The Sisters Rosensweig
by Wendy Wasserstein
Directed by Nicholas Martin
B.U. Theatre
November 4 - December 4, 2005
# THE SISTERS ROSENSWEIG

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The Sisters Rosensweig
by Wendy Wasserstein
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November 4 – December 4, 2005
One weekend in August 1991, while the Soviet Union is collapsing, Sara Goode's sisters arrive at her London home to celebrate her 54th birthday. Pfeni, 40, a journalist turned travel writer, has just returned from Bombay; Gorgeous, 46, is visiting from Newton, Massachusetts, leading a tour for her Temple Beth El sisterhood. All three Rosensweig sisters have found varying degrees of success in their careers, but their personal lives seem stalled.

Twice-divorced Sara, a successful international banker, has been featured on the cover of Fortune, but she can't stop her teenaged daughter's plans to rush off to join the Lithuanian resistance. “Dr. Gorgeous” hosts a popular radio call-in advice show that might be moving to television. With her Harvard-lawyer husband, beautiful children, and house in the suburbs, she seems to be living the dream her parents had for all three of their daughters. Yet her life is not as perfect as it appears. Even Pfeni is tempted to give up her peripatetic lifestyle as “a wandering Jew” to settle down and raise children with her bisexual theatre-director boyfriend, Geoffrey. She is dissatisfied with her exotic but lightweight travel reviews, and may finally write her serious book on the plight of women in Tajikistan.

As the humor and tension builds, these three sisters struggle to define themselves and their relationship to each other and their faith. When Geoffrey invites his American friend, faux furrier Merv Kant, to join Sara's birthday celebration, circumstances begin to change, perceptions start to shift, and the promise of “hope and rebirth” doesn’t sound as empty as it did before. Over the course of the weekend, the sisters learn that while they may never find that elusive moment of “pure, unadulterated happiness” they are each seeking, there are still other very real possibilities open to them. – MD
Every year I make a New Year’s resolution to get up at 6am every day, go running, write for four hours, learn to speak Italian, have lunch with a friend, and have a meaningful relationship. I’ve done none of that,” says Wendy Wasserstein. Nor has she managed to fulfill her parents’ dream by marrying — or becoming — a doctor or lawyer.

Maybe she hasn’t managed to create her ideal life, but she has done well by most objective standards. A Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning playwright, Wasserstein has been praised for her ability to capture the lives of a generation of women struggling to balance the pressures and possibilities of family, career, life, and art, while maintaining some sense of personal identity. Terrence McNally has said she accomplishes this because “her sly humor is based on acute perception, her passion comes from the gut and her intelligence borders on the Talmudic.” Her early champion and longtime supporter André Bishop puts it more simply: “she had the gift.”

Wendy Wasserstein was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1950, to Morris and Lola Wasserstein. The youngest of their four children, she joined siblings Sandra, Georgette, and Bruce. Her father was a textile manufacturer, her mother a dedicated amateur dancer and perfectionist. Young Wendy attended Yeshiva in Brooklyn where she first realized that she was funny. “An elementary school Falstaff,” she has described herself. From then on, humor would serve her well — as an entrée to social circles, as a defining attribute, and as a coping mechanism for the more painful realities of life.

The Wassersteins moved to Manhattan when Wendy was twelve. The move to the Upper East Side further honed her sharp, wry wit. After graduating from the Calhoun School, she went to Mount Holyoke, because, she has said, “I thought if I went to a Seven Sisters school my parents would leave me alone for the rest of my life.” Instead of meeting a nice Jewish doctor, Wasserstein met playwriting, and began to suspect that the skills of humor she had once used to get out of high school gym class could be a ticket to something more.

For her M.F.A. thesis, Wasserstein wrote a play based on her experience at Mount Holyoke. Uncommon Women and Others, the story of five alumnae who gather several years post-graduation to compare stories and choices, resonated with a generation of young women navigating the world of opportunities newly available to them, and introduced a powerful new voice to the professional theatre. But Wasserstein turned down an opportunity to transfer the play to Broadway when a potential producer suggested she change the ending so that the main character married a doctor after all. Uncommon women don’t compromise.

Her next major plays included Isn’t It Romantic, about a complicated mother-daughter relationship, and The Heidi Chronicles, the story of one woman's
growth from idealistic naïf to adult, Ph.D., and mother. For this play, Wasserstein was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award — she was the first woman to win both awards for the same play. Questions of identity, history, and purpose continue to run through her subsequent plays, which include *The Sisters Rosensweig*, *American Daughter*, and *Old Money*. Her most recent play, *Third*, is scheduled to open in New York in the fall of 2005. Although she still hasn't married a lawyer, Wasserstein has given Morris and Lola another granddaughter. Wendy and Lucy Jane live in New York.

