

A PERFECT
COUPLE

Or:

Let Your Heart
Break Open

Brooke Berman

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A PERFECT COUPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooke Berman's plays have been produced and developed across the U S at theaters including: Primary Stages, The Second Stage, Steppenwolf, The Play Company, Soho Rep, Williamstown Theater Festival, Naked Angels, M C C, WET, S P F, New Dramatists, New Georges, The Hourglass Group and the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. In the U K, her work has been developed at The Royal Court Theatre, The National Theatre Studio and Pentabus. Plays include: HUNTING AND GATHERING (Primary Stages, named one of the 10 Best Plays of 2008 by *New York Magazine*); SMASHING (The Play Company, The O'Neill); UNTIL WE FIND EACH OTHER (Steppenwolf, The O'Neill); THE TRIPLE HAPPINESS (Second Stage, The Playwrights Center, The Hourglass Group), SAM AND LUCY (S P F, Cleveland Playhouse), A PERFECT COUPLE (WET), OUT OF THE WATER (Cape Cod Theater Project, ARS Nova), THE JESUS YEAR (New Dramatists Creativity Fund), The Liddy Plays (Rising Phoenix Rep, The Hangar Theater Lab, Williamstown Theater Company), and others.

Brooke is the recipient of a Berilla Kerr Award, a Helen Merrill Award, two Francesca Primus Awards, two LeCompte du Nuoy awards and a commissioning grant from the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. She is an alumna of New Dramatists, where she served

on the Board of Directors and developed countless plays. She has received support for her work from the MacDowell Colony and the Corporation of Yaddo and commissions from Arielle Tepper Productions and C T C in Minneapolis.

Her short play DANCING WITH A DEVIL was a co-winner of The Heideman Award at Actors Theater of Louisville in 1999, presented in *Life Under 30* at the Humana Festival, and nominated for an American Theater Critics Best New Play award. It has been published in numerous anthologies. Her short play DEFUSION has been produced in a number of festivals and as part of Christine Jones's Theater for One project at New York Theatre Workshop. (www.theatreforone.com/gallery/img_0470.htm)

Brooke attended Barnard College and is a graduate of The Juilliard School. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild, PEN and the M C C Playwrights Coalition.

Her memoir, *No Place Like Home*, is published by Random House and available in bookstores. More information: www.brookeberman.net

A PERFECT COUPLE was commissioned by Arielle Tepper Productions.

A PERFECT COUPLE was developed at The National Theatre in London, Naked Angels, New Dramatists, and in WET's INKubator: The Ray and Kit Sawyer Development Series.

The world premiere of A PERFECT COUPLE was produced by WET Productions (Women's Expressive Theater, Inc, Sasha Eden and Victoria Pettibone, Producers) at the DR2 Theater in New York City, opening on 18 June 2008. The cast and creative contributors were:

EMMA..... Annie McNamara
ISAAC James Waterston
AMY Dana Eskelson
JOSH Elan Moss-Bachrach
Director Maria Mileaf
Set design Neil Patel
Costume design Jenny Mannis
Lighting design Matthew Richards
Sound design..... Bart Fasbender
Casting director Alaine Alldaffer
Press representative Spin Cycle/Ron Lasko
Production managerRalph Carhart
Production stage managerLarry K Ash
Associate producersAmi Ankin & Azizah Rowen

CHARACTERS & SETTING

ISAAC, forty, about to be married

AMY, thirty-nine, about to be married

EMMA, thirty-nine, their single best friend. Or best single friend. Or both.

JOSH, twenty-three, a recent college grad, lives with his parents, nearby

Place: an old family house in the country. Ghosts.

NOTE

Stylistically this moves from traditional “scenes” to “arias” and “duets”, in which characters speak directly to the audience, sometimes on their own, sometimes in choral relief with other characters and then, back to scene. The arias are straightforward, simply presented—presentational rather than introspective or psychological—like documentary. Or the breakout sections of reality T V shows. Or opera. The characters love talking to the audience. And to one another. They are effusive beings.

The overall tone of this play should be quick, rigorous, playful and smart.

The original title was “Let Your Heart Break Open” because in my experience, once your heart actually breaks apart, it can take on new life, new light—heartbreak is a triumph. The world can now enter! Thus, the loss of a relationship is not necessarily a sad topic. There is liberation in sight, and deeper relationship with both self and other.

