



INDIANA  
REPERTORY  
THEATRE

presents

# ***Iron Kisses***

**by James Still**

April 15 - May 11, 2008 • IRT Upperstage

## **ENRICHMENT GUIDE**

*Enrichment Guide edited by Richard J Roberts*

*Contributors: Katie Norton, Millicent Wright*

*Study guide materials courtesy of Portland Stage Company, Portland, Maine*

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## About the Play

When the lights come up, Billy's mother is holding an invitation to his wedding to another man. She has known for some time that her son is gay, she has even met his husband-to-be, but she and her husband are in a quandary over whether to attend the wedding. They have been struggling with accepting Billy's homosexuality for years, and they now face a defining moment in all of their lives.

In 2004, People's Light and Theatre Company in Pennsylvania asked James Still to write a ten-minute monologue about coming out, but he felt he was beyond that place in his life. Instead, he wanted to write about children and their parents. The monologue began as a piece about gay marriage from the perspective of the parents of a gay man; in a unique twist, this son portrayed both of his parents onstage. As he wrote, Still realized that the sister mentioned in the monologue needed to have her say as well, so he wrote another twenty-five minute monologue during which she portrayed the same two parents talking about their relationship with their daughter. In the play's final scene, the brother and sister talk to each other.

The lives of the four characters portrayed in *Iron Kisses* are set against the backdrop of a small Midwestern town. The son, Billy, is a "Golden child" who tries to "make up for being gay" by being perfect. The daughter, Barbara, is the "black sheep" in the family who ends up leading a conventional life. While on the surface it may be easy to say that this play is about gay marriage, and although the first scene concentrates on parents struggling with their son's homosexuality, this is only one aspect of this complex story about family relationships. The play explores the sometimes troubled bonds between parents and children and the mysteries of relationships between brothers and sisters. *Iron Kisses* also looks at the limits that we put on love. Who are we allowed to love? What are our obligations to loved ones? Finally, it is a play about grief. Billy's parents grieve for the life they imagined he would have when he was a little boy. Barbara grieves for the relationship she never was able to form with her mother.

James Still purposely leaves some ends untied in his innovative take on the family drama. "After all," he says, "if everything were figured out, what role would the audience play?" *Iron Kisses* gives observers the chance to discover the nuances of love and disappointment found in this flawed and loving family, and provides us all a space to reflect on our own relationships with loved ones.

James Still began writing what would become *Iron Kisses* at the New Harmony Project, a play development workshop held each May in southern Indiana. In December 2004 People's Light and Theater Company workshopped the first two scenes. *Iron Kisses* had a second workshop at Geva Theatre in Rochester, New York, in January 2005, where James wrote the third scene in a 24-hour burst of adrenaline: "It was like catching lightning in a bottle-you have to do it before it slips away."

In March 2006, Geva Theatre premiered the completed script of *Iron Kisses* to rave reviews. Erica Curtis of *Rochester City Newspaper* wrote, "James Still ... draws the story with appealing symmetry, slowly and elegantly revealing patterns, wounds, hope." Since then this poignant play has been produced by theatres around the country, including Company of Fools in Hailey, Idaho; Portland Stage Company in Maine; Illusion Theater in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Unicorn Theatre in Kansas City, Missouri; and Spontaneous Productions in Boise, Idaho.

## Playwright James Still

As a writer for theatre, film, and television, James Still has created works that reach people of many different ages throughout the country. His writing ranges from deeply researched historical plays like *Looking Over the President's Shoulder* to weekly children's television shows.

James grew up in the small, rural town of Emporia, Kansas. He began writing while in high school and then studied acting at the University of Kansas, where he graduated in 1982. After college he left Kansas and moved to New York City, where he began a career as an actor and writer.

James's first major success came in 1990 when the Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York premiered a one-man show that he both wrote and performed titled *The Velocity of Gary (Not His Real Name)*. The show was a cult success, and James spent the next several years performing it "around the country for just about anyone who would listen." James got his first screenwriting credit when he adapted this one-man show into a fully cast feature film which was released in 1998, starring Vincent D'Onofrio and Salma Hayek. In his *Diary of a Mad Screenwriter*, a collection of excerpts from his production journal, James wrote that the first time the director, Dan Ireland, yelled "Action!" he burst out sobbing. The second day he was still in shock, and by the third day making a movie seemed like the most natural thing in the world. He eventually came to the conclusion that the process of filmmaking requires you either "develop a Zen sense about the whole thing or give up on sanity as a treasured state of being." The stage version of *Gary* went on to be revived in 2000, performed Off Broadway and in San Francisco by Danny Pintauro of the TV series "Who's the Boss."

In the 1990s, James's theatrical work started to receive more attention in regional theaters, including the Indiana Repertory Theatre, which produced his play *The Secret History of the Future* in 1992. In 1995 James moved to California, where he began writing for television. He returned to the IRT in 1996 for the world premiere of *And Then They Came for Me: Remembering the World of Anne Frank*, a multi-media play based on the experiences of two of Anne Frank's childhood friends. The *Indianapolis Star* said of the production, "It lasts a little more than one hour. It'll stay with you for the rest of your life." In 1998, artistic director Janet Allen asked James to become the IRT's playwright in residence, and the theatre secured two consecutive TCG-Pew Charitable Trusts National Theatre Artist Residency grants to support his work here. In 2000 the IRT produced an expanded version of his one-act play *Amber Waves*, in which foreclosure threatens a Midwestern farm family. When the original version premiered at the Kennedy Center, Elizabeth Weir of *Talkin' Broadway Off Broadway* described it as "[confronting] disquieting issues of adult failure, pride, conflict, perseverance and hope." *Looking Over the President's Shoulder* premiered at the IRT in 2001, and has since been produced more than a dozen times across the nation, from the famous Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C., to the Pasadena Playhouse.

James's other works for young audiences include *Hush: An Interview with America* (1994) and *A Village Fable* (1997), an adaptation of John Gardner's novella *In the Suicide Mountains*. Many have been produced by some of the leading children's theatres in the country, including Childsplay in Tempe, Arizona, and Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Since premiering at the IRT, *And Then They Came For Me* has been translated into several languages and performed for children and adults around the world.

In 2002 James finished a five-year project, a joint commission from the IRT and the People's Light and Theatre Company in Philadelphia: *He Held Me Grand* was developed from a series of interviews, workshops, and oral histories with senior citizens in both cities. James's 10-minute piece *Octophobia*, about a figure skater's fear of figure eights, appeared at the 2003 Humana Festival at Actors Theatre of Louisville. *Searching for Eden*, a contemporary riff on Mark Twain's "Diaries of Adam and Eve," premiered in 2003 at American Heartland Theatre in Kansas City; the IRT produced the play in 2005. That same year the IRT again produced *And Then They Came for Me*, and James's *A Long Bridge Over Deep Waters* was the final play in Cornerstone's Faith-Based Theatre Cycle in Los Angeles. A series of vignettes featuring intense encounters between 57 characters from ten religious communities, the play embodies themes and attitudes James discovered during over 1,000 hours of interviews. Talking to the *Jewish Journal*, James said that writing the play was crucial for him because, "It's scary now for minorities to discuss religion in this country. There's pressure to talk about faith as one thing only, and that is Christianity."

*Iron Kisses* premiered at Geva Theatre in Rochester, New York, in 2006, and has been produced at theatres including Portland Stage, the Illusion in Minneapolis, and the Unicorn in Kansas City. Also in 2006 the IRT premiered James's adaptation of Booth Tarkington's novel *The Gentleman from Indiana*. James has directed many productions at the IRT, including *Doubt*, *Bad Dates*, *Old Wicked Songs*, *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*, *Plaza Suite*, *The Immigrant*, and *Dinner with Friends*, as well as his own *Amber Waves* and the premiere of *Looking Over the President's Shoulder*.

James is the winner of the William Inge Festival's Otis Guernsey New Voices Award, and the Charlotte B. Chorpenning Award for Distinguished Body of Work. His plays have been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and developed and workshopped at Robert Redford's Sundance, the New Harmony Project, New Visions/New Voices at the Kennedy Center, and the Bonderman at the IRT. Three of his plays have received the Distinguished Play Award from the American Alliance for Theatre & Education, and his work has been produced throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia.

James's newest play, *The Velvet Rut*, was developed last summer at the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center. Next season the IRT will premiere *Interpreting William*, commissioned by the IRT with Conner Prairie. James is currently working on *The Heavens Are Hung in Black*, a new play for Ford's Theatre to commemorate the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Upcoming projects for the IRT include a play about the Beatles' concert at the Indiana State Fair in 1964.

James also works in television and film and has been nominated for five Emmys and a Television Critics Association Award and was twice a finalist for the Humanitas Prize. He was a producer and head writer for the series "PAZ" which airs daily on TLC and Discovery Kids, the head writer for Maurice Sendak's "Little Bear," and writer for the Bill Cosby series "Little Bill." He wrote *The Little Bear Movie*. He is currently working on a new television series in Amsterdam and a movie in Copenhagen.

James lives in Los Angeles ... for now.

# a place to call *home*

by James Still, Playwright in Residence



Priscilla Lindsay and  
Wiley Moore in  
*He Held Me Grand*.

If someone had told me in 1997 that I would commute every month for the next ten years from California to Indiana, I'm sure I would have been ... skeptical. Of course no one told me such a thing, no one predicted my future, and frankly no one could have imagined the successful collaboration that would evolve between myself, my work, and the IRT.

I said yes to our original commitment of two years because I wanted to immerse my artistic life in a theatre and its culture, its community, and the unique artistic process of making meaning out of chaos. I had enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) being the guest at many different theatres, working with a variety of collaborators in a variety of ways. But I wanted a place to call home. I wanted to have a relationship with an audience that might take an interest not just in one or two of my plays, but a genuine interest in the voice behind and underneath those plays, and in the curiosity

David Alan Anderson in  
*Searching for Eden*.



and care that leads me through the peculiar and personal process of writing. I had no idea how my relationship with the IRT would literally change my life, both artistically and personally.

From the beginning, my work with the IRT has been organic and surprising, unfolding in much the same way my plays unfold to me as a writer: it's a process, it's a mystery, it's seldom what you think it will be, and there's finally, always, something strangely hopeful about it. How do I describe how

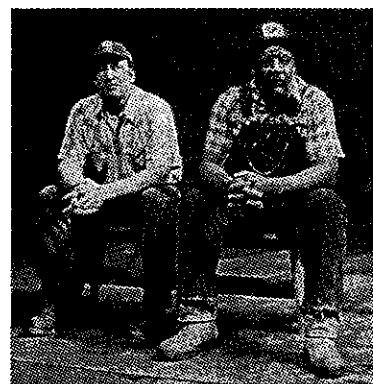
moved I am that we're doing two of my plays simultaneously as a way to celebrate a decade of my work at the IRT?