More than twenty years ago, as *Isn't It Romantic* was opening in New York, Wasserstein was quoted in *The New York Times* talking about the growing number of women playwrights. “There’s so much potential there; think how much richer the theatre will be when all these women are telling stories too. They might be different kinds of stories than we’ve seen before. But they’re certainly worth telling.” For almost thirty years, Wasserstein has led the way in telling these stories, and American theatre is the richer for it. – MD

AN UNCOMMON WOMAN
Speaks

Wendy Wasserstein — playwright, sister, mother, and arts activist — spoke with Huntington Literary Manager Ilana Brownstein about the upcoming production of *The Sisters Rosensweig*, the need for arts in public schools, and her long-awaited return to Boston.

IB: Do you remember the first play you saw? The first play that made you think: I could do this?
WW: *My Fair Lady*. What enchanted me? Everything — the story, the ending, whatever happens to Eliza. It’s funny, I saw that play recently in London with Jonathan Pryce, and I thought, oh my God, this is about a 60-year-old man and a 21-year-old girl! But that didn’t occur to me when I was young. I thought it was wonderful. It is wonderful — I was right.

So why playwriting?
I grew up going to plays. I grew up in New York: I used to go to The June Taylor School of the Dance on Saturdays, then my mom and dad took me to the theatre. My parents loved the theatre, they loved Broadway. I think playwriting for me is very much part of being a New Yorker, about my childhood in New York. I was the youngest child, and my sisters always listened to Broadway show albums. And my mother Lola is a dancer, and she still, gosh, she still dances at the Broadway Dance Center.

And it was always the writing that drew you?
Not dancing?
No no no, I’m a shy person. It was always the writing.

Much has changed since you wrote this play.
What does it mean to you now?
Yes, a lot has changed. My oldest sister, whom I based Sara on, died in 1997 — my sister Sandra Meyer. So in many ways, one of the glories of writing a play is — not that it’s directly her, but she was certainly the muse of the play — it can make someone come alive again.

You said there are many similarities between the sisters in the play and your own family.
Was it difficult for you to fictionalize?
I always tell the story of the opening night of *The Sisters Rosensweig* on Broadway. My sister Sandy was this businesswoman, and she was ordering everyone around saying, “you sit here, you sit here, you do this, you do that.” And my
sister Georgette, whose nickname actually is Gorgeous, was walking around saying, “Hello. I’m Gorgeous.” And I was shy and standing in the corner. So we acted ourselves exactly as we are.

Some have called Rosensweig a stylistic departure from your previous plays. Does that comment make sense to you?

Yes, The Sisters Rosensweig reminds me of the plays I saw when I was younger — at least that I imagined I saw. For example, Sara comes out at one point in a tennis outfit, carrying a tennis racket. Sisters is a well-made boulevard comedy [like the farces and domestic comedies of the early 20th century].

You’ve acknowledged the inspiration of Chekhov’s Three Sisters in this play. What do you see as the Rosensweigs’ Moscow?

You know, the Rosensweigs’ Moscow, in some way, is that they want to go home again, and you can’t go home. Finally, as close to Moscow as those girls get is on the couch in the last scene of the play, which is one of my favorites, where they’re just three sisters on a couch. They’re emotionally at peace.

Could one say that the Rosensweig sisters are “uncommon” women who face relatively “common” problems?

Absolutely.

Your Tony Award for Heidi was cheered as a first for a woman. Since then, only Yasmina Reza (Art) has won the Tony for Best New Play, and no plays by women were nominated this year. Does this mean that progress isn’t coming as fast as it should?

Not only were there no plays by women this year, most of the plays had all male casts. I think it means we need more men and women writing parts for women. More plays by women.

Playwriting programs are training equal numbers of men and women — why aren’t we seeing plays by women have equal commercial success?

I don’t know, because you certainly see them in regional theatre. And frankly, a young playwright like Sarah Ruhl, her play A Clean House has been done a lot. Lincoln Center Theater is going to do it, and it was short listed for the Pulitzer. So you can point to certain people, but I don’t think that in numbers it adds up. I don’t understand that, in terms of commercial theatre.

Can you point to any other younger writers who inspire you and renew your faith in the future of playwriting?

I think Gina Gionfriddo is so funny, oh my God, just so bright. I also like Jenny Lyn Bader, who is really talented. It’s funny, because I’m getting so old, that to me Richard Greenberg and Robbie Baitz are young, wonderful writers.

In addition to serving on the Artists Committee of the new citizens’ advocacy group Arts Action Fund, you’ve implemented your own program in New York. Could you talk about your recent work in arts activism?

