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Fun Home: Revelation of Reality and Relationships Through Grief

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Recommended Citation

Tesori, Jeanine. Fun Home. Concord Theatricals, 2015. Thomas, James. Script Analysis. Sixth ed., Routledge, 2020.

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Play Analysis

14 December 2021

Fun Home: Revelation of Reality and Relationships Through Grief

Fun Home is a musical by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori, based on the graphic novels by Alison Bechdel. It tells the story of Alison as an adult looking back at her life with her father, trying to understand him. She grew up in a funeral home adoring her father, and went off to college only to realize that she was a lesbian. She then found out that her father was also gay, only weeks before he killed himself. The musical follows Alison as an adult, Alison as a child, and Alison as a young adult as she tries to piece together her and her father's relationship through cartoons and memories. *Fun Home* is a musical about reality and relationships, and how we try to control the memory of those we lose.

Action Analysis

Chain of External Events:

- 1 Bruce **reveals** his treasures
- 2 Mrs. Bochner **arrives**
- 3 Bruce **encourages** Medium Alison
- 4 Bruce **reveals** deaths/a dead body to Small Alison
- 5 Joan **invites** Medium Alison in
- 6 Roy **arrives**
- 7 Roy **accepts** the sherry
- 8 Medium Alison **comes out** to Joan

- 9 Bruce **stops** Small Alison
- 10 Joan **kisses** Medium Alison
- 11 Bruce **dismissed** Small Alison
- 12 Bruce **picks up** Mark
- 13 Medium Alison **petitions** to her parents to respond
- 14 Bruce **reveals** he's seeing a Psychiatrist
- 15 Bruce **fights** with Helen
- 16 Bruce **leaves**
- 17 Bruce **responds** to Medium Alison
- 18 Small Alison **witnesses** a butch lesbian
- 19 Helen **reveals** that Bruce is gay
- 20 Joan **offers** support (a joint)
- 21 Bruce **spirals**
- 22 Helen **confides** in Medium Alison
- 23 Bruce **confesses** to Alison
- 24 Bruce **kills** himself
- 25 Alison **captions** her relationship with her father

Reviewing the Facts:

WHO Small Alison, Medium Alison, and Alison, as well as her parents and siblings, and college girlfriend.

WHAT Alison looks back on objects from her childhood and young adulthood to better understand her father. She relives childhood moments with new understandings, and coming out to her parents. She relives her father coming out to her, and his subsequent suicide.

WHEN The early 70s (Small Alison), the late 70s (Medium Alison), and the early 2000s (Alison).

WHERE Rural Pennsylvania.

WHY Alison needs to draw about her father.

HOW Alison relives moments with her father through objects and photographs.

WHAT FOR To understand the truth about her father.

Seed: Control. A struggle for control is present throughout the musical between Alison and her past, Small and Medium Alison and their identities, and Bruce and his own identity.

Chain of Internal Events:

1 Bruce **reveals** his treasures

Bruce relishes in his control over story

2 Mrs. Bochner **arrives**

Helen frantically tries to give Bruce control

3 Bruce **encourages** Medium Alison

Bruce maintains control over Medium Alison

4 Bruce **reveals** deaths/a dead body to Small Alison

Bruce removes a little bit of control Small Alison thought she had

5 Joan **invites** Medium Alison in

Medium Alison refuses to give up control

6 Roy **arrives**

Helen realizes she is not in control

7 Roy **accepts** the sherry

Bruce loses control, and exerts control over Roy by offering sherry in exchange

for something else

8 Medium Alison **comes out** to Joan

Joan encourages Alison to take control of her life

9 Bruce **stops** Small Alison

Bruce controls Small Alison in order to control himself

10 Joan **kisses** Medium Alison

Medium Alison relinquishes control

11 Bruce **dismissed** Small Alison

Bruce attempts to control Small Alison to make her more like him

12 Bruce **picks up** Mark

Bruce struggles with control over himself, and offers a kid a beer

13 Medium Alison **petitions** to her parents to respond

Medium Alison struggles with her lack of control over her parents' reaction

14 Bruce **reveals** he's seeing a Psychiatrist

Bruce slips out of Helen's control

15 Bruce **fights** with Helen

Bruce and Helen struggle for control

16 Bruce **leaves**

Bruce searches for a way to be in control

17 Bruce **responds** to Medium Alison

Bruce begins to loosen his control over Alison, and over himself

18 Small Alison **witnesses** a butch lesbian

Small Alison realizes the bounds of control she could have in the future

19 Helen **reveals** that Bruce is gay

Helen relinquishes control to Medium Alison

20 Joan **offers** support (a joint)

Joan helps Medium Alison feel in control

21 Bruce **spirals**

Bruce tries and fails to regain control

22 Helen **confides** in Medium Alison

Helen admits she has never been in control, and encouraged Medium Alison to not make the same mistakes

23 Bruce **confesses** to Alison

Alison tries to take control of the memory she is living in

24 Bruce **kills** himself

Bruce exerts ultimate control by killing himself

25 Alison **captions** her relationship with her father

Alison finally lets go of control to see her relationship with her father as it truly was

Three Major Climaxes: The first climax occurs when the family is anticipating the arrival of Mrs. Bochner, the second is when Helen tells Medium Alison that Bruce is gay, and the third major climax is when Bruce kills himself at the end of the musical.