I am not the only member of the IRT staff past or present to have worked here for ten years. There are many others who have served this institution longer and with equal passion. The unique aspect here is that it's a writer who celebrates ten years.... Writers are strange creatures; we spend hours and hours

alone, our imaginations and all-too-real interior worlds as our primary company. Characters can feel as real to us (and demanding) as family. Writers are often experiencing every waking moment in a kind of "split-screen" existence: there's the reality of what's going on, and then there's the play or story that we're writing in our heads in response to the reality that's going on! We are often the slightly anxious men and women who might be standing in the back of the theatre, unconsciously leaning in with gratitude toward the light on the stage where beautiful actors bring our characters to life with the unique storytelling skills of a director and a team of designers backing them up. When I'm standing in the back of a theatre, I'm not only seeing my play onstage, I'm also seeing the audience watching my play onstage.

There's a moment that happens with every play I write. It doesn't happen early in the process, it happens later, it can almost go unnoticed. A tiny shift happens when I start to sense my play becoming itself (flawed but uniquely itself). At that point I start letting myself hope that someone will want to see what I'm writing, will want to talk about it, will want to argue about it, will even want to see it again. Empty theatres are more frightening to me than blank pages.

I am the playwright in residence at a theatre with heart and vision big enough to create a theatrical celebration that honors my past work and embraces my present work. My future surely involves more airplanes, more flights that approach a landscape that I know from the inside out, a sophisticated Midwestern city surrounded by checkerboards of fields. I will hit the ground running, wondering how I'll ever be able to write all of the things I want to share with a theatre and its audience who have made it clear that as unlikely as it might seem, as mysterious as it continues to be—the IRT is a place to call home.



Tim Grimm and  
John Henry Redwood  
in *Amber Waves*.

Rebecca Masur and  
Grace Morgan in *And  
Then They Came for  
Me: Remembering the  
World of Anne Frank*.



CELEBRATING  
10 YEARS  
JAMES  
STILL  
PLAYWRIGHT  
IN RESIDENCE

## Going Solo

### An Exploration of Solo Narrative Performance

Many of the plays with which we are familiar today are centered around action, even if that action is simply a dialogue between two characters on stage. In contrast, *Iron Kisses* is more narrative and presentational than action-based, at least in the first two acts, with a single character standing on stage and delivering short monologues speaking as two other characters. This style is closely related to an oratorical type of theater that began in ancient Greece and continues to influence modern theatre today.

Greek theatre grew out of the tradition of oratory, or the art of speaking eloquently and effectively. Greek oratory, though more political or philosophical in nature, is basically part of the practice of oral storytelling, a worldwide tradition born out of the need to communicate with no written language. In the 6th century B.C.E., the poet Thespis was credited with creating a style of performance in which a solo actor delivered the speeches of all of the characters of the narrative, making distinction between characters with speech patterns and masks. Although the Greeks continued to add characters in order to facilitate dialogue on stage, *Iron Kisses* is written in the vein of the original tragedies of Thespis.

Since ancient times, there are very few notable examples of plays wholly composed of this style, because the introduction of more actors on stage provided playwrights and performers the opportunity to create bigger and better spectacles in order to tell their story. However, as seen in Shakespearean soliloquies, the power of a single actor on stage remains theatrically strong and important to our theatrical tradition. Not until more recent times have plays like *Iron Kisses* become an important part of how to theatrically tell a story. By stripping the story down to its essentials and eliminating even simple action, theater pieces like *Iron Kisses* rely on and reinforce the power of the spoken word.

Most solo performance pieces today are not part of mainstream theater, but instead use the power provided by their words to be a part of political and social movements. Anna Deavere-Smith's *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1992), about race relations in Brooklyn, New York, and *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1993), about the violent riots in L.A. after the Rodney King verdict in 1992, were two of the first solo performance pieces to reestablish respect for this performance style as not only political, but truly theatrical. When *I Am My Own Wife* by Doug Wright, a one-man play about Charlotte von Mahlsdorf featuring a "cast" of nearly forty characters, won the Tony Award in 2004, the power and importance of solo narrative performance became a central part of Western theatrical tradition once again.

What has made solo performance so powerful is what many criticize it for: the act of one person portraying many. However, as evidenced by the response to Anna Deavere-Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, there is something deeply profound about one person speaking for the multitudes. Michael Frym, a critic for *Los Angeles Reader*, praised Deavere-Smith, an African American, for unashamedly delivering the words of



all of the ethnicities that were embroiled in the riots: "It will be difficult for audiences to maintain an 'us' and 'them' mindset after realizing the rich potential of the inclusive 'all.'" When *I Am My Own Wife* was being workshopped, actor Jefferson Mays and playwright Doug Wright found that creating a one-man show served the story best because the main character, Charlotte von Mahsldorf, took on many guises in her own life to survive in East Germany, and that adoption of identities was mirrored by the solo performance style.

When James Still set out to write *Iron Kisses*, it was with the monologue format in mind, but as the first two scenes emerged it became clear that this style of performance was able to highlight how each character's identities are delicately intertwined by the relationships that they all share. Furthermore, by using solo performance to tell the story of Barbara, Billy, and their parents, James Still raises the stakes surrounding the issues with which the characters grapple. Even the smallest remark by the father about the news in San Francisco not being about him is as evocative a statement about the state of our society as the mother's desperation to accept her son's sexuality. In this way, solo narrative performance allows the audience to focus on the words and the emotions behind the words, creating a sense of importance and immediacy about the story being told.



INDIANA  
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THEATRE

*Artistic Director*  
JANET ALLEN

*Managing Director*  
STEVEN STOLEN

presents

# IRON KISSES

*by* JAMES STILL

*directed by* DAVID BRADLEY

*Scenic Designer*  
RUSSELL METHENY

*Costume Designer*  
KATHLEEN EGAN

*Lighting Designer*  
LAP CHI CHU

*Original Music by*  
CHRIS COLUCCI

*Dramaturg*  
RICHARD J ROBERTS

*Stage Manager*  
NATHAN GARRISON

UPPERSTAGE • APRIL 15 - MAY 11, 2008

## THE CAST

*Billy* RYAN ARTZBERGER

*Barbara* CONSTANCE MACY

## THE SETTING

A small town in the Midwest and San Francisco. Now.

Scene 1 Iron Kisses

Scene 2 The Long Division of My Mother

Scene 3 Happiness Is What You Can Bear

*The performance lasts approximately 90 minutes with no intermission.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Iron Kisses* is presented by special arrangement with Dramatic Publishing, Woodstock, Illinois.

Originally produced by Geva Theatre Center, Rochester, New York, on March 15, 2006.

Mark Cuddy, Artistic Director; John Quinlivan, Managing Director.

Work on *Iron Kisses* was supported by the New Harmony Project.

"Special thank you to David Bradley and People's Light and Theatre Company, Malvern, Pennsylvania, for inviting me to write a ten-minute piece that quite suddenly became a full-length play." —*James Still*

The actors and stage managers employed in this production are members of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

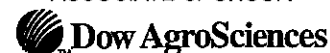
The director is a member of SSDC, the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers.

The scenic, lighting, and costume designers are represented by United Scenic Artists Local 829, IATSE.

Photography and recording are forbidden in the theatre.

The videotaping of this production is a violation of United States Copyright Law and an actionable Federal Offense.

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ASSOCIATE SPONSOR



We are pleased to recognize the National Endowment for the Arts as an Associate Sponsor of *Iron Kisses*. The NEA believes that a great nation deserved great art; we at the IRT believe that *Iron Kisses* brings great theatre to a great Indiana audience.



# perspective

by Janet Allen, Artistic Director

A couple of years ago, one of our board members asked me if our playwright in residence James Still ever wrote anything that wasn't set in Indiana. This made me laugh at first—since the vast majority of James's work is not set in Indiana—but then made me thoughtful. In fact, we've produced three plays by James that are not part of his Indiana oeuvre, but two of them have been for our youth series. The third, *Searching for Eden*, was a modern-day riff on Mark Twain's "Diaries of Adam and Eve." To celebrate the 10th anniversary of James's residency here at the IRT, we selected *Iron Kisses* quite purposefully to introduce another branch of his writing to you—something we might call a contemporary issue play.

*Iron Kisses* springs, in part, from James's reaction to a current social-political discussion regarding the changing American view of marriage. In that manner, it isn't so unlike *Doubt* (which James directed earlier this season), which was playwright John Patrick Shanley's response to some of the current social politics of the Catholic Church. The plays have something else in common: neither is propagandistic in the slightest, but both are, instead, penetrating character studies of people caught in a redefining moment. Skillful playwrights using their art form to explore a social issue, exploring an idea from multiple viewpoints rather than preaching.

*Iron Kisses* looks deeply into the face of marriage in the 21st century and asks us some challenging questions: How and why do we feel differently about the marriage between a man and a woman than we feel about the potential for marriage between two people of the same gender? How do we celebrate love? With 50 percent of heterosexual marriages ending in divorce, will traditional marriage practices cease to function as a social bedrock in the future? These and other questions linger beneath the interactions of the family of four characterized in this contemporary comedic drama.

*Iron Kisses* adds to its strengths a fascinating stylistic exploration: the male actor plays both the son/brother of the family, and his own parents; the female actor plays both the daughter/sister and those same parents. Hence, we see two perspectives on the parents: Each is enacted by both their children in monologues with the audience. Later we see the actors as brother and sister in dialogue with each other. The impact of the play is like turning a prism in the light: the colors of the discussion change depending on whose perspective we are looking through.

We hope you will find this newest piece of the James Still canon something that will keep your thoughts spinning on the way home, and that it will elicit discussions with your own loved ones about the nature of family and partnering commitments in our century.

**"I would argue that the future of our country hangs in the balance because the future of marriage hangs in the balance. Isn't that the ultimate homeland security, standing up and defending marriage?"**

**—Senator Rick Santorum  
on the Gay Marriage Amendment  
as reported by the Associated Press  
on July 14, 2004**

# change

*Iron Kisses* is exactly the play I wanted to write when I wrote it. It exists because it willed itself into being, because I couldn't say no to its insistence that I write it. It's a play I had thought about for a long time, but couldn't figure out how to write. It was a lesson in both patience and urgency.

It was one of those plays that the characters started whispering in my ear and I started writing it all down. When I got too busy to finish it I would work on *Iron Kisses* in my sleep, dreaming about it, sleeping with a paper and pen under my pillow, waking up in the middle of the night and scribbling it down before it all disappeared with the setting moon.

The character of Billy came first, though the character of Barbara made her presence known to me pretty early on; she was pacing in the corners of my mind, tapping her impatient fingers on my heart. Both of these characters quickly reminded me that siblings can be born to the same parents while also having slightly different versions of those same parents. Family stories differ depending on who's doing the remembering.

*Iron Kisses* is a play in which brother and sister play their parents (as well as themselves). While on the face of it this choice might risk seeming like a gimmick, I love the pure theatricality of it, the truth in the little details, and the shifting perspectives and points of view. But it's also emotionally true—that idea that no matter how much we might try, family is profoundly inescapable.