To achieve the intended tone, it will help for the actors to make big positive choices with their text and actions—until the journal appears and everyone discovers that they know just a little less about themselves than they’d imagined. The shifts in tone and subject matter occur in spite of themselves, taking us by surprise.

THANKS

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scene:
a perfect couple

(Early morning. EMMA, in the kitchen alone. She makes a pot of coffee through a cone-shaped device, enjoying the absence of electric coffee makers. She scoops coffee into the cone, waiting for the water to boil. EMMA seems to know where things are in this kitchen, moving through the room with a great deal of ease, even though it is not hers. EMMA snoops a little. Looks in every drawer. Just to see what's there. She's happy in a strange quiet way. Everyone else, asleep. She is at home in this kitchen, comfortable. The water boils. EMMA pours it through the cone-shaped device and lets the coffee brew. Impatiently. She opens the refrigerator and sees berries. Starts to wash and cut strawberries, popping one into her mouth as she does this. All of this is quiet, familiar—)

(ISAAC enters. A sweet ease between them)

EMMA: You can't go into the world and find Love the way you find a pair of shoes.

ISAAC: What?

EMMA: I'm just saying.

(ISAAC looks at EMMA a moment.)

ISAAC: I need coffee. *(He goes to it, pours himself a cup. Then,)* You can't go into the world and what?

EMMA: Find love the way you find a pair of shoes.

ISAAC: Some people do it just like that.

EMMA: Not me.

ISAAC: Which is exactly why we love you. Everything has to be hard.

EMMA: Not hard. Honest.

ISAAC: Idealized.

EMMA: Enough.

(ISAAC comes to EMMA, sits. Eats a strawberry. Starts to cut fruit as well, dismembering a pineapple. A sweet ease between them.)

EMMA: I've been thinking about Coral all morning. How we sat here, talking, she said— *(She cuts herself suddenly. Blood)* Shit. *(She puts her finger in her mouth.)*

ISAAC: Come here.

(ISAAC puts EMMA's finger under a stream of water.)

EMMA: Fucking—shit!

ISAAC: It's okay. Here.

(ISAAC gets a band-aid, takes EMMA's finger out of the water, dries it on his shirt, and then wraps the band-aid around it.)

EMMA: Why are you doing this? Now?

ISAAC: Taking care of your finger?

EMMA: No. Not that. Why are you—? You know.

ISAAC: It's the right time.

EMMA: But are you—?

ISAAC: Yes?

EMMA: —sure?

ISAAC: Yes. I'm sure.

EMMA: *(She is about to raise an objection, but decides not to.)* Okay.

ISAAC: Relationships take work.

EMMA: Okay.

ISAAC: And we have worked.

EMMA: I know.

ISAAC: Besides, it's a good time. We're ready. It's time.

EMMA: Okay. *(Beat)* But...

ISAAC: Yes?

EMMA: You don't get along.

ISAAC: Well.

EMMA: You can't be alone together.

ISAAC: That's not true.

EMMA: You run away from her. You're always traveling, and when you do come home, you fight. I love you both, but you make each other sick.

ISAAC: Well. That's what real relationships are like. You make each other sick. I think that's real.

EMMA: Really.

ISAAC: Really. There is this part of the adult long-term relationship where you learn to transcend the things you hate about the other person. Where you make each other sick, and stay anyway. This is commitment. This is real. You wouldn't know because you haven't had an actual relationship, with an actual adult in—

EMMA: That's not true.

ISAAC: —a long time.

EMMA: Not true!

ISAAC: Isn't it?

EMMA: No. Besides, I've been really busy.

ISAAC: I see.

EMMA: And you can't just—

ISAAC: I know. Go into the world and—

EMMA: That's right.

ISAAC: Amy and I know each other. We're committed. Dedicated. Intimate. At a certain point, you can't start over. And you can't run away. Everyone says so. And everyone says relationships take work.

EMMA: Is that what "Everyone" says?

ISAAC: We want this. We're forty. It's time.

EMMA: I'm still thirty-nine.

ISAAC: Well, I'm forty, and I will marry Amy.

(AMY enters in a nice robe. Just waking up)

AMY: God, I hope you'll marry me. I've already hired caterers.