I started a program in New York called Open Doors. I went to the Theatre Development Fund and said: I want to take eight kids from the public high school — smart kids, like math/science kids who’ve never been to a play before — to the theatre, then take them out afterwards and talk to them for an hour about
it, and let’s see if theatre is elitist. Does it still have value? It was amazing, just amazing. At the end of the year, I asked if we should we continue this. These were kids from a high school in the Bronx, and they said to me, “not only had I never been to the theatre before, I’d never thought Manhattan belonged to me, but now I feel that the city is mine as well.” From that point on, this program has grown. There are now 15 groups going out, and the mentors for these kids include [The New York Times columnists] Frank Rich and Alex Witchel, [director and writer] Jim Lapine, [writer and composer] Bill Finn, [director] Scott Ellis — Scott Ellis took his eight kids with him to the Tony Awards this year. It was unbelievable! This has been such an effective program that I’ve become a real advocate of arts in the schools, and also for artists mentoring kids, because you can’t just leave it in the hands of the government. For future generations of theatre-goers, a lot of it has to do with theatre professionals somehow taking a stand on it, doing something.

Do you have plans for other projects like this in the future?

First, I’m trying to build a fund for these kids so they don’t just go to the theatre for a year, in their senior year in high school. There should be a ticket fund so they can keep going during college. Then I’d like to see this program spread to other cities.

In this era of decreased governmental funding, do you see any possibility for a renewed strength for arts and artists, or do you think the battles will only get worse?

I think, yes, the battles will get worse because some people on the right have very cleverly — I don’t know how they’ve done it — they’ve made the arts congruent with one point of view, or an amoral point of view, or whatever the heck they’re trying to do. Actually, I think culture will win out, but we have to have very strong advocacy from the artists.

“What I love about this play is it’s for middle aged women...a 57-year-old man walks on stage, looks at a 54-year-old woman, and falls in love. How interesting that that’s radical.”

Do you have any favorite anecdotes about past productions of Sisters?

You know, The Sisters Rosensweig was done in England at the Greenwich Theatre, and it starred Maureen Lipman and Janet Suzman, directed by Michael Blakemore. And it was about two weeks after a bomb had gone off at the Israeli Embassy in Knightsbridge. So that night, the Israeli Ambassador was coming to our play, and about ten minutes before the show was going up, we had to evacuate the theatre because of a bomb scare. Maureen Lipman said — because it stays light until about 10pm — let’s do the play in the park. Not only was the theatre evacuated, but the pubs and shops around the theatre were evacuated. We had about 500 people following us out to a park, and the stage manager got on the hill and said, “This is Sara Rosensweig’s apartment. Here’s the door, here’s the couch, enter Sara.” And we did this play, and it occurred to me that my play about Dr. Gorgeous returning a Chanel suit could have had huge political implications [had there really been a bomb], with an American playwright, an English cast, and an Israeli Ambassador. So what you said earlier is quite true about uncommon women making common choices. Or, as Madeline Kahn used to say: somebody like Dr. Gorgeous returning that suit, in her world — as funny as she is — that’s an act of courage. But I also think what you take away from it too is, there is a joy in watching three actresses in a well-made-play knock it out, you know? I think nothing’s better. What I love about this play is it’s for middle aged women, and furthermore, a 57-year-old man walks on stage, looks at a 54-year-old woman, and falls in love. How interesting that that’s radical. It was deliberate. Sara’s closed shop, because she believes all this stuff [about how women of her age are over the hill]. Then this man, Merv Kant, whom I love, walks in and he literally falls in love. He says “I’m staying for dinner!”

Your play Uncommon Women and Others was produced by the Huntington more than 20 years ago. How do you feel about coming back to Boston to work with Nicholas Martin as your director?

So happy, really. I went to college at Mount Holyoke, so I have such fond feelings for Boston. And to work with Nicky Martin means a lot to me. I was extremely close to [renowned director] Gerald Gutierrez, and Gerry was very close to Nicky. So in some ways, it’s about both the joy of working with Nicky for the first time, and also that connection to Gerald Gutierrez and [equally-renowned director] Ellis Rabb — who’ve both passed away — and to that whole tradition they embodied. It was my friend Daniel Swee, the casting director at Lincoln Center, who suggested I send this play to Nicky. So I did, and Nicky called me and said, “I was so surprised, there was The Sisters Rosensweig sitting on my desk!” Needless to say, it’s made me very happy.
Running Away From Home
Or, Everywhere You Go,
There You Are

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*
– TS Eliot

If, as Robert Frost wrote, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in,” why do so many people spend so much time and energy trying not to “go there?” When did going home become a last resort? What are we running from?

Many of us live hundreds of miles away from our childhood homes, but an increasing number of people are putting even more distance between themselves and their hometowns. The numbers of expatriates is on the rise around the world. While many people relocate with family or for jobs, numerous others choose to move to another country for the pure adventure, just to get away from the mundanity of home. Dealing with those pesky problems of daily life — like utility bills and grocery shopping — can seem far more exciting when they come with a foreign accent. A quick web search turns up dozens of sites for companies that specialize in helping navigate the logistics of the relocation process. Many of these sites also offer bulletin boards and chat rooms to help expatriates connect with communities — real and virtual — in their new countries of residence. You may be moving halfway around the world, but you shouldn’t have to wait to find the best dry cleaner, fitness center, or pub near your new home.

