Tess** Mother, now you're the one diverting the argument!

**Sara** I don't know how it happened, but I've been blessed with a totally beautiful and brilliant daughter. My daughter just happens to be perfect. I tell your Aunt Pfeni to be certain that sometime during her peripatetic life she must have at least one child, because the greatest joy of my life is having you.

**Tess** Mother, that's sentimental revisionist history! Hermia Cox-Jones's father says you have the biggest balls at The Hong Kong/Shanghai Bank world-wide.

**Pfeni** Pish-pish.

**Sara** Pfeni, there's something very New York about your tone today.

**Pfeni** Well, excuse me for living two times.

**Tess** What do you mean "New York"?

**Sara** Well ...

**Pfeni** Tessie, many decades and a continent ago when your mother was a freshman at Radcliffe and I was still living home with your grandparents in Flatbush, Brooklyn, a very nice man named Harry Rose called our house every morning. Mr Rose was the head salesman at Grampa's Kiddie Tog factory.

**Sara** What is your point, Pfeni?

**Pfeni** Tessie, Mr Rose liked to catch Grampa to discuss the day's business just when the entire house would be waking up. So everyday at seven a.m., I'd rush to pick up the phone just to hear Mr Rose say, "Hallo, Maury, is that you?" And then I'd answer, "No, Mr Rose. It's me. Maury's daughter Penny." And he'd always say, "Well, excuse me for living, Penny, but how could you recognize it was me?"

**Tess** So Mr Harry Rose was "New York"?

**Sara** New York in a way that has very little to do with us. Pfeni's the one who's guilty of revisionist history, my luv. Pfeni's the one who's romanticized a world we never belonged to.

**Pfeni** I was mistaken. Mr Rose never called our house every morning. It was Henry Cabert Lodge.

**Sara** You see, Tessie. I told you Pfeni's defensive just like you.

**Tess** You have no sense of humour, Mother, none.

**Sara** What? You think you're telling me something I don't know. (*She smiles*) That was very New York.

**Tess** I gotta go. I'm meeting Tom. Can he come to this late dinner too?

**Pfeni** Who's Tom?

**Sara** Who's Tom, Tessie?

**Tess** Tom Valiunus is the man I'm currently seeing.

**Sara** Tell Pfeni more. She's very good about people.

**Tess** Tom's father owns a radio supply store in Liverpool and he's hoping to go into the business if the economy turns around.

**Pfeni** That sounds nice.

**Tess** Mother doesn't think so.

**Sara** I never said that. I just don't know what you have in common with someone who dreams of selling radio parts. And you certainly don't have to chase him through greater Latvia.

**Tess** Lithuania. Aunt Pfeni, Tom and I are very committed to the Lithuanian resistance. And because of the coup Tom feels we should be there.

**Pfeni** Vilnius was once the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

**Sara** You're not being helpful, Pfeni.

**Pfeni** There's also a good restaurant, the famous and traditional Old Cellar. Also for plays check out the Central Theatre of Vilnius.

**Sara** That way, Tessie, when they send the tanks in, you and Tom can take in a quick hamburger and a show.

**Tess** Mother, that's not funny.

**Sara** I know. I have no sense of humour.

**Tess** Aunt Pfeni, would you like to join Tom and me for tea today?

**Sara** Aunt Pfeni, don't you think it's just slightly irregular for a nice Jewish girl from Connecticut to find her calling in the Lithuanian resistance?

**Tess** But I'm not a nice Jewish girl from Connecticut. I'm an expatriate American who's lived in London for five years and the daughter of an atheist.

**Sara** This has nothing to do with organized religion.

**Tess** Mother, Tom comes from a perfectly balanced and normal family which is something you've never managed to maintain despite being on the cover of *Fortune* twice. But if you like I'll tell him that he's not invited to dinner here tonight with the socially-acceptable, racist, sexist, and more than likely anti-Semitic Nicholas Pym.

**Sara** (*quietly*) Tessie, please invite Tom to supper tonight.

*Tess kisses Sara on the cheek*

**Tess** Tea is at the Halcyon at five.

*She exits*

**Sara** Guess who's paying for tea. I never met a freedom-fighter who didn't enjoy a good meal. Pfeni, you must talk to her.

**Pfeni** I did talk to her.

**Sara** She's determined to make her life the opposite of mine.

**Pfeni** That's exactly what we set out to do because of our mother.

**Sara** Yes, but we were right.

**Pfeni** So maybe is Tessie.

*Sara starts to move the bags*

Sara, relax. I'll take them down later.

**Sara** (*picking up the Indian god*) I don't know why Tessie insists on bringing home junk like this from Portobello Road.

**Pfeni** I brought it from Bombay.

**Sara** Oh, it's lovely.

**Pfeni** This will destroy all evil and bring you hope and rebirth.

**Sara** I'm too old.

**Pfeni** You're not too old.

**Sara** You don't know. You're only forty.

**Pfeni** Forty is old.

**Sara** Oh, Pfeni, I'm so glad you're here.

**Pfeni** Did you think I'd let Dr Gorgeous show up for your birthday and not be here?

**Sara** Your sister's not just showing up for my birthday. She's leading the Temple Beth El sisterhood on a tour of the Crown jewels.

**Pfeni** But she managed to plan it in time for your birthday.

**Sara** True. You're a good sister, Pfeni Rosensweig. Pfeni! God, what an awful name! Why do you keep it?

**Pfeni** Penny Rosensweig wasn't any better. Now, Sara Goode, on the other hand, is a great name.

**Sara** Multiple divorce is a brilliant thing. You get so many names to choose from. But my second was definitely my best. And how nice that there is now a Mrs Samantha Goode, Mrs Melissa Goode, Mrs Pamela Goode, and as of last year, the twenty-four-year-old Mrs Sushiro Goode. We could form the Wives of Kenneth Goode Club with branches in Chicago, New York, London, and Tokyo. Well, never mind. I'm looking forward to us growing old together. Like two old maid spinsters in a Muriel Spark novel.

**Pfeni** Sara, that's beyond depressing.

# WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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