At its heart, *Iron Kisses* is about a family struggling to recognize itself as it breathlessly changes and evolves in ways unimaginable not just fifty years ago, but even ten years ago. It's about that nagging sense that we all, at one time or another, "become" our parents. It's also about grief, about the ways we grieve, about our need to be with people we love when we're grieving, even if we don't know how to do it. Grief is lonely. It's also messy.

*Iron Kisses* is for all the folks out there who want to marry the person they've been

# family

by James Still, Playwright

lucky enough to find and fall in love with. *Iron Kisses* is for all the folks whose hearts have been broken and their hopes betrayed as they muster the courage to start anew at a moment well into adulthood, when starting over is probably the very last thing they want to do. *Iron Kisses* is for all the parents who love their kids, even—especially—when they don't understand them.

*Iron Kisses* is also for all the audiences who open themselves up to writers. I've tried to tell a story that is perhaps achingly familiar, but with a theatrical challenge that might let each of us think about ourselves and our own families in new, even more compassionate ways. *Iron Kisses* explores thematic territory that mirrors my experience with the IRT audience. People can surprise you—if you let them.

Over my ten years as playwright in residence, I've purposely cast myself as a kind of community anthropologist, offering the IRT audiences more than mere glimpses of themselves, wanting to honor the poetry of the Midwest in all the ways that I inherently know and understand. *Iron Kisses* is a big mirror—one that flashes both backwards and forwards in time, one that more vulnerably makes room for a bit of me in the mirror too. *Iron Kisses* is one more way to share myself with the IRT staff, board, audiences, and community—and that's what I've tried to do from the beginning.

by David Bradley, Director

**T**hank you for helping me understand my daughter." That was the comment of a dad after seeing *Hush: An Interview with America*, the first play I directed by James Still, back in 1996. The play features a blind 12-year-old girl being raised by a single dad, as they face together the thrilling and befuddling challenges of growing up. *Hush* began my 12-year (and counting!) friendship and collaboration with James Still, a relationship that has featured 7 productions of his plays (3 now at IRT) and a deeply satisfying and ongoing exchange about life, art, love, and perhaps most importantly, family. I've directed plays by James for adults and young people, but, as the comment of that grateful dad suggests, I think James's work helps all generations discover family anew.

My collaboration with James has paralleled major events in my own family life. I first met him just six months after I was married. In the years since, my wife and I have bought our first house, become parents, and lost important members of our families in ways both expected and shocking. Along the way there have been the everyday delights of baseball games and kids' drawings, the sacred rituals of birth, death, and marriage, and the jolting surprise of phone calls in the middle of the night. In other words, we have lived the experience of being a family alive now in America.

Living that experience alongside the plays of James Still has helped me see it for the extraordinary journey it is. Because in James's plays, families seize the stage in the most improbable ways. The ghosts of ancestors dance with their descendants. The first couple of humankind, Adam and Eve, return to the garden with cell phones and suitcases

and the mid-life crises of modern marriage. Children take on the bodies of their parents and parents stand next to the children they've never met.

The theatrical zest of these inventions certainly makes for an engaging experience in the theatre. But beyond their immediate surprise and entertainment, I think they resonate because what James is expressing in these wildly improbable moments is in fact the deep truth of family: it's all wild; it's all improbable; it's all layers of reality, memory, and invention.

Family is an endeavor in which we both have no choice (we can't pick our parents or siblings) and have a myriad of choices (how close to stay with our parents; whether to have kids; what priorities to live by). It's contradictory—at times seemingly impossible and at times full of possibility. We like to use words that ascribe to it a sense of invincibility: bedrock, foundation. But as we all know—because it's the one thing we've all got in common—at some point in the living of it, family feels chaotic, vulnerable, anything but invincible.

James's plays keep us company in that contradiction. And perhaps they can liberate us to appreciate family not as some sturdy, sociological fact, but instead as a poem, made up of everyday parts but arranged into something mysterious, heightened, transcendent. Inside this poem, time is immediate and eternal. Memory is vivid and elusive. We feel anchored or unmoored, or both. We are guided by our experience and continually surprised by what we don't know.

Whether it's that father understanding his daughter anew through *Hush*, or me celebrating my sons and mourning my father as we created *He Held Me Grand*, or you seeing a bit of yourself in Billy and Barbara and their parents here at *Iron Kisses*, James encourages us to view family finally as perhaps our most creative process. We write this poem of family, and it writes us. We are constantly revising. We can always imagine something new.

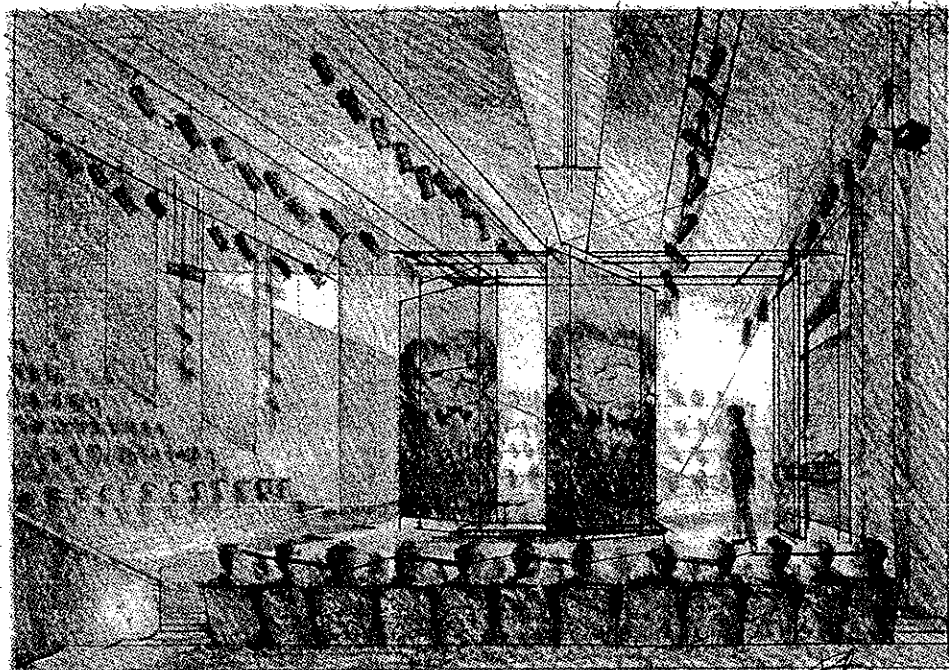
Thank you, James, for these discoveries. Here's to more.

**A Mother's hardest to forgive.  
Life is the fruit she longs to hand you,  
Ripe on a plate. And while you live,  
Relentlessly she understands you.**

—Phyllis McGinley

**RUSSELL METHENY****Scenic Designer**

The scenic atmosphere of this intimate theatre piece began from a fragmented remembrance of a shimmering, beautiful, fog-filled dawn. As the sun took over the air, moments of detailed clarity and curious dream sensations were revealed. And with the twilight, the coming night dissolved it all into the past. From this evolved a space of rich pewter, hints of brassy gold, the deep black-blue ink of night, and foggy scrims in motion. Fleeting images play and melt through this gauzy haze. Snapshots of life past and present, familiar, arresting, and all too brief, gliding away into a fragmented two-dimensional frame revealing the full real dimensions of performance.



## family portrait

IRT

IRON KISSES

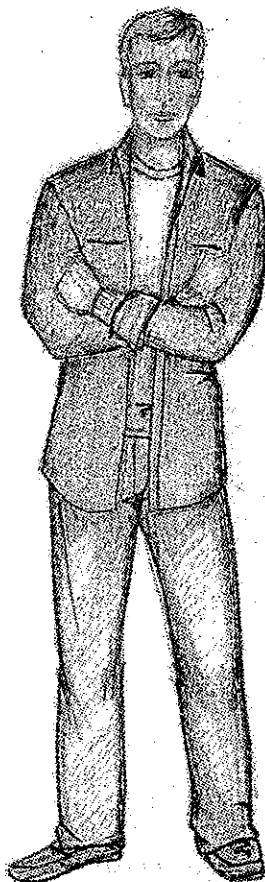
BY JAMES STILL

**CHRISTOPHER COLUCCI****Sound Designer**

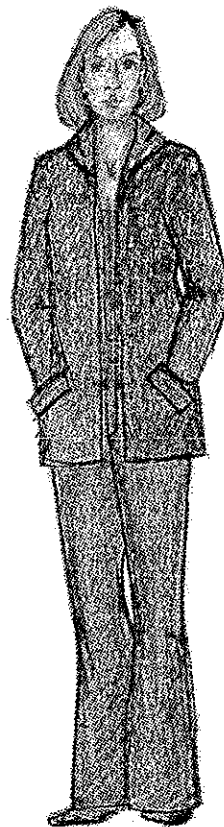
My experience with *Iron Kisses* goes back to 2005, when I saw the first two parts at a summer play festival at the People's Light and Theatre Company in Malvern, Pennsylvania. My dear partner in life, Kathryn Petersen, played Barbara. I saw another production of the play last year at the Gay and Lesbian Play Festival in Philadelphia, this time with the third part which had not been performed in 2005. I was immediately taken in by the honesty in the writing. When I was given the opportunity to write music for this production, I was thrilled. I am writing this program note in the middle of March and I have just returned from a South Philadelphia recording studio where director David Bradley and I had been working on some of the music for this production. I hope that the story speaks true to you, as it so powerfully did to me.

**LAP CHI CHU****Lighting Designer**

This play is deceptively simple. Two actors telling a story about family. But what is it the children are trying to get at by portraying their parents? And what do the characters get from telling their story to the audience? At this early point in the process, my plan is to treat the first two scenes and their many locations with more visual athleticism, setting up the calm domesticity of the final scene. But when we get on stage, I may throw all that out. The line between just enough and too much can be very fine. I look forward to experiencing this play with an audience and seeing how they (you) respond.

**KATHLEEN EGAN****Costume Designer**

Every time I read this play, I find some new moment that speaks to me. One is Barbara telling her son, "There's just enough light to get us home sweetie; just enough, that's all we need." Just enough is all we need in life. How unintentionally brilliant of Barbara this is. How honest and unplanned. It just comes out of her mouth in her own pain as she comforts her son. As I thought about the play, it seemed that surely, the costumes needed to be something more complicated than shirts and pants. But I kept coming back to simple fluid clothing that could transform to Mom and Dad, yet reflect Barbara and Billy and the reality of the third scene. Shirts and pants seem to be just enough, all we need.



Costume sketches by designer Kathleen Egan for Billy (left) and Barbara (right).