Who hasn’t dreamed at least once of picking up, moving on, and starting over? Some days it seems that the complete clean slate of witness protection even has its appeal. In a new place, do you have an opportunity to become a new, a better, person? Is moving away the closest we can get to achieving an “if I had it all to do over again” situation?

In *The Sisters Rosensweig*, oldest sister Sara and her daughter Tess have moved to London where Sara has become “an American Jewish woman living in London, working for a Chinese Hong Kong bank, and taking weekends at a Polish resort with a daughter who’s running off to Lithuania!” Sara knows what she left behind when she left the U.S., and she knows why she doesn’t want to move back. She may be lonely, but she refuses to go home. And she won’t encourage her daughter to attend a U.S. college because the country is being transformed in ways she can’t condone. Sara has clear memories of her Brooklyn past and strong Jewish parents to rebel against, but Tess hasn’t had the same grounding in any specific country or culture, and feels justifiably rootless.

When Tess finally asks her mother, “If I’ve never really been Jewish, and I’m not actually American anymore, and I’m not English or European, then who am I?” she officially enters the initial phase of her own identity quest, one that could take her anywhere, around the globe like the aunt she resembles, or back to the U.S. to the life her mother rebelled against. Maybe both. – MD
A MATTER OF FAITH

Religion in The Sisters Rosensweig

As The Sisters Rosensweig opens, Tess Goode is working on a school project: a biography of her mother. Sara may believe that who she once was bears no weight in who she has become, but her creator — Ms. Wasserstein — knows that by necessity “one’s cultural background contributes to how one sees the world.” Throughout The Sisters Rosensweig multiple cultures and religions are touched upon, but (as in Wasserstein’s other work) the one most prominently on display is Judaism.

Wasserstein has described the three Rosensweig sisters as “a practicing Jew, a wandering Jew, and a self-loathing Jew.” Not surprisingly, each has developed her own way of coming to terms with her Jewish identity, and with the other cultures she finds herself bumping up against. Here, below, is a primer on some of the faiths invoked in the play.

JUDAISM

Considered the oldest of the monotheistic religions, Judaism is, as demonstrated in the play, often viewed as much an ethnic and cultural identity as a religious one. Belonging to a community that lives according to Jewish law and tradition gives the 18 million modern Jews a common way of life beyond basic religious practices, but not Sara Goode. While sister Gorgeous rushes to light the Sabbath candles before sunset, Sara coolly tolerates the ceremony, but dismisses it to Tom as “an ancient tribal ritual.”

The lighting of the Shabbat candles is actually one of the most important observances in Judaism. According to tradition, the candles — lit at sundown — must be tended by the woman of the house. The Sabbath ritual is intended to provide a temporary respite from the concerns of daily life, and offer a time for personal reflection and prayer. To Gorgeous, this ceremony is an important symbol of her role as a Jewish wife and mother. To Sara, as someone who avoids personal reflection at all costs, it is a reminder of everything she has tried to escape.

SIKISM

Pfeni arrives at Sara’s later than expected due to a delayed flight from Bombay. She blames “Jesse the Sikh” for driving her around too long — it’s clear that Pfeni has been living in a world where there are few Jews to be found, and she’s perfectly comfortable with that. Founded in the 15th century, Sikhism is a relatively young, but large monotheistic religion. Most of the world’s 19 million Sikhs still live in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan where the faith was founded. Often mistakenly defined as a combination of Islam and Hinduism, Sikhism has its own independent doctrines. Based on the idea of social and gender equality, Sikhism rejects the caste system. Its central tenet is the significance of a believer’s internal religious state, and it preaches the primacy of good actions over empty rituals. Because Sikhs believe that an intermediary to God is unnecessary, they have no clergy and they are tolerant of other faiths as equally valid paths to God.

HINDUISM

Pfeni brings with her a present for Tess — a statue of the Hindu God Shiva. One of the world’s oldest and largest religions (900 million strong), there is no single doctrine or creed that defines Hinduism. For followers, religion is less a prescribed code of behavior than an inextricable part of every aspect of life. A henotheistic religion — that which recognizes multiple gods and goddesses as facets of a supreme being — Hinduism includes among its basic set of principles a faith in one God who takes many other forms; a belief in the journey of the soul through an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; and a belief in Karma, the measure of a soul’s good and bad deeds. The ultimate goal of all Hindus is to live well enough to escape the cycle of reincarnation and attain liberation.