Theme: The damage caused by attempting to hold onto control

Super-Objective: Alison wants to control the memory she has of her father

Through-Action: Alison is transcribing her memory of Bruce

Counter Through-Action: Bruce tries to control Alison to be the best of him and not the worst of him

Fun Home is a musical that does not contain acts or scenes. I analyzed the script to find potential French scenes or natural breaks. I found that there were moments in the stage directions that would dictate “SHIFT” in all capital letters, and switch the focus to a different location in

time or space. I based most of my scene breaks on these moments in the stage directions, as well as a few exits or entrances. In my analysis I found it interesting that Bruce seemed to be the character that was driving most of the scenes internally. Bruce is not the main character of this musical, but I think this indicates the amount of control that he and his memory have over Alison, even as an adult. Additionally, I found that the entire musical for me revolved around a struggle for control. Alison is seeking to control the memory of her father. Even though she says that she wants to know the truth, she is left rattled and grasping at straws when faced with truths about her father near the end of the play, indicating that she was not prepared for the uncomfortable and out of her control truth. Bruce in a different way struggles for control over the two lives he is living; the loving father and husband versus the closeted gay man. He takes this struggle out on Small and Medium Alison at times when he keeps her in a box of femininity, not out of a need for power over her, but a desire to protect her from the same struggle he has.

Score of the Role: Bruce Bechdel

Chain of External and Internal Events:

- 1 Bruce **reveals** his treasures
Bruce relishes in his control over story
- 2 Bruce **anticipates** Mrs. Bochner's arrival
Bruce grasps for control
- 3 Bruce **encourages** Medium Alison
Bruce maintains control over Medium Alison
- 4 Bruce **reveals** deaths/a dead body to Small Alison
Bruce removes a little bit of control Small Alison thought she had
- 6 Bruce **dismisses** his wife
Bruce asserts to Helen that he is in control

- 7 Bruce **offers** Roy some sherry
Bruce loses control, and exerts control over Roy by offering sherry in exchange for something else
- 9 Bruce **stops** Small Alison
Bruce controls Small Alison in order to control himself
- 11 Bruce **dismissed** Small Alison
Bruce attempts to control Small Alison to make her more like him
- 12 Bruce **picks up** Mark
Bruce struggles with control over himself, and offers a kid a beer
- 14 Bruce **reveals** he's seeing a Psychiatrist
Bruce slips out of Helen's control
- 15 Bruce **fighters** with Helen
Bruce and Helen struggle for control
- 16 Bruce **leaves**
Bruce searches for a way to be in control
- 17 Bruce **responds** to Medium Alison
Bruce begins to loosen his control over Alison, and over himself
- 18 Bruce **recognizes** Small Alison
Bruce recognizes the struggle for control in Small Alison
- 19 Bruce **deflects** on the phone
Bruce declines to relinquish control to Medium Alison
- 21 Bruce **spirals**
Bruce tries and fails to regain control
- 22 Bruce **leaves** quickly
Bruce maintains control over the situation by asserting his position then leaving
- 23 Bruce **confesses** to Alison
Bruce gives up a little control, but not all of it

24 Bruce **kills** himself

Bruce exerts ultimate control by killing himself

Reviewing the Facts:

WHO Bruce Bechdel, Alison's father

WHAT Bruce works at the family funeral home, and to fix up houses. He parents his children, including Alison, and struggles to maintain a healthy relationship with his wife and himself as a closeted gay man.

WHEN The early and late 70s, during Alison's childhood and first year of college

WHERE Rural Pennsylvania

WHY Bruce care about his children and his life, and wants to make things better for them. Bruce however also needs to find ways to let out the burning fits of passion inside him.

HOW Bruce tries to control Alison to fit inside a box, while also facilitating her mind to be open and intelligent. He has affairs with men, some of them underage, and throws himself into his home repairs to deal with the lack of control he feels in his life.

Seed: Control. Bruce struggles with controlling his identity and how it doesn't fit in the life he has created. He also struggles to control his children, Alison in particular, to not make the same mistakes he did.

Three Major Climaxes: The first climax occurs when Bruce is anticipating the arrival of Mrs. Bochner, the second climax occurs when Bruce and Helen have a screaming match witnessed by Small Alison, and the final climax occurs when Bruce kills himself.

Super-Objective: Bruce is trying to make Alison's life easy in a way his was not

Through-Action: Bruce tries to control Alison to be the best of him and not the worst of him

Counter Through-Action: Alison (Small and Medium) fights back against Bruce's attempts to control her, and tries to control his memory

When reading through this musical or watching it for the first time, it can be easy to villanize Bruce to an extent. In some scenes he is an abrasive and aggressive husband, and an emotionally volatile person. But when a closer look is taken through the score of the role, you can see that Bruce is scared. His attempts to control Small and Medium Alison to keep them in a box of femininity and ease come from a place of love, and his desire for her life to be easier than his. He struggles to control contrasting realities of his life, and does not want to pass that struggle on to her. But in attempts to control himself, his life, and his daughter, he ends up shutting her out instead of allowing her to witness his lack of control and grow closer to him.