# MEET THE COMPANY

## RYAN ARTZBERGER Billy

Ryan's IRT credits include Mitch in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Simon Stimson in *Our Town*, Biff in *Death of a Salesman*, Elijah in *Inherit the Wind*, Jesse in *He Held Me Grand*, Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Jack Lane in *The Herbal Bed*, and various roles in *A Christmas Carol*. Regional credits include Jason in *Argonautika* at the Lookingglass; Herve Joncour in *Silk* and Pericles in *Pericles* at the Goodman Theatre; Pericles in *Pericles*, Valvert in *Cyrano*, and many others at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, DC; Hamlet in *Hamlet*, Treplev in *The Sea Gull*, and Angelo in *The Comedy of Errors* at Shakespeare Santa Cruz; Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet* at Great Lakes Theatre Festival; Ray Dooley in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* at the Denver Center; and Orlando in *As You Like It* at both New Jersey Shakespeare and Playmakers Rep. Ryan is a graduate of Ohio University and the Juilliard School.



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HORTH

## CONSTANCE MACY Barbara

Constance came to the IRT in 1990 as an ensemble member of the Junior Works company. Over the years, her favorite IRT roles have been Roxane in *Cyrano* and Belinda Blair in *Noises Off*. She is a founding member of ShadowApe Theatre Company, where her favorite roles include Lilith in *The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer* and Rosaura in *Life Is a Dream*. Constance is an IRT teaching artist and also teaches acting at Butler University. She is a native of Indianapolis, a graduate of Indiana University, and a 2004 Arts Council of Indianapolis Creative Renewal Fellow. She is married to Robert Koharchik, a set designer, and has a four-year-old son, Mike (a.k.a. "The Bear"). "Many thanks to Nancy and Bill for their kindness and generosity."



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## DAVID BRADLEY • Director

David is very pleased to return for this celebration of James Still at the IRT, where he has directed James's *Searching for Eden* and *He Held Me Grand*. David directed the world premiere of *He Held Me Grand* and the original version of *Iron Kisses* at People's Light and Theatre in Malvern, Pennsylvania, where he is a long-time company member and was previously associate artistic director. At People's Light, his more than 20 productions include James's *Hush: An Interview with America* and *A Village Fable* as well as *The Crucible*, *The Giver*, *A View from the Bridge*, *Holes*, *Pretty Fire*, *Jungalbook*, *The Music Lesson*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. David is artistic director of Living News, now in its second season at Philadelphia's National Constitution Center, and has directed at Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis. He works extensively as an arts educator and consultant, currently developing new programs at World Café Live, one of Philadelphia's premier music venues. He is an adjunct professor at Arcadia University and a graduate of Yale University. "For Andrew. All experience is an arch...."

## RUSSELL METHENY • Scenic Designer

Russell has designed 41 IRT productions, including *The Piano Lesson*, *The Unexpected Guest*, *The Gentleman from Indiana*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Old Wicked Songs*, *Searching for Eden*, *Plaza Suite*, *Arcadia*, *The Immigrant*, *Ah, Wilderness!*, *Looking Over the President's Shoulder*, *State of the Union*, *Othello*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Herbal Bed*, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, *Spunk*, and *You Can't Take It with You*. He has designed for the Idaho Shakespeare Festival, Great Lakes Theatre Festival, Shakespeare Santa Cruz, Dallas Theatre Center, the Old Globe, Geffen Playhouse, Missouri Rep, Actors Theatre of Kansas City, the Goodman Theatre, Syracuse Stage, Buffalo Studio Arena, Portland Stage, Weston Playhouse, Goodspeed Musicals, and the Studio Theatre.

## KATHLEEN EGAN • Costume Designer

For the IRT Kegan has designed *The Immigrant*, *The Drawer Boy*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Same Time, Next Year*, and the world premiere of *Looking Over the President's Shoulder*. She designed the Circle City Children's Theatre production of *The Comedy of Errors*. Kegan originally designed the long-running *Triple Espresso* for the Cricket Theatre in Minneapolis. She designed for the Guthrie Lab, the Frank Theatre, and others in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Off-Broadway at the Hartman Theatre and Pennsylvania Stage Company. She taught at the University of Minnesota and Emporia State University. She managed the IRT costume shop from 1998 to 2003. Her business, K.Egan, creates custom fabric projects and window treatments. Her work with the Rowland Design Group on a media room was recently featured in *Indianapolis Monthly* magazine. Kegan volunteers with the Feral Bureau of Indiana, lobbying for Indianapolis to be a no-kill city.

## LAP CHI CHU • Lighting Designer

Lap returns to the IRT after designing *Doubt*, *Death of a Salesman*, *King Lear*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Regional designs include the Mark Taper Forum, Geffen Playhouse, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Arena Stage, Hartford Stage, Dallas Theater Center, San Jose Rep, Intiman Theatre, Portland Stage Company, Shakespeare & Company, Cleveland Play House, the Evidence Room, Pine Mountain Music Festival, Virginia Opera, and the Ordway Music Theater. New York City design credits include New York Theatre Workshop, Dance Theater Workshop, PS 122, the Kitchen, Danspace, Primary Stages, and Juilliard Opera. Lap is the lighting designer for Chamecki/Lerner (*Visible Content*, *Hidden Forms*, *I Mutantes Seras*, and *Please Don't Leave Me*), performed in the United States and Brazil. Lap holds degrees from Northwestern University and New York University. He teaches lighting design at California Institute of the Arts.

## CHRISTOPHER COLUCCI • Sound Designer

Christopher makes music and sound as a theatre artist, guitarist, composer, and producer. Residing in Philadelphia, Christopher has designed more than 20 productions in that city thus far this season. Recent shows include *The Odd Couple*, *Mr. Bailey's Minder*, and *Greater Tuna* at the Walnut Street Theatre; *Getting Near to Baby* at People's Light and Theatre Company; *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* for the Delaware Theatre Company; and *Living News* at the National Constitution Center. "I am happy to be making my first appearance at the IRT and would like to thank David Bradley for inviting me along."

## NATHAN GARRISON • Stage Manager

This is Nathan's 12th season at the IRT. He has also worked at Center Stage in Baltimore and at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. Recently he was awarded a Creative Renewal Arts Fellowship from the Arts Council of Indianapolis.

## ***“Just Being Honest”***

### **Family and the Process of Coming Out**

In *Iron Kisses*, Billy's parents describe their personal reactions to their son's decision to come out to them, and while every family's experience is unique, theirs parallels the processes reported by many families in our culture. For instance, Billy's Mom recalls a “difficult period” during which she and Billy fought and then did not speak to each other for six months; this kind of conflict and distance, which experts call “disintegration,” commonly occurs in families when a child initially comes out. Even though Billy's family, like many families, makes progress past their first reactions of anger and grief, having a family member “come out” often begins a difficult process for everyone in the family.

Long before they consider coming out to their families, gay and lesbian young people struggle to define and accept themselves. Homophobia remains pervasive in our culture, and non-heterosexual youth can develop unhealthy social habits such as people-pleasing, co-dependence, and compulsive accommodating. An example of this kind of response is Billy's decision to be “perfect” in every other aspect of his life, so that people will “forgive” his being gay. Though gay adolescents may stay closeted, they often have trouble connecting with their peers, and later transitions such as moving away from home can be more difficult because of this. Researchers suggest that the primary impetus for coming out to family is recognizing a need not only for self-acceptance but also for the honest acceptance of others. In Billy's case, finding a way to become a whole and proud person meant moving away, perhaps to give his family space to accept him as well.

When gay young people are going through this difficult self-acceptance process, it's not uncommon for them to confide in a sibling before discussing their sexuality with other family members. While sharing this confidence can strengthen the sibling bond, knowing that a brother or sister is gay before their parents know can put siblings in an awkward position later on. In *Iron Kisses*, for instance, Barbara asks Billy why he told her first, complaining about the pressure she endured to keep his secret and about having to act as a mediator between him and their parents. This pressure to somehow “make things okay” between parents and a sibling is familiar to anyone who has had a sibling come out, and the situation can put a strain on the relationship.

One of the most common issues that parents report dealing with after their children come out is blame, usually in the form of self-blame for their child's “abnormal” circumstance, such as a father who fears he has caused his daughter to become a lesbian by involving her in “male” activities with him when she was young. Although our culture has progressed in this area in recent years, parents still feel the pressure of what experts call the “societal criminalization” of parents of gay children. Billy's parents make remarks throughout the play about blaming themselves or trying to discover a cause for their son's sexual orientation. Parents' feelings of guilt and fear of judgment often cause them to keep their child's orientation a secret.

It is an irony that when a child finally comes out, one of the parents' first responses may be effectively to “closet” themselves for fear of what people will think. Even when parents crave support while dealing with their feelings of guilt and sadness, their fear of social reprimand



keeps them isolated: "It was like a death in the family," said one mother of a gay son, "and I couldn't talk to anyone." If the parents live in a socially conservative community, as Billy's parents do in *Iron Kisses*, they might keep their secret indefinitely. For instance, Billy's mother sits in church wondering if anyone around her is gay or has gay children, but can't find out because she isn't willing to share her own situation. Families truly begin to heal, however, when their desire for support becomes so significant that they bravely seek out others who understand what they're going through.

Another major problem parents face after their child comes out is letting go of their old image of their child to develop a new, more accurate image of their child's past, present, and future. Billy's dad echoes the voices of many parents in describing how impossible it seemed that he could miss something so fundamental about this son. "It's a blow to your ego," explains one mother of a gay son: "You think you know your child so well, and then find out he knew this at a young age and didn't tell." Changing their image of how their child has always been necessarily affects parents' image of their child's future, and this means realizing that the child won't conform to heterosexual traditions. Billy's mom struggles, for instance, with the fact that her recurring dream for him (to marry a pretty girl and have children) will not come true. One positive effort that Billy's parents make, however, is to support their son's choice of partner by going to his wedding. This step, accepting a child's same-sex partner, is one of the most important steps in healing the rift between parents and child.

*Iron Kisses* tells the story of a mother and father who are not perfect, but who are ultimately willing to change and adjust to maintain their relationship with their son. Unfortunately, not all families make it past the initial rocky phases that occurs when a child comes out. Many families, however, do make it to the point of acceptance where we see Billy's family in the play, and even beyond to a point where they openly support and champion their gay children. In fact, many claim that they are better parents and better people because of the incredibly challenging process they have been through to embrace their child's sexuality.

## What Is a “Normal” Family?

How many times does someone ask, “Why can’t I have a normal family like everyone else?” Sometimes people try to shield their friends from the things about their families that embarrass them, or they move far away from home as soon as they are able. Others might worry that their influence has negatively affected their family, just as the family members in *Iron Kisses* worry that their past words and actions have prevented each other from having “normal” lives. What many people don’t realize, however, is that they are confusing “normal” with “ideal.” In other words, just because their families aren’t the way they would like them to be doesn’t mean that they are different from most families in our society. In fact, recent research on families shows that what’s actually “normal” in family relationships isn’t at all what might be called “ideal.”