Of the many forms of God worshipped by Hindus, the most prominent are Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, often called the Hindu Trinity. Brahma is the creator, Vishnu, the preserver. Shiva — both destroyer and restorer of worlds — has the power (as Pfeni tells Tess) to annihilate evil, restore hope, and bring rebirth. Shiva is inextricably linked to Shakti, his consort — they are the male and female balance of the universe, and it’s their love that creates, destroys, and creates again. Pfeni agrees that Tess can give the statue of Shiva to Sara, a woman “in desperate need of hope and rebirth.” Sara in turn offers the statue to Merv, who has renewed her belief in the possibilities still available, and has inspired her to look inside Sara Goode and once again find Sara Rosensweig. — MD
On Sisterhood

Women are the worst. I will rot in hell for saying that. My toes will gnarl inward into tiny hooves, and I’ll never dare to get another pedicure. All right. All right. Women are kind, decent, nurturing, the best friends women could ever have — until they’re not. Then women can be the absolute worst.

— Shiksa Goddess by Wendy Wasserstein

Female friendships may bring out the best and the worst in women, but those highs and lows pale in comparison to the emotional connections and complications of the bond between sisters. There is no better friend than a sister, no one who knows you as well, your strengths, weaknesses — and weak spots. You don’t have to like your sister, but you do have to love her. Some days that proves easier than others.

Have you ever looked at a group of siblings and wondered how children raised in the same family can be so different? One simple answer is that each new member changes the dynamic so that no child is truly raised in the same environment as any of his or her siblings.

Generally, oldest children have their parents’ undivided attention for their earliest years; their achievements are anticipated and praised, recounted to their younger siblings as family lore. In trying to claim their own territory, middle children often become whatever their older sibling isn’t. By the time the last child is born, whatever household rules remain have been relaxed. The baby of the family never gets the chance to move up the ladder when a new child is born and, as a result, can have a difficult time with the idea of growing up and settling down.

The Rosensweig sisters reflect many of these birth order traits, but they also bear more than a little resemblance to Wasserstein sisters.

Wendy Wasserstein is the youngest of Morris and Lola Wasserstein’s four children. Her oldest sister Sandra was a classic first-born child. A corporate pioneer, Sandra Meyer was one of the first female executives at General Foods, American Express, and Citicorp. She married when Wendy was only six. Two years later, after the marriage ended, Sandra moved to London. It became a mythical, glamorous place to the young Wendy, still at home in Brooklyn. When Sandra moved back to the U.S. and further up the corporate ladder, Wendy watched as she coolly juggled work, family, and ultimately cancer, with style, power, and dignity. Sara Goode in The Sisters Rosensweig may be older when she escapes to London, but as a twice-divorced single mother and corporate executive, she owes a clear debt to Sandra Meyer.

Older Wasserstein sister Georgette, nicknamed “Gorgeous” as a child, has three children and runs an inn in Vermont with her psychiatrist husband. “She did the best,” Wasserstein has said. Although their parents are proud of their children’s professional accomplishments, it’s their grandchildren they brag about the most.

Brother Bruce, only three years older than Wendy, became a successful investment banker and mergers and acquisitions lawyer, named by The Wall Street Journal as one of the “world’s hottest dealmakers.” Wendy affectionately tells the story of a night during previews for The Heidi Chronicles when she received a message: “Your brother Bruce called. Can’t come to the play tonight. Is buying Nabisco.” There may not be a brother in the Rosensweig family, but Bruce Wasserstein would have negotiated an incredible contract for Merv Kant.

Although there is a part of Wendy represented in each of the sisters Rosensweig, she is perhaps most clearly visible in the writing, traveling, wisecracking, youngest sister Pfeni. Like Pfeni, the playwright has a calling to tell women’s stories. — MD
A WENDY WASSERSTEIN Chronology

