

Big Idea Productions

TITLE:

AUTHOR:

SUB TO: Small Notion Productions

FORM: Play

SUB BY: Big C Productions

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ANALYST: Chris E. Gepp

GENRE: Fantasy-Drama

PERIOD: 1920-1961

LOCALE: Multiple cities and  
countries

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LOG LINE: The four former wives of Ernest Hemingway try to unravel the mystery of the closed-off, womanizing author and how they each played an important role in his life.

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BRIEF: A dreamy narrative without a clear main character or clear external plot may lead to issues in adapting this material to the screen.

SYNOPSIS

Four women one by one arrive to the "Casa de Sueños" ("House of Dreams") not a literal place, but a place of memory. There, the four former Mrs. Hemingways relive their experiences as wives of Hemingway, in the process drawing Hemingway back to them as in a séance. A polemic ensues between the women and Hemingway.

Through dreams and flashbacks, each woman's experience with Hemingway is talked out and recreated before us, involving a fiery beginning, middle, and end, as Hemingway overlaps with each woman, hopscotching from one woman to the next as affairs end one marriage and start another. Rightly so, each woman has unsettled grudges to settle with the others.

The play is also broken up by several scenes that are homages to Hemingway's most memorable works, such as *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, in which Hemingway and one of the wives are cast in key roles as the work is brought to life. Each of these scenes seems to be used to show an important turning point in the relationship, which often is its end.

Eventually, Hemingway has a showdown with his mother, who seems to be the underpinning of all of Hemingway's problems. This is especially made clear when the four wives transform collectively into Hemingway's mother. In effect, "mother issues" seem to be the reason for the course Hemingway's life has taken and the choices he has made.

After successive books and failed marriages and many, many affairs Hemingway ages before our eyes, handled literally by the four wives, as they physically age his appearance on stage, as if to show their involvement in his rapid aging. After Hemingway's mother Grace dies, their last moment together with Grace on her deathbed ending in an argument, Hemingway begins to lose his mind afterward.

At the height of the darkness that overtakes Hemingway's life, Pauline, Hemingway's second wife, apparently commits suicide following an explosive conversation with him over their son's cross-dressing and her admission to Hemingway that she aborted one of his babies. Hemingway commits himself to an institution, no longer able to write. He also makes final amends with Hadley, his first wife.

From there, the women choose to remember Hemingway as the quintessential Hemingway: young and virile. In response, Hemingway strips himself of his old attire and becomes young for them again.

The women accept that they were mutually changed by their relationships with him and that Hemingway would not have been Hemingway without them. At the end, after a dance to show their mutual connection, the light over Hemingway goes out followed by the sound of two shotgun blasts, which we must assume to be his committing suicide.

COMMENTS

As a character, Hemingway himself comes across strongly through his dialogue and through the scenes in which he is presented. He does always seem to be performing, however, which one can assume given this particular figure was wholly intentional. Because he is a touch unreal, though, Hemingway is hard to follow as a main character. The wives would seem to be the more natural "main character" choice since they are the reason the story is taking place, through their meeting at Casa de Sueños. However, as four different characters with a common problem - Hemingway - it was often difficult to define specific character wants beyond those of the group as a whole, which might be the reason why the moments in the show with the greatest power are the ones in which the wives unite forces either as Hemingway's mother, when they "age" Hemingway, or when dancing with Hemingway. We as an audience can actively participate in these scenes since we understand the group desire more than any individual woman's desire. By not knowing the any single woman's desire, it was hard to differentiate them as separate characters. Not having an individual to focus on also made it difficult overall to latch onto the story.

The structure and plot seemed intended to evoke the idea of memory or a dream through flashback and using Hemingway's works as a lens through which to view each of his failed relationships. We're not clear, though, from whose point-of-view (POV) this structure is stemming, and this question of who the main character is continues to nag, in spite of clever theatrical devices to help us stay engaged.

The POV actually seems to be anyone's and everyone's. Each wife has a sequence in which her experience with Hemingway is relived, although it is not clear whether the other women may already have this information. (They sometimes seem to.) Hemingway also has his own moments that might not be known to the women - but, then again, they might! - coming across most specifically in his asides to the audience and the soliloquys he's sometimes given at the intros and outros of certain scenes. The issue with a shifting POV is that it makes it difficult for the audience to connect with a specific character. The result of having no audience-main character connection is that the play works more as an intellectual exercise than one that fully engages the heart.

In translating this into a film, the first order of business might be to choose a main character from whom the action stems directly because of his or her motivation. And while the same dreamy quality can certainly be parlayed (and perhaps could be made even more powerful in a film), concrete action will be essential for the primary plot line. In the play the primary plot seems to be the wives' meeting at the Casa de Sueños, without a clear reason for this meeting other than to talk about Hemingway. In the film, though, we would need a concrete reason for their meeting: what is the problem and what do the women hope to achieve? This motivation, if made accessible to the audience, would allow us to engage and completely participate in the narrative from there.