Relationships between parents and their children play a major role in the lives of the characters in *Iron Kisses*, specifically those affected by gender. For instance, Barbara’s relationship with her daughter turns out surprisingly similar to her own relationship with her mother, and she faces the same questions about whether she favors her son. Earlier in the play, Barbara’s dad suggests that fathers have less turbulent relationships with their daughters than mothers do because “there’s no competition,” and Barbara’s mom suggests that it’s natural for mothers to be “more in awe” of sons than daughters. As uncomfortable as it might be to admit, these ideas support the Freudian model of gendered parent-child relationships: the Oedipus/Electra complex. Freud theorized that boys are conditioned to replace their fathers and girls to replace their mothers, and this model would appear to explain why mothers and daughters or fathers and sons experience high levels of conflict, particularly once children become teenagers and start to solidify their identities.

Today, with the multitude of theories that have arisen since Freud’s work in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it’s practically impossible for us to reduce the causes of all our family relationship problems to set complexes. This is especially true since our cultural ideas about how parents should function based on their gender has changed drastically since Freud’s day. Experts say, for instance, that the majority of today’s fathers are more openly affectionate with their sons than their fathers were with them, an idea that defies the negative stereotype of fathers teaching their sons to be “men” by being emotionally distant. Similarly, the stereotype of an “indulgent, overly involved” mother has lost power now that it’s not unusual for mothers to have time-consuming careers away from home. While fathers and mothers are taking more equal shares of child care, however, a recent study shows that adolescents still share their feelings more openly with their mothers. What this suggests is not that fathers are naturally less emotionally available than mothers, but that it’s normal for some cultural constructs to affect our family relationships.

A related subject of family tension that is frequently referenced in *Iron Kisses* is differential treatment of siblings by their parents. “I worry that I’m harder on Barbara than I am on Billy,” their mother confesses, and this is after insisting that she does her best to treat her children and grandchildren equally in every respect. Later in the play, their mom observes that Barbara doesn’t lose her patience with her son “the same way she does with her daughter,” and she worries about how her differential treatment might influence her daughter’s parenting habits.

Perhaps the main reason why parents worry they're being "harder" on some children than others is that they're afraid preferential treatment will be interpreted as proof they actually love one child more than the other. While we usually think of this problem in a parent-to-child context, it can also happen that children give preferential treatment to one parent over the other, and this can cause equally serious family tensions. It's not uncommon, in fact, for families to deal with a combination of this problem, where some siblings ally themselves with one parent and others ally themselves with the other parent. Unhealthy family dynamics like these are potentially insidious and damaging.

For many people, both the positive and the negative aspects of family relationships are inextricably connected to brothers and sisters. Siblings have arguably more influence over one another than their parents do since, depending on age difference, they might spend more time with one another than with any other human being during their formative years. Researchers say that siblings actively socialize each other, which means that they teach each other how to interact with peers. An older sibling can act as a kind of additional parent to a younger sibling, and even siblings who are close in age exhibit feelings of protectiveness and admiration. In *Iron Kisses*, for instance, Barbara calls Billy her "hero," and Billy recalls Barbara fighting other kids who were cruel to him. As anyone who has siblings knows, however, this camaraderie and care usually exist side by side with rivalry. Because siblings share so many resources—parents, toys, living space—competition comes into play. As siblings get older, advantages that one sibling has over another such as good looks or easy social skills can cause serious rifts in the relationship. It's no wonder that experts say most siblings significantly distance themselves from one another when they first reach adulthood.

Although relationships between siblings can be painful and tumultuous, the benefits of having brothers and sisters increase as we grow older, so many people work extremely hard to maintain strong relationships. Studies show, for instance, that even siblings with histories of intense conflict often seek a positive relationship with one another in adulthood, and adult sibling relationships demonstrate remarkable adaptability over time, depending on the needs of the individual brothers and sisters. Siblings who haven't spoken in years will suddenly become close friends after a crisis in one of their lives, or a brother and sister who never became close because of gender differences may start talking on a daily basis because of a need to understand their shared past. Perhaps the most significant reason why siblings find they need each other as adults is summed up in *Iron Kisses* when Barbara tells Billy that she flew to visit him because she wanted to talk to someone whom she "didn't have to explain everything to." Our feelings toward our siblings may seem irrational to us, but our need for them as adults is profoundly normal, especially as our parents and we grow older.

An unfamiliar and awkward kind of family dynamic that is rapidly becoming the norm in this country is for aging parents to live with their children and grandchildren. Studies show that one in five Americans will be 65 or older by 2030, and as this trend progresses, more adults will find themselves "sandwiched," or responsible for caring for their parents while caring for their own children. In many cases, such individuals also have to manage a career, adding financial pressure to the emotional stress of caring for parents with failing health. Although these kinds of situations are among the most difficult faced by families in our culture, recent studies show that they involve a combination of positive and negative characteristics. Parents may feel their dignity

is threatened by their child's caring for them, and children may feel smothered by the constant presence of a parent in their lives. Negotiating the line between making a parent feel like a valuable family member and maintaining one's own adult identity and authority can be a constant battle. On the other hand, many children report forming closer relationships with their parents after this reversal has taken place, and many parents find ways of helping their child with household work and child care in return for help with their own medical circumstances. A "sandwich" household is, therefore, just another example of how coping with less than ideal situations is central to being part of a family.

Learning about typical problems and stresses that affect most families in our culture may still do little to ease our personal fears and worries about the normalcy of our own family. While experts can make observations about what is normal among families, the fact remains that every family is made up of unique individuals who influence each other in countless ways that are impossible to predict. A brother and sister may not have spoken for years, but their parenting habits may have a great deal to do with their experiences with each other. A child may be extremely close to his parents but choose to move away from home to assert himself as an individual. Parents might, like Barbara and Billy's parents in *Iron Kisses*, struggle to understand what they might have done to affect their child's sexual orientation. Regardless of what our own anxieties about our family relationships may entail, we can feel secure in the knowledge that the perplexing and potent concept of family is also influencing the lives of everyone around us.

## The Generation Gap

Imagine that a grandmother buys a cell phone and her teenage grandson shows her how to use it. She is confused and it takes her a while to catch on; he, on the other hand, is confident and proficient. The teen has a skill that the grandmother lacks, and understandably he'll think that he knows more than she does. She, on the other hand, has 80 plus years of experience at life, and could give him a run for his money if given the chance. Only 200 years ago, the elderly were revered for their wisdom because changes in the culture were so slow they were practically unnoticeable. Elders knew what life had in store for their descendants and could faithfully guide them. Today, in a very real sense, that is no longer the case. We hear it everywhere: the world is changing—fast. A tornado of popular culture and advanced technology has left older generations in the dust. Anthropologically speaking, we live in a pre-figurative culture, in other words, a culture in which the young teach the old. Centuries ago, all known cultures were post-figurative, cultures in which the old taught the young.

In 1970, renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote, "We have no descendants, as our children have no forbears." She meant that the world that had existed before World War II and the world that existed after it were so different that those born after 1945 could barely relate to those born before it. The generation she was speaking of is now hitting retirement age. At the time, Mead didn't believe that such a fundamental change in culture could happen again, but either it has changed again or the change has intensified to the extent that a similar gap has formed between Baby Boomers and their children—and their children's children, for that matter. According to Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, authors of *When Generations Collide*, there are four distinct generations of adults in the United States today: Traditionalists in their 70s, who are hardworking and patriotic; Baby Boomers in their 50s, who are self-absorbed and optimistic; Generation X-ers in their 30s, who are cynical and computer savvy; and the Millennials, the barely 20-somethings just entering the work force.

Most of Mead's reasons for such a radical culture shift still hold true for the ongoing changes we experience. World War II irrevocably altered cultures around the globe, though in the Western world these changes are more pronounced. First, she points to worldwide communication. There are no geographical unknowns left on Earth. The vast majority of nations can quickly communicate through computers, satellites, television, and rapid air travel. Second, the atom bomb has altered our conception of war. Before America dropped the first nuclear bomb on Hiroshima in 1945, people knew that no matter how devastating warfare was, humanity would survive it. The possibility of a nuclear winter means that is no longer the case. Third, modern medicine, while wonderful, has led to a massive population increase that threatens to overwhelm the planet's resources. Before the war, Earth's population was measured in millions. Now there are 6.6 billion people. It follows that we now know we have the capacity to destroy the environment through overpopulation and pollution. Finally, the modern feminist movement has changed the structure of the family unit in the Western world. Mead believed that we were entering an era in which parents could only loosely guide their young. Older ideas for how to live life no longer applied, old wisdom was obsolete; a new world order had suddenly and completely replaced it.

Mead didn't count on another rift between young and old forming in the new millennium. A youth culture was created in the 1950s and 1960s, brought about by the Baby Boomers themselves. The slogan "Don't trust anyone over 30" said it all. Unfortunately for them, the power and independence of youth culture has intensified, while they themselves have entered middle age and became "over 30."

A crucial difference between today's youth and the young people 30 years ago is that they now are perceived as having more disposable income. Popular wisdom says that advertising executives aim for the 18-34 age group because without children, mortgages, or other financial obligations, young adults have more money to spend on entertainment. Most of today's popular movies are being made for people in their teens and twenties; the same applies to television shows and clothing designs. The consumer world no longer belongs to the Baby Boomers. In film and television, we often see the story of the young and talented newbie replacing the more experienced—yet more expensive—senior executive. Many people over 50 are overwhelmed by a business and social culture that does not value age and wisdom, and psychologists say that feeling useful and valued is a key component to happiness. Imagine being raised in an age that favors the elderly over youth, challenging that ideal, and then growing old in a world that focuses on young people and dismisses seniors as excess baggage. As a result, they never had the chance to be celebrated by society.

Today, parents of teens and young adults are trying to figure out how best to support their children as they move out into a world that bears little resemblance to that of their own youth. The established rules of working, socializing, and dating were destroyed in the 1970s and 1980s; society has yet to come up with firm replacements. Both teens and parents struggle with the new world order, and they do so with entirely different premises. Mead likened the generation gap to an Englishman and an American conversing. On the surface, it seems like they speak the same language, but as words and phrases have entirely different connotations, they are in fact speaking two separate languages. Once they realize that, they can clarify their opinions and communicate effectively. Mead's assertion that "Today, elders can no longer present with certainty moral imperatives to the young" is as true for the Baby Boomers as it was for their parents, which makes negotiating a pre-figurative culture as an aging adult just as daunting as it is growing up in one.

## Small-Town Life in the Midwest

"In San Francisco I kept checking to see if part of the paper was missing, the part that had anything to do with me. You'd think that news is news but the news out there didn't seem to have much to do with my life."

—Billy's Dad, *Iron Kisses*

Billy's Dad's reaction to the San Francisco newspaper is illustrative of the world in which Billy's parents live, a small town somewhere in the Midwest. The family's distinct cultural identity shapes their story. Midwestern states are stereotypically referred to as "the flyover states" between the two coasts. The region is sometimes called "the rust belt" because manufacturing industries have moved overseas in search of cheaper labor, leaving some communities with no source of income as factories and equipment lay idle.