1950  Born October 18 in Brooklyn, New York.
1971  Graduates from Mount Holyoke College with a degree in history.
1973  Receives an M.A. in creative writing from City University. Her first play, "Any Woman Can't," is produced in New York at Playwrights Horizons. She enters the playwriting program at the Yale School of Drama.
1975  Uncommon Women and Others, a play based on her years at Mount Holyoke, is produced at Yale as her master's thesis.
1976  Receives an M.F.A. in playwriting from Yale.
1977  Uncommon Women and Others is produced in New York by the Phoenix Theatre.
1978  PBS broadcasts Uncommon Women and Others.
1979  Her adaptation of John Cheever's "The Sorrows of Gin" is broadcast on PBS.
1981  Isn't It Romantic is produced in New York by the Phoenix Theatre.
1986  Her adaptation of "The Man in a Case" is produced in New York as part of Orchards, a series of one-act plays based on Chekhov stories. Her musical Miami is produced in New York at Playwrights Horizons.
1989  The Heidi Chronicles moves to Broadway from Playwrights Horizons and receives the Pulitzer Prize, a Tony Award, and New York Drama Critics Circle, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle Awards.
1990  Bachelor Girls, a book of essays, is published.
1992  The Sisters Rosensweig premieres at Lincoln Center Theater and features Jane Alexander, Madeline Kahn, and Frances McDormand as the three sisters.
1993  The Sisters Rosensweig moves to Broadway and receives a Tony nomination and an Outer Critic's Circle Award. She adapts Stephen McCauley's novel, The Object of My Affection for film, and receives the William Inge Award for distinguished Achievement in the American Theatre. Her adaptation of The Nutcracker is performed by the American Ballet Theater.
1995  The Heidi Chronicles appears on television. She lobbies on Capitol Hill to save the National Endowment for the Arts; the agency is run by Jane Alexander, who starred in The Sisters Rosensweig.
1997  An American Daughter premieres in New York at Lincoln Center Theater; her sister Sandra Meyer dies of breast cancer.
1998  The Object of My Affection opens; she founds a program with the Theatre Development Fund to take Bronx high school students to the theatre.
1999  Writes "The Festival of Regrets," a libretto for New York City Opera's Central Park trilogy. Her daughter Lucy Jane is born.
2000  Old Money opens in New York at Lincoln Center Theater.
2001  Shiksa Goddess (Or, How I Spent My Forties), a collection of essays, is published.
2002  She writes the libretto for Franz Lehar's The Merry Widow at the San Francisco Opera.
2004  "Psyche in Love" is presented at the Tribeca Theater Festival as part of a program of short works about life in lower Manhattan. She joins the Artists Committee of the Americans for the Arts Action Fund, established to counter the decline in arts funding, and to ensure that all Americans have the opportunity to participate in the arts. Sloth: And How to Get It is published.
2005  Her new play, Third, is scheduled for New York's Lincoln Center Theater. The Huntington Theatre Company produces The Sisters Rosensweig. – MD
Objectives

Objectives
Students will:

1. Identify the central themes and issues in *The Sisters Rosensweig* including:
   - The struggle, confusion and joy connected with family experiences
   - Marriage and the ideal mate
   - Decision making and taking risks

2. Examine the generational values expressed in *The Sisters Rosensweig*

3. Relate themes and issues of *The Sisters Rosensweig* to their own lives

4. Understand the values and issues of the play within the characters’ social and cultural context

5. Participate in hands-on activities, including acting, visuals arts and dance

6. Evaluate the Huntington Theatre Company’s production of *The Sisters Rosensweig*
Teachers: Use the following descriptions and questions to lead your students in discussion and/or as a model for written work.

**Background**

Make copies of the Preface found at the beginning of your script for The Sisters Rosenweig. Have students read playwright Wendy Wasserstein's comments on the development of this play and her experiences on the process of writing a play in collaboration with directors, actors, family and friends. Using the information provided by Ms. Wasserstein, ask students to create questions they would want to ask Ms. Wasserstein if they were conducting an interview. Once the questions are created, divide students into groups and have them research these questions and share their answers with the rest of the class.

**KEY ISSUES**

**Evolving Nature of Family Relationships**

The Sisters Rosenweig pivots around the past and present relationships of three sisters, one of which has a daughter in the play, and whose daughter is the niece of the other two sisters. The relationships involve different generations of women and are marked by differences in career and family choices, temperament, responses to growing up in a non-traditional Jewish home, and life decisions.

Below are possible activities to help students discuss the complexity of family relationships, beginning with their own.

1. Divide students into two groups, one to represent the "sisters" generation and one to represent Tess' (the daughter of Sara) generation. Have students research the changing roles and attitudes of women of the two generations. Some areas include employment opportunities, gender competition, child rearing, education, roles within the family, roles in a “man's world,” motherhood, divorce, single motherhood, and husband/wife relationships. Have each group report its findings to the rest of the class.

2. Have students brainstorm a list of topics which can cause disagreement between them and their siblings or parents. Consider after-school jobs, household duties, meals, respect, discipline, attitudes about local, national and international issues and future plans. Display the lists in the classroom. In large or small discussion groups, have students focus on the causes of conflicts between parents and children, between two different age groups, and finally, with family members’ responses and reactions to their culture and ethnicity.

3. Have students work in pairs to present a role-playing scenario based on the topics from the lists made. Following reading or viewing the play, engage students in a discussion on different or similar points of view voiced by the characters in The Sisters Rosenweig.

**Multicultural Identities in America**

Have students reflect on their ethnic/cultural backgrounds in a 5-10 minute free writing exercise. What traditions, customs, values are preserved in their families? Consider after-school jobs, household duties, meals, respect, discipline, attitudes about local, national and international issues and future plans. Display the lists in the classroom. In large or small discussion groups, have students focus on the causes of conflicts between parents and children, between two different age groups, and finally, with family members’ responses and reactions to their culture and ethnicity.