Idea

An idea that persists throughout *Fun Home* is Perceived Reality vs Actual Reality. Thomas cites critic Francis Fergusson who claims that idea "points to the object which the dramatist is trying to show us, and we must in some sense grasp that if we are to understand [their] complex art" (Thomas 135). Throughout the musical, Alison is parsing through her memories to push past her perceived reality and to reach the actual reality of truth surrounding

her father. It is the thought that drives the core of the memory action throughout the text. This idea is also present in other ways beyond Alison's motivation.

The title *Fun Home* is a nod to this very idea. Fun Home is a reference to what the Bechdel children call their family funeral home where they live and their parents work. It is an ironic place for children to grow up playing, and they do make the most of it by staging commercials for their "fun home." As children, they perceive their home as somewhere safe and fun, which is why they refer to it as such. But in reality they live in a funeral home, a place of sadness and death. This dichotomy highlights how separated the Bechdel children are from a semblance of true reality, which might play into why Alison has such a difficult time accepting realities about her father.

The topic of reality is also deeply tied to Alison's and Bruce's respective sexual identities and how they interact with those. Bruce is a closeted gay man who is married to a woman, but continues to have affairs with men. Alison is a lesbian, which she realizes in her first year of college and immediately shares with the world. While Alison is quick to accept and share her reality about her sexuality, Bruce remains secretive about his for years. Helen participates in perpetuating a false reality by pretending that Bruce is a faithful husband, and Bruce does the same. When it is revealed to Medium Alison that her father is gay, the truth of reality rocks her world. That revelation also rocks Bruce's world and possibly contributes to the reasons for his suicide. In addition, as Alison is reliving the events of her past as they truly are and not as her idealized memories, her revelation of realities she was previously blind to are quite shocking for her. All of these revelations are exactly what the author, Alison herself, is trying to convey.

Language and Imagery

An interesting pattern within the language of the musical is Alison's repetition of her captions. Alison as an adult is a cartoon artist, and throughout the story she is sketching photographs and items from her childhood and youth memories and captioning them. In essence, she is captioning the past particularly as it relates to her father. She repeats this phrase often, followed by insights about her father. If she doesn't get it right on the first try she gives it another go. After the first song she captions the moment, "Caption: My dad and I were exactly alike." She shortly follows this with, "Caption: My dad and I were *nothing* alike" (Tesori 12). It creates a structure that is recognizable for the audience. Then when this structure breaks as Alison becomes unable to handle captioning her memories, it gives the audience insight into how Alison is struggling to grasp at the truth.

What is even more interesting about this repetition is that I find it to be very concrete language usage. Alison is repeating statements with the same hard structure over and over again, and often uses definitive language to describe her images instead of feeling or big idea words. We can see a direct contrast between this concrete language from Alison and the type of abstract language that Small and Medium Alison use in her memory. Small Alison sings a song in which she witnesses a butch lesbian for the first time. She sings about how she feels and how she wants and how she doesn't understand those feelings quite yet. It is a song full of ideas that Small Alison cannot feel with her senses, but feels with her heart. Medium Alison has a similar song that she sings after she first has sex with Joan. She sings about her desires and how she doesn't understand how she feels. These songs about these big feelings are a stark contrast to the way that Alison of the present is observing and trying to understand her past feelings. This is another

indication of how Alison is suppressing parts of her past, and reverting to an objective way to process through her father's death.

Application/Conclusion

As a designer, I would hone in on the idea of perceived reality versus actual realities. As the musical goes on and Alison realizes that more is different from how she might remember it, I would use the elements of light to highlight that change. This could be done with a particular color palette being used for certain parts of scenes, say a warm color scheme for the moments when all is well in Alison's memory. It could then shift to a cooler lighting color palette as things start to crack in the family's reality, or in Alison's memory. For example, the moment when Bruce addresses Alison herself and not Medium Alison could contain a sharp shift in lighting color on Bruce and Alison to indicate that something has shifted, and they are now operating in the same reality. Additionally, this lighting separation would serve to keep the past and the present in different lanes for the audience, until they bleed together at the end and the stage becomes a myriad of color.

I would also be interested to play with a sound or scoring that would undertone Bruce's moments with men or fits of passion that would be repeated in a slightly different way during Alison's moments with women. This would link their respective journeys with their sexuality, while highlighting the differences in how they perceive themselves. When playing underneath Bruce's moments, the sound would come off as a little foreboding. But when repeated underneath Alison's moments, it would be light and curious, but have a similar melody and tonality to indicate the connection between the two.

Works Cited

Tesori, Jeanine. *Fun Home*. Concord Theatricals, 2015.

Thomas, James. *Script Analysis*. Sixth ed., Routledge, 2020.