Since the region is filled with farmers, the weather is constantly monitored, and "weather talk is richly nuanced and endlessly varied." The prosperity of farms and families depends upon the right combination of rain, sunshine, heat, and cold, and the climate can be unforgiving. After living in Illinois for thirty years, author Dan Guillory wrote, "I have experienced drought, flood, tornado, blizzard, ice storm, and earthquake, each one several times. We've experienced 110 degrees Fahrenheit in high summer and 25 below in the dead of winter."

Like the rest of the country, much about the Midwest has changed rapidly in the past few decades. The economic structure of the region was undermined during the 1980s and the 1990s, when corporate giants closed numerous factories, stripping the Midwest of well-paying jobs. Even more devastating was an alarming reduction of the number of family farms, as huge tracts of land owned by corporations replaced scattered farmhouses. Guillory identifies the disappearance of family farms as "the single biggest blow to Midwestern culture and identity, because the farm is the physical and psychological seat of the [Midwest's] defining values, like the family, the work ethic, the land itself, and a certain kind of stoicism."

While these devastating economic trends threaten rural Midwestern culture, the rhythm of life largely remains the same. If you visit a small town in Indiana or Kansas today, you may find that some details of life have barely changed for decades. Tornado sirens sound at noon to tell farmers that it is time for lunch. Work on a farm stops at sundown, since there's not much to do in the fields after dark. Dinner is served much earlier than it is in metropolitan areas. In the country, dinner is at five o'clock. As a whole, the rural Midwest is in synch with the earth. The sun determines working hours, and prosperity is tied to rain and sunshine as much as it is tied to the Dow Jones Average. Residents of small towns follow the farmers' habits. There is no reason to keep a restaurant open past seven when everyone eats at five. If factories close or corporate farms put family farmers out of business, the towns dry up.

The vast majority of Midwesterners are descended from German, Scandinavian, and Irish immigrants, who arrived in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and settled in these under-populated farming and industrial areas. Before World War I, there were some places where German was spoken more than English. During that war against Germany, the German immigrant population found itself under deep suspicion. They were forbidden to teach their language in schools, and a few

men were actually lynched. It is not surprising that under such conditions, people focused inwardly on themselves and became a closed community. Today, there is a growing African American and Latino population in the region's big cities, but rural areas are not racially diverse, and may seem to have changed very little in the past half-century.

In such insular communities in which the greatest diversity might be between German Catholics and Norwegian Lutherans, there is often little tolerance for differences simply because people are unused to dealing with them. Slight religious differences are handled as a matter of course. While they might silently look down on each other, Protestants and Catholics have found ways to live side by side without too much conflict. The differences manifest themselves mostly in the town cemetery, which is often divided between sanctified ground for Catholics and unsanctified ground for Protestants. Families with members in both denominations are buried near the line between the two. For the most part, non-Christian religious communities, such as Jews and Muslims, congregate in the region's cities, and generally these urban environments are much friendlier to diversity of all kinds.

Non-fiction writer Ben Alvey grew up in a small Midwestern town knowing that he was gay, but did not come out until college. In junior high, Alvey was blackmailed when a bully found out about his touching another boy in a "more than friendly way." In high school, he tried to learn more about "his people," but in the pre-Internet era, there was absolutely no information on the subject anywhere nearby, except for one gay film in the video store. Gay culture is more visible on the coasts and in big cities. Nobody talked about homosexuality in Alvey's hometown; there were certainly no gay pride parades or student organizations. Other kids called him a "fag" because he was effeminate, not because they thought he was gay. There was a sense that such things did not exist in that world; people who deviated from the norm lived in the cities, not in tiny Midwestern towns. That is one reason why, in *Iron Kisses*, few people ask Billy's parents how he's doing, and that same attitude may be one reason why his parents do not tell anyone why they are going to San Francisco. It is clear that most of the town knows that Billy will never marry a woman, but no one talks about it; he is seen as an anomaly, and the subject is strictly taboo.

Barbara and Billy grew up in the kind of insular community in which everyone seems the same, and it shapes the way that they deal with the surprises life throws at them. Billy tries to be perfect to make up for being gay. Barbara tries her hardest to distinguish herself from everyone else. Billy, the anomaly, moves to San Francisco, a place widely known for its tolerance of open homosexuality. That arrangement is best for everyone; no matter how perfect Billy tries to be, there would seem to be no place for him in his hometown. Writer Garrison Keillor has said that despite changing attitudes in the urban areas of the Midwest, rural attitudes have changed little: "Culture isn't decor, it's what you know before you're twelve." The rural Midwest evolves slowly, following old customs and cherishing its roots.



## The Quest for Gay Rights

When comedian Ellen DeGeneres's character "came out" as a lesbian on national television in 1997, the actress revealed to the nation something she had known herself for nearly 20 years. The popularity of her show paved the way for "Will & Grace," "Sex and the City," and "Six Feet Under," all television series which addressed gay relationships in one way or another. The trend continued in 2003 with "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," a gay makeover show for straight men, and in 2005 with the award-winning film adaptation of Annie Proulx's short story "Brokeback Mountain" about a love affair between two cowboys in the 1960s. Today, gay issues are breaking into mainstream culture as lifestyles kept underground for decades become more accessible to the public. Still, gay men and women struggle for equal rights.

Communities have been trying to come to terms with same-sex relations since the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, and China, throughout the Middle Ages, and into 18th century England, where "molly houses" (the equivalent of today's gay bars) were popular. The rise to dominance of Christianity around 1300 and the introduction of anti-sodomy laws forced gay subcultures in Europe underground. Along with Jews, Gypsies, and the disabled, as many as 10,000 homosexuals were killed in the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. During the McCarthy Era, as the U.S. government targeted communist infiltration, it began ousting homosexuals seen as "polluting Government office," which left gay men and women at the mercy of police entrapments, mental hospitalization, and anti-gay witch-hunts. In response, despite the shutdown of the Society for Human Rights founded by Henry Garber in 1924, the Mattachine Society for gay men was founded in 1951, and the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian organization, was founded in 1956. These organizations referred to themselves as "homophiles" and lobbied for the assimilation of gays and lesbians into mainstream society.

The revolutionary culture of the 1960s and 1970s brought about a dramatic change in attitudes toward human sexuality. Feminists, gays, and lesbians, greatly influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, began emphatically demanding acceptance. Policy makers, however, ignored lesbians and gays, and newspapers were reluctant to focus on gay pride. In retaliation, gays and lesbians lobbied for laws against discrimination by picketing outside government agencies and demonstrating against police harassment. As hostile tensions continued, the "Gay is good" motto inspired thriving gay communities by promoting an openly gay market for newspapers, magazines, and events.

A *Gay Manifesto*, one of the first influential documents of gay liberation, was written by Carl Whitman in 1969. The manifesto, printed by a leftist underground press, highlighted the fundamental liberation topics of sexual orientation, feminism, gender roles, oppression, political activism, community, and coalition. Later that year, one of Greenwich Village's most popular gay bars, the Stonewall Inn, was raided by the New York City police, who had routinely harassed patrons there. The police arrested individuals lacking identification and those dressed as "drag queens." Outside the bar, the police were unexpectedly met by angry protestors. Despite 13 arrests, the crowd increased and persisted for six days, during which protestors demanded equal rights. The Stonewall Riots became a rallying point for gay liberation and provoked the establishment of the Gay Liberation Front. As the *Village Voice* observed, these individuals

“coming out of hiding to celebrate their sexuality” would challenge institutions of family, monogamy, marriage, and gender.

Since 1970, gays and lesbians have steadfastly lobbied for inclusion in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres, including the right to marry. In the early 1970s in Minnesota, Kentucky, and Washington, the first court rulings were passed against same-sex marriage. Harvey Milk was one of the gay liberation movement's national figures and San Francisco's first publicly gay elected official; his speech at San Francisco's first gay pride march provoked lesbians and gays to “make a commitment to fight for themselves, their freedom, and their country.” Milk was shot to death in 1978, the same year that a San Francisco artist designed the Rainbow Flag to establish a community symbol representing hope.

Gay rights were not universally acknowledged, and social conservatives condemned these worldwide cultural and political changes and protested official recognition of gay civil rights, because to them, gay and lesbian communities appeared to threaten America's traditions. Anita Bryant headed the first official Christian anti-gay movement in the 1970s. The organization, called Save Our Children, campaigned to eliminate gay rights. Many of those responsible for establishing anti-gay organizations also launched anti-feminist, anti-abortion, and anti-New Left organizations.

In response to anti-gay actions, the gay and lesbian community rebelled with sit-ins and other protests. But despite their efforts, gay sex remained illegal in all states except Illinois and Connecticut in 1970. A decade later, with growing numbers fighting for emancipation, nearly half of the states had repealed their anti-sodomy laws. Although some federal and state laws still denied protection to gays and lesbians, antidiscrimination statutes were widely passed and bans on employment were lifted.

When the Democratic Party began to promote gay rights in 1980, gay and lesbian subculture literally “came out” from the underground. However, with the advent of the AIDS epidemic, the gay liberation movement was presented with a new challenge. Known early on as the “Gay Related Immune Deficiency Syndrome” and “gay cancer,” the disease thwarted the movement, and the public perception of homosexual identity was reduced to sexual acts. The virus redirected gay liberation toward government and state medical rights. As a result, New York passed its first gay civil rights bill in 1986. The fight against AIDS eventually served to strengthen the cause of homosexual liberation, as it portrayed homosexuals as a community of strong-willed and caring human beings.

During the 1990s, a decade characterized by swelling gay pride celebrations, bisexuals and transgender individuals sought incorporation into gay and lesbian rights organizations and gay pride marches. The issue of gay marriage reappeared in 1993 when the state of Hawaii ruled that denying same-sex marriage violated its constitution. Shortly thereafter, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), in 1996. DOMA established marriage on the federal level as a “union between one man and one woman,” and held that same-sex marriages legalized by some state constitutions would not be recognized by all states. That same year, Hawaii granted same-sex marriage licenses, but a state amendment nullified the ruling in 1998. Two tragedies occurred within the gay community following the verdict: the brutal murders of Matthew Shepard, a student at the University of Wyoming, and Billy Jack Gaither, a closeted factory

worker in Sylacauga, Alabama. These murders garnered worldwide attention and intensified the struggle against discrimination and violence.

The watershed event for gay marriage occurred in 2000 when Vermont legalized civil unions, granting an alternative to same-sex couples for state marriage benefits. Over the next three years, the Netherlands and Belgium recognized same-sex marriage, as did Massachusetts, which became the first state to legally offer same-sex marriage licenses in 2004. Despite state and federal rulings, officials in San Francisco, New Mexico, Oregon, New Jersey, and New York also began granting same sex marriage licenses which were soon revoked by the Supreme Court. Shortly thereafter, President George W. Bush championed an amendment to the constitution banning same-sex marriage nationwide, which was defeated by Congress. In 2005, Spain and Canada recognized same-sex marriage, and California and Connecticut granted state marriage benefits through civil unions. Since then, 18 states have passed constitutional amendments denying recognition of same-sex marriages; an attempt to pass such an amendment in Indiana failed in 2007.