Next, divide your class into small groups. Ask students to generate a list of values, customs, traditions, attitudes, and the like that represent American culture. What images appear prominently on television, on film and in print that define American culture? How do other countries define American culture? Students can combine their ideas into one list to be displayed in the classroom.

Have students revisit their free writing exercise. How do their family cultures compare to what they have established as American culture? What are the differences and similarities? In what ways do their families maintain cultural identities that may be separate from mainstream American culture?

Using small pictures, colored paper, fabric or other art supplies, have students create a panel for a paper quilt. Each panel should be the same size. Have one half of the class create collages on their panels that contain images representing their cultural identities. Have students use symbols or images to represent not only concrete objects and events (foods, holiday/religious celebrations, family heirlooms,...) but also particular values of their families and themselves (honesty, importance of education,...) and how they feel about them (supported, nurtured, trapped, grateful, resentful,...). Once these panels are finished, have students explain them in class. Have them attach their panels together to create a class quilt and display in the classroom. Have the other half of the class create the same quilt for the characters in The Sisters Rosenweig.
MASTERY
Assessment

ACT ONE
1. What is Tess’ homework assignment?
2. Describe Sara’s relationship with her daughter. Why doesn’t Sara approve of Tom?
3. Why doesn’t Tess like Nicholas Pym?
4. What is Geoffrey’s career?
5. What does Pfeni want to know from Geoffrey?
6. Who is Jordan? What is his claim to fame?
7. What is Gorgeous’ new job and who is her mentor?
8. Why is Merv in London?
9. How would you describe Gorgeous’ relationship with Sara? Why does Sara react so strongly when Gorgeous lights the candles for the Sabbath?
10. What does Merv say always goes “hand in hand with European nationalism”?
11. Why is Tess bothered by how her mother speaks to Tom?

ACT TWO
12. What does Geoffrey ask Pfeni at the top of Act II?
13. How does Gorgeous feel about Pfeni’s relationship with Geoffrey?
14. Why is Gorgeous upset with Sara?
15. How does Sara encourage Pfeni when Pfeni shares with her about her recent experience in Doubandi?
16. What is the “minor triumph in Poland” that Sara shares with Merv?
17. Why does Sara initially push Merv away?
18. After his time with the Temple Beth El sisterhood, what does Geoffrey realize?
19. What are the reasons Geoffrey gives for initially pursuing Pfeni? What was he trying to avoid?
20. What secret does Gorgeous reveal to her sisters?
21. Who do the sisters toast to and why?
22. What is a shtarker?
23. Why does Tess decide not to go to Lithuania?
24. Why does Gorgeous decide to return the Chanel suit?
25. What are the two reasons Sara asks Merv to swing by the house?
26. Why is Tess confused about her identity?
**OPEN RESPONSE and Writing**

*Instructions for students: Please answer the following as thoroughly as possible. Remember to use topic sentences and examples from the text.*

**OPEN RESPONSE ASSESSMENT**

1. What do you feel is the main message Wendy Wasserstein is trying to convey through her play *The Sisters Rosensweig*? Is the message relevant to the lives of young people today?

2. Tess’s premise for her paper is that Sara’s early years have no bearing on her later years. Why do you think she has chosen to write on this topic?

3. What role does religion play in the key moments of the play?

4. Is this play a comedy or a drama? Use examples to support your answer.

5. Many of the characters in the play are grappling with their identity — struggling to get a sense of who they really are. Choose three characters and determine if, by the end of the play, they are more truthful to themselves and others about who they are and what they want.

6. Why do you think Gorgeous has chosen not to share with her sisters that her husband has been out of work for two years?

7. The sisters’ mother, Rita Rosensweig, is often referred to in the play. What do you think she was like and what do you think were her expectations of her daughters? How do you think each sister has defined herself in relation to Rita?

8. Identify two moments in the play that give us a glimpse of the three sisters in childhood. What do you think the relationships between the three sisters were like when they were growing up?

9. A number of characters in the play have names that have changed over time — identify two characters where this is true and describe why their name changed and how you think the character feels about it.

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

*Teachers: The following can be used as possible topics for well-planned and carefully written paragraphs. Encourage students to use topic sentences and examples from the text.*

1. Read *The Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov and determine what similarities exist between this play and *The Sisters Rosensweig*.

2. Merv says that anti-Semitism always goes “hand in hand with European nationalism.” Research Lithuania’s recent history — from 1991 to the present and see if there has been a rise in the occurrence of anti-Semitic conflicts.

3. Many of the characters in this play struggle with their identity and how to define themselves. Write a short essay about the aspects in your life that you currently use to identify yourself. Has the way you identify yourself now changed from how you identified yourself when you were younger? For example, do you have a different nickname now?

4. Use one of the following lines from *The Sisters Rosensweig* as a topic for a short essay:  
   GORGEOUS: You’re pretending to be somebody you’re not.
   GEOFFREY: You really don’t understand what it is to have absolutely no idea who you are? 
   SARA: Life is serious business...Life isn’t funny.

5. Consider one of the supporting characters in *The Sisters Rosensweig*. All characters in this play are affected by the decisions of the principal characters. Write a journal entry from the point of view of one of these characters, expanding on what we already know about them.

6. Write a critical review of the Huntington Theatre Company’s production of *The Sisters Rosensweig* and submit it for publication in your school newspaper. Be sure to send the Huntington a copy!
MEDIA
Assessment

These questions and hands-on exercises are interactive challenges in Drama, Visual Art, Music/Dance, and Design that inspire further consideration or understanding of the play.

DRAMA

Explain to your students that in order to prepare for a role in a play, an actor spends a great deal of time on character development. Although an audience sees only a snapshot of a character’s life, an actor must consider how the character’s past shapes the character that we see on stage. Have each of your students choose a character from The Sisters Rosensweig. As if they are preparing for the role in rehearsal, have the students consider the following questions about their characters:

Creating a Character

The Sisters Rosensweig playwright Wendy Wasserstein knows that “one’s cultural background contributes to how one sees the world.” What is my character’s cultural background and how does it influence my character in the play?

What was the most important event in my character’s life prior to the time depicted in the play?

What does my character want in the play? What is his/her overall objective? What in my character’s life has led him or her to seek this objective?

Why does my character act the way he or she does in the play? What past events influence my character’s dialogue and actions in the play?

How does my character change over the course of the play? What causes this change?

Role Play and Improvisation

Select students who each chose different characters from The Sisters Rosensweig for the above activity. Ask the rest of the class to suggest a situation that might have occurred several years before the play itself. The students should improvise the scene in character. After the exercise, ask the students why they made the choices that they did. How did what they knew about the characters from the play inform their actions in this scene?

Ask students to improvise a scene from after the conclusion of the play. What happens in Sara and Merv’s new relationship? What are the dynamics between the three sisters at the next family event? This exercise will help students to understand that creating a work always involves an interrupted process or a decision to stop what could be revised endlessly.

VISUAL ART

Instruct each student to create a birthday card for Sara’s 54th birthday. Each student should select a character other than Sara and design the card from that character’s perspective. The students should also write birthday messages to Sara in the cards. These messages should be indicative of the particular nature of the relationship between Sara and the chosen character. Have students exchange cards with each other.

Ask students to create a poster design for the Huntington Theatre Company’s production of The Sisters Rosensweig using the media with which they feel most comfortable (photography, paint, collage, etc). Encourage students to consider texture and color when making decisions.
Note to teachers: After viewing the play, ask the following questions:

1. About the Play and Production
   A. What was your overall reaction? Were you surprised? Intrigued? Amused? Explain your reactions.
   B. How was the play structured? Did it build to a single climax? Was it episodic? Did this structure help or hinder your understanding of the play? Was the dialogue interesting? Appropriate? Poetic? Were you aware of the imagery and symbolism during the course of the play? Would you have been aware of these devices without previous preparation?
   C. Was the pace and tempo of the production effective and appropriate?

2. About the Characters
   A. Did the characters touch you personally in any way? Did you care about them?
   B. Were the characters three-dimensional and believable?
   C. Were the motivations of the characters clear?
   D. What qualities were revealed by the action and speech of the characters?
   E. Did the characters develop or undergo a transformation during the course of the play?
   F. In what ways did the characters reveal the themes of the play?

3. About the Set
   A. Was the set usable and workable?
   B. Was the set compatible with the production as a whole? Were there any features of the set that distracted from the action of the play?
   C. Did the design reflect the themes, type and style of the play?
   D. Were the artistic qualities of unity, balance, line, texture, mass and color used effectively?
   E. Did the set provide appropriate environment and atmosphere?
   F. Was the set used to present any symbolic images or did it simply represent the space in which the action of the play occurred? Did it contain elements of both a “realistic” and a “symbolic” approach?

4. About Lighting and Sound
   A. What mood or atmosphere did the lighting establish? Was the illumination sufficient? Did the lighting harmonize with, and contribute toward, the unity of the production?
   B. How did the sound used in the play enhance your overall experience?

5. About Costumes/Makeup/ Hairstyles
   A. Were all of these elements correct in terms of the period fashion? Were they suitable in terms of character and storytelling for the production?
   B. Did the color/design of the costumes and make-up serve to illuminate the themes, type, and style of the play?
**Handout 1**

**VOCABULARY IN THE SISTERS ROSENSWEIG**

Define the following terms.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<td>Compulsive</td>
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