Same-sex marriages still remain unrecognized federally, leaving same-sex couples without the complete legal benefits of marriage such as tax benefits, hospital visitation rights, access to deceased spouses' pension plans and wills, and so on. In her book *Same-Sex Marriage: The Cultural Politics of Love*, Kathleen E. Hull writes that those legislators who support same-sex marriage consider it a matter of equal rights, justice, and nondiscrimination; they see opposition as an act of bigotry and prejudice, comparing it to other human oppressions. Those who reject same-sex marriage do so on the basis of majority rule, claiming it is not a matter of civil rights. Some say homosexuality is a lifestyle choice, some argue against on religious grounds, and others fear it would threaten and dismantle marriage traditions.

Today, as the struggle for and against gay marriage goes on, gay and lesbian communities still strive for equal rights. In a world where gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals are accepted more than ever before, gay rights on the political and religious fronts still have a long way to go. But as the *New York Times* noted on the day gay marriage was legalized in Massachusetts, "we have taken a step towards making homosexuality a non-issue; to making gay citizens merely citizens."

## Same-Sex Marriage in San Francisco

On February 12, 2004, 83-year-old Del Martin and 79-year-old Phyllis Lyon became the first same-sex couple to be granted a marriage license in the city of San Francisco. The two women, who had been partners for 51 years, were veteran gay rights activists and had started the first national organization for lesbians in 1955. Theirs was the first of nearly 4,000 such marriages to take place in San Francisco between February 12 and March 11 of that year, after Mayor Gavin Newsom's legalization of same-sex marriage. The California constitution, Newsom reasoned, prohibited the discrimination of any person or group, and it was therefore his duty as a city official to grant same-sex couples the same rights as other citizens, despite a 2001 statewide ban on same-sex marriage in California.

Mayor Newsom's action caused national controversy. Conservative religious groups immediately called for a restraining order to stop the weddings because they felt they threatened the sanctity of marriage. Others countered that divorce and domestic violence were greater threats to the institution of marriage. The California attorney general stated that the mayor had violated his jurisdiction by taking it upon himself to decide whether a state law was constitutional; he could have gone through due process to try and change the law, but instead his actions violated another article of the California constitution. The California Supreme Court took up the case and suspended the weddings until a verdict could be reached. Six months later, the court decided that the mayor's actions should be dismissed as illegal. As a result, all records of the weddings were erased, and all the marriage licenses were declared null and void.

Though conservative politicians used this incident to demonstrate the need for an amendment banning same-sex marriage, and though some liberal groups cited it as an example of blatant government discrimination, other same-sex marriage advocates directed harsh criticism at Mayor Newsom. They argued that the mayor should have known that these marriages would not hold up when challenged in court, and allowing so many couples to go through the process was irresponsible. The fact that the marriage licenses contained disclaimers regarding the legal validity of the marriage seems to prove that San Francisco officials were at least aware of the possible backlash. Because of the futile end to the incident, one gay U.S. Representative called the weddings "a symbolic point" that actually hurt the struggle for same-sex marriage rights. The mayor maintained that his actions came out of his belief that "It's wrong to deny tens of millions of American the same rights and privileges" that heterosexual couples are allowed.

## Family Structure through the Ages

As traditional definitions of family are challenged by societal changes, many people believe that the family unit is breaking down. Those who oppose gay marriage declare that a family consists of one man, one woman, and their children. Deviations from that ideal—same-sex parents, unmarried cohabitation between heterosexual couples, single-parent households—do not qualify. The combination of husband, wife, and children is what social historian Lawrence Stone calls the “closed domesticated nuclear family,” and it is only about two hundred years old. A modern closed nuclear family is more often found in the middle and upper classes than in the poorer and working classes, who rely more heavily on a larger network of relatives and friends to survive.

Family structure has been in flux throughout Western history. Beginning in the Middle Ages after the fall of Rome in 476 C.E., the Catholic Church became the main social power in Europe and depicted marriage as the only religiously acceptable option for individuals who did not live a chaste life in devotion to Christ. St. Paul regarded virginity as the ideal state, but sanctioned marriage as it was the only way to produce legitimate children. In a secular sense, marriage was a business arrangement. Parents of sons offered family name, reputation, and respectability. Parents of daughters offered a dowry: money, goods, or land. Some parents sent their daughters to nunneries to avoid the expense. During this period, the family structure followed an “open lineage” pattern in which kin (cousins, aunts, uncles, in-laws, and so on) were included in the family unit. People relied on the kinship system for survival. A household typically included the biological family, which was made up of a husband, a wife, and their children. In addition there were kin related to the husband or wife, and unrelated people such as servants and apprentices. Everyone in the household pooled resources and contributed to the family coffers, which were controlled by the husband.

This system dominated Europe for over eight hundred years, until the start of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Martin Luther, who launched the Reformation in 1517 when he nailed his famous *95 Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, argued that members of the clergy should be allowed to wed. According to him, a wife was necessary, to prevent men from “living in sin” (having sex outside of marriage) and also to maintain their households. A flood of nuns and priests followed his advice and found spouses in the new religion. A few decades later, King Henry VIII closed all of England’s monasteries and nunneries after he severed ties with Rome, and over the years, the Continental powers gradually followed suit. Suddenly, the cloistered alternative to marriage ceased to exist. The biological family became the primary organization unit in Western culture. Protestant churches portrayed matrimony as a desirable and “holy” state, and they added a third reason for the institution of marriage: love between spouses.

While this new system meant that most people were expected to marry, the closed nuclear family did not form overnight. Households still included servants, apprentices, and closer kin, such as an aging parent or unmarried sister. Stone calls this the “restricted patriarchal nuclear family,” and economic matters determined its structure; in a highly agrarian economy, families required several adults to make ends meet. Numerous sermons and conduct books of that era

portrayed the husband as the unquestioned head of the household; however, the prevalence of such literature suggests that this was not always the case. The family unit was extremely unstable because of high mortality rates. It was not uncommon for a person to have three or four spouses in his or her lifetime. Stone calls death an “early escape hatch” for unhappy marriages.

The Industrial Revolution and urbanization shaped the closed nuclear family as we know it today: a husband, a wife, and their children. Men became the primary wage earners, and middle-class women stayed home while children attended school. Extended family became a burden upon the household because they were no longer contributing to the family income. However, the nuclear structure only worked for wealthier classes. Working-class families still relied on a wider kinship system that allowed them to pool resources to get by. In the book *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich observes that kinship systems in which extended family and nonrelatives live in the same household still exist today because housing is so expensive. Our own ideal of a nuclear family does not work for *all* members of society, and never has.

Those who worry about the decline of the nuclear family in the 20th century point to vastly increased cohabitation, illegitimacy, divorce, and homosexual unions as the greatest threats to the institution of marriage. Currently, one in two marriages ends in divorce. The number of unmarried couples living together increased from under 500,000 in 1960 to 5.5 million in 2000. Fewer people choose to tie the knot and opt for cohabitation as an alternative. Although the exaltation of marriage was a product of revolutionary religious ideas in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the establishment of marriage as a primary option for the majority of society and the formation of the closed nuclear family was the result of economic and practical influences. Family structures will likely continue to adapt according to changes in the economy and religious doctrine, just as they have for thousands of years.

## Marriage in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

On the surface, marriage may appear to be a straightforward and comprehensible act: two people committing themselves to one another “before family, friends, and God.” However, the history of secular and nonsecular marriage in early societies alone demonstrates that there are more forces in the equation than simple commitment. As the divorce rate rises to nearly 50 percent in the United States, the institution of marriage faces criticism and doubt as more and more people opt out and explore different ways to show their commitment. Nevertheless, more people than not are still walking down the aisle, and there are countless gay and lesbian couples fighting for their right to marriage, so perhaps it is worth asking, “Why say ‘I do’?”

Briefly speaking, the origins of marriage provide the simplest answer to our question: procreation. Much as in the animal kingdom, our early ancestors “married” one another in order to continue the growth of the population. Early “marriage” was most likely merely the contract and commitment of parentage: once offspring were produced, the male was obligated to provide food and shelter while the female was obligated to rear the progeny. Though far more complicated today, this notion continues to drive many couples, both hetero- and homosexual, to the altar.

Society’s notion of procreation and family has been ruled for centuries by the idea that it must happen within the confines of a marriage, and so many couples get married in order to start (or in some cases legitimize) their new family. Records from ancient cultures in Greece, Egypt, and China document the institutionalization of marriage specifically as a benefit to the offspring of the society. By introducing binding marriages that kept parents together, more children were guaranteed protection, support, and the knowledge of who their mother and father were. The idea that procreation can only happen within a marriage has broken down a great deal over time, particularly since the sexual revolution that began in the 1960s. Nevertheless, it still remains important to many people, often because of their religious beliefs, that sex should only happen after marriage, regardless of whether children are in the plan or not.

Religious beliefs and traditions are the next most common reason people get married. In many religions, marriage is part of the core beliefs of how an individual becomes closer to God. For example, in the Catholic faith, marriage is one of the seven sacraments that can be fulfilled as one’s duty to the church. Even when nonreligious people choose to marry, their weddings are often still performed in churches and with the same wedding vows from the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England: “I take thee to be my wedded wife (or husband), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.”

The romantic notion of love, which many would like to believe is the primary reason couples consider marriage, did not become a factor until comparatively recently. For many centuries, marriages were negotiated for political and business reasons, and not by the betrothed but by their elders. There is a debate as to when love was finally allowed to propel marriage, but it probably began to take hold in the middle classes in the mid- to late-1700s in the United States. Since then, love, or perhaps the idea of love, has brought many people together, and, some would argue, has also torn them apart again. Many critics of the state of marriage today believe

that using love as the only guide to the altar has caused the divorce rate to grow, because love is subjective and ephemeral. One critic, William J. Bennett, a conservative writer about family issues, argues, "In deciding to marry, we moderns place the emphasis on voluntary and reciprocal affection, on emotional fulfillment, friendship and companionship.... Marriage is now viewed not as a covenant but simply as a contract, based on self-interest, convenience, and individual self-fulfillment."

The shift from covenant to contract is said to be the primary reason that the divorce rate has reached nearly 50 percent. Couples are said to be marrying on a whim and divorcing just as easily when they find their marriage less than they desired. However, some scholars say that the rising divorce rate is more indicative of the shift over the last 50 years toward marriage being a more communicative and equal venture. Now that divorce is less stigmatized, couples are finding it easier to leave their unhealthy or unfulfilling relationships in search of something better.

While many couples are finding the freedom to end their marriages, there is a portion of the population begging to be part of the club. Same-sex couples want to get married for many of the same reasons that heterosexual couples do: love, religion, starting a family. However, there are also legal benefits to marriage that many heterosexual couples take for granted. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG) uses the phrase *heterosexual privilege* to describe these perks, which include employee benefit-plan coverage (health insurance, bereavement leave, pension plans), joint income-tax filing, Social Security survivor benefits, child-custody rights, reduced auto and homeowners' insurance rates, and, as illustrated in *Iron Kisses*, hospital visitation and information rights. As the debate over gay marriage continues to be heated and rarely resolved, there are now companies, cities, and states that recognize committed homosexual couples who go through civil union ceremonies or who file for "domestic partnership" status. Unfortunately, this recognition is not universal and is still not the same as being welcomed into the mainstream married world.

On the other hand, there are couples, both hetero- and homosexual, who do not even consider marriage. In the last 25 years, there has been a significant rise in long-term cohabitation and civil unions that do not involve a license or wedding chapel; couples across the country are reviving old traditions and finding new reasons and ways to be joined in "holy matrimony." *Iron Kisses* illustrates the fluctuation and change of traditional American marriages. While their parents continue their marriage in comfortable unity, Barbara struggles with divorce, and Billy wishes his love for a man could be legally and socially recognized by the world. These changing tides surrounding society's views of and involvement in marriage are at the heart of all of the debates over marriage for hetero- and homosexual couples alike. As in any society, entering uncharted territory makes many people uneasy, and the most logical solutions seem suspicious. Fortunately, though the continuing political debate depersonalizes the issues, plays like *Iron Kisses* remind us that people, not politicians, are struggling to make these rules work for themselves and their families.



## Glossary

**Black sheep:** A phrase most likely originating from the 18th century proverb “there’s a black sheep in every flock,” which refers to a member of a family or social group considered different.

**Captain Kangaroo:** Bob Keeshan starred as Captain Kangaroo on the longest-running children’s TV show of all time (1955-1984).

**Civil union:** A legal contract similar to marriage, which became legal in the state of Vermont in 2000, offering same-sex partners some of the benefits of married couples. Also known as civil partnership, registered partnership, domestic partnership, life partnership, or stable union, among other terms, a civil union is not recognized by the federal government and states are not required to recognize them. Rights and status vary in the countries and states in which they have gained recognition.

**Elton John:** (b. 1947) One of the most successful English solo artists in pop music history; he came out to the media in 1989. He established one of the world’s leading non-profit AIDS organizations in 1992. Sir Elton was united with his partner, David Furnish, as a result of the new civil partnership legislation in England in 2005.

**Impala:** A model of Chevrolet which sold over a million units in 1965 and for a time was America’s best-selling automobile.

**John Denver:** (1943-1997) Popular folk singer-songwriter in the 1970s famous for songs such as “Rocky Mountain High” and “Leaving on a Jet Plane” as well as his democratic political activism and humanitarian work.

**Julia Child:** (1912-2004) American celebrity chef and co-founder of the American Institute of Wine & Food who hosted the popular cooking show “The French Chef” on PBS. Her many cookbooks and television shows popularized French cuisine in America.

**Rock Hudson:** (1925-1985) Silver screen star of the 1950s and 1960s (*Magnificent Obsession*, *Giant*, *Pillow Talk*). Tall, dark, and handsome, an all-American icon of heterosexuality during his acting career, he was secretly a closeted homosexual. His AIDS-related death in 1985 brought worldwide attention to the AIDS virus.

**Marriage:** A mutually contracted partnership often restricted to one person of each gender and recognized socially, religiously, or legally. A marriage requires the authorization of a legal document called a marriage license which can be obtained for a small fee from the state in which the marriage is to take place.

**Savings bond:** A nontransferable, tax-exempt federal savings security issued by the U.S. Department of Treasury in denominations of \$50 to \$10,000 that obligates the federal government to repay the principal balance with interest at the time of maturity.

**Stretch marks:** Stripes or lines called *striae* found on the skin surrounding the breasts, abdomen, and hips that are often the result of skin stretching during pregnancy.

**Valley of the Dolls:** Written in 1966 by Jacqueline Susann, it was one of the first romance novels by a female author to achieve worldwide commercial success. The novel was adapted into a film in 1967.

## Discussion Questions

What do the words “iron kisses” mean to you? What images do they evoke, and how does this affect your understanding of the relationships in the play?

How does the choice to have Billy and Barbara each play their both of their parents contribute to the revelation of family dynamics? What does it tell us about the relationship between each child and their parents?

In what ways have people of Billy and Barbara’s parents’ generation been disconnected from the modern world? How have the social changes of the last thirty years influenced their relationships with their children?

Why is the right to “marriage,” not just “civil unions,” so important to gay rights activists?

Why is the concept of marriage such a divisive issue today?

In what ways has Billy and Barbara’s relationship as siblings changed as they grow older? What factors affect the “grown-up” relationship between people who have known each other for their entire lives?

How does Billy and Barbara’s small Midwestern hometown affect the lives of both them and their parents?

Why do some parents of children who come out blame themselves for their children’s homosexuality? What impact does this assumption have on their children’s coming out process?

What is the symbolic importance of Billy’s and Barbara’s hope chests? How do the objects and mementos you treasure differ from those your parents and grandparents treasure?

Why do family members keep secrets from one another? How do these secrets shape the family dynamics? Are there ever times when hiding things from family members is a good idea?

How does the “direct address” style of storytelling used in the play affect your response to the story? How would *Iron Kisses* change if it were cast with different actors playing each of the four roles?

How do the lighting, music, and multi-media elements of the production further the storytelling? Did these design elements focus your attention on particular aspects of the play? If you were designing *Iron Kisses*, what would you do differently?

How does your family deal with conflict? How do differences between generations affect personal viewpoints toward challenging issues? How do such ideological differences affect day-to-day family relationships?

Billy and Barbara's parents live in a small Midwestern town to which they are closely connected, and they feel like outsiders when they travel to the West Coast. Discuss the ways in which a person's hometown and home state affects his or her identity. How does being from Indiana shape who you are?

## Writing Projects

Think about a time when you kept a secret from a family member or someone else close to you. Write a short monologue about what it was like to keep the secret and what happened when it was revealed (if you did reveal it). How did keeping the secret affect your relationship with that person?

The idea for Billy's childhood self-portrait in the play came from an actual child's drawing a parent once showed playwright James Still. Take a small seed of an idea—an overheard remark, a brief moment, a tiny fragment of experience—and use it as the inspiration for a short story or monologue.

Think of an experience from your childhood. Write a monologue about this incident from one or both of your parents' point of view.

Go online to our website [www.irtlive.com](http://www.irtlive.com) and write a review of *Iron Kisses*. A well-rounded review includes your opinion of the theatrical aspects—scenery, lights, costumes, sound, direction, acting—as well as your impressions of the script and the impact the story and/or themes and the overall production had on you. How did you feel at the end of the play? Did you notice the reactions of the audience as a whole? Would you recommend this play to others? Why or why not?

## Activities

Research the history of the gay rights movement. In what ways does this campaign parallel the Civil Rights or feminist movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s? Are the issues at stake the same or different? What are the future battles to be fought in any of these areas?

Playwright James Still has said that “we inevitably become our parents,” and much of the action in *Iron Kisses* involves parent-child relationships. Interview one of your parents about the issues they and their parents struggled over. Are their adolescent disputes the same or different from those you are experiencing?

Stage a debate on the question of whether same-sex marriages should be legalized. Research the arguments for and against legalizing gay marriage. Split into two groups with one group arguing in favor of same-sex marriage and the other group arguing that marriage should be limited to “one man and one woman” only.

At a time in which the divorce rate has risen to nearly 50 percent and many couples are seeking alternatives to getting married, why is marriage such an important issue for gay and straight people alike? As a group, discuss the reasons why we choose to get married (or divorced) and how we choose our partners. What factors influenced Billy’s and Barbara’s decisions?

Divide into groups of two and think of a short scene from your everyday life. Practice telling the story together, and then have each person tell it from his or her specific point of view. Share both stories with the class and discuss the ways in which the two different perspectives change the story.

The character of Barbara in the play is in the process of a divorce.. What are her options and challenges as a single mother, economically and socially? How are the options and challenges different for a single father? How are they the same? How are these situations different than they have been for previous generations?

## Create a Hope Chest

Traditionally, hope chests were handcrafted wooden boxes made from cedar—a wood capable of preserving cloth—and elaborately decorated with carvings and paintings. Hope chests stored clothing, linen, silver, and other valuable items for a woman to carry with her to her new home when she married.

Until the late 18th century, arranged marriages were routine. The joining of estates aided the economic and social survival of each family. It was customary for the groom's family to offer wealth and power in the form of land, money, and business in exchange for his bride. In turn, the bride's family was responsible for providing the new household with the necessary furnishings, dishware, and linens. Women were taught to sew, knit, crochet, and embroider, which increased their value as potential brides. While awaiting an engagement, they created delicately handcrafted lingerie, linens, towels, and the like, which were placed in the hope chest that would accompany them to their future households.

Passed down from mother to daughter for generations, hope chests have become somewhat of a dying custom, but they have been modified and modernized in recent years, and the tradition continues to thrive in small pockets throughout the world.

### Making Your Hope Chest

Gather your materials:

- Shoebox, cigar box, or any small, sturdy container

- Paint, colored pencils, markers, or crayons

- Stencils, fabric, glitter, pictures, anything you'd like to use to decorate your hope chest

- Objects to go inside your hope chest

You can fill your hope chest with any objects, pictures, or even poems and meaningful words that are special to you. If you like, fill your chest with things that you think would help you during transitions in life such as moving away from home or going to college. You could also make a hope chest for a younger relative (brother, sister, cousin, niece, nephew) and fill it with things that you think will be meaningful to them as they grow.

Alternate approach: You can also make a hope chest for your class to give to the class that will follow yours next year. Have everyone pick an object that he or she thinks will be helpful for the students coming after you, and put all of these objects into a decorated container that you can entrust to your teacher.

## Books

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## Websites

### **<http://www.indypflag.org>**

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons, their families and friends through Support, to encourage a healthy family and community perspective, Education, to enlighten the public, and Advocacy, to secure equal civil and human rights. PFLAG provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

### **<http://www.indianayouthgroup.org>**

Indiana Youth Group responds to the needs of self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning youth. IYG programs focus on 5 primary areas: Education and career development, character and leadership development, personal development, social development, and information and referral. IYG tries to improve the lives of youth using research-based and "best practice" programs. These include weekly support meetings helping those dealing with coming out, either to themselves or to their families and friends. Speakers from diverse fields encourage youth members to explore a variety of educational and vocational experiences, as well as educate members on risk behaviors and positive decision-making skills. Program topics range from domestic violence, substance abuse and suicide prevention to arts and crafts, and dating skills. Overall the goal is a fun program that offers a message and an enjoyable social opportunity for all youth.

### **<http://www.divorceabc.com/>**

The goal of the National Family Resiliency Center, Inc., is to foster healthy relationships in all families, regardless of composition, through individual, couple, family, parent, co-parent, pre-marital, marital, separation, and blended family counseling.