Oh, Coffee. *(Coffee should sound a little bit like Nirvana.)*

(AMY heads for her favorite morning thing, touching the others lightly as she does. But really, she's all about the coffee, still adjusting to being awake. She does not do morning well. Then, sensing that she has walked into something—)

AMY: What are you two doing?

ISAAC & EMMA: Nothing. Talking.

AMY: Oh. *(Then, looking out the window)* Do you think I'll be able to fit seventy-five guests on that lawn? I'm going to make that happen.

ISAAC: Emma wants to know why we're getting married.

EMMA: Why now?

AMY: Because we're grownups. Because people who have been together for fifteen years get married or break up and we're not breaking up. That is why.

(AMY goes upstairs, kissing ISAAC as she goes. They watch after her.)

ISAAC: The house looks good, right?

EMMA: It's great.

ISAAC: We've been fixing things. We have this kid next door; he's great—just graduated from school. Has time on his hands. Can use the cash. We're going to fix everything.

EMMA: Is there a lot to fix?

ISAAC: It's an old house. And since Coral died...

EMMA: It's just like it was. When you came downstairs just now, it was just like it was. Coral said, "The thing you want wants you back."

ISAAC: I don't understand.

EMMA: "The thing you want wants you back" You don't have to look for it because odds are, it is already very close. It is already yours.

ISAAC: I still don't understand.

EMMA: Well, it's a general life philosophy. You don't have to force things, or push them into— What don't you understand? (*Changing the subject*) I don't feel old enough to be our age. Do you?

ISAAC: Yes. More and more, I am starting to feel old enough to be Our Age.

EMMA: The marriage thing.

ISAAC: And for you, the lack of it.

EMMA: Lets bring Amy breakfast in bed. Strawberries. More coffee. She loves breakfast in bed. When we were roommates—

ISAAC: I know. You had breakfast in bed all the time.

EMMA: We did.

(Playfully, they assemble a plate to take to AMY and perhaps the entire pot of coffee. EMMA exits, but ISAAC stops on his way upstairs, turning to the audience, for Aria #1:)

aria #1:

a house in the country, with trains every hour

ISAAC: We got this place when I was a kid. It was a weekend house, at first. But Coral, my father's eccentric Swiss second wife, fell in love with this part of the country. It became her home in a way that our apartment in the City, where he'd lived with my mother, was not. This was entirely hers. Eventually, they moved up here full time. She was some kind of amateur everything. And she made friends like no one else I know. People loved Coral. She was my mother, even though she wasn't. And this was her house. And now it is mine.

Over the years, we have, I have, maybe half a dozen friends up here. Plus the people who remember Coral. Many people remember Coral. And my father. They threw parties. People remember them. People came to tea. People came over. This house was once—alive—in ways that it hasn't been since she died. I'd like it to be that way again. Alive. People say, well people say, the way to do that is to marry Amy and have some kids. That is what people say.

I don't know about kids. I never have. But Amy wants kids, Amy has always wanted kids, and Amy is usually right. About everything. Sometimes I think, what if I am very fucked up and what if Amy, maybe, is right?

(ISAAC exits after EMMA)

scene:**why do people love to talk about the past?**

(JOSH enters. Looks around. Calls for the owners of the house.)

JOSH: Hello? Hey? Isaac? Amy?

(JOSH pokes around, pours himself a cup of coffee. Checks out the stuff on the kitchen table. Looks for a note addressed to him, doesn't find it. Waits, until AMY enters)

AMY: I thought I heard you. Want some//

JOSH: Is that okay? I just//

AMY: Oh you found it. Of course it's—

JOSH: Okay.

AMY: Our friend's up from the City. Have you ever met Emma?

(JOSH shakes his head no)

AMY: I didn't think so. She's my best friend. We went to school together. Lived together before I met—
(Motions upstairs, as if to signify ISAAC) —Do you want food, Sweetheart? I know we have— (Strawberries)

JOSH: No I'm okay. Do you want me to...? We were going to work on—

AMY: The attic. I know. Isaac's kind of— we're getting a late start. We were all up pretty late. Talking about the past. Why do people love to talk about the past?

JOSH: I don't know.

AMY: There's this wish to recreate your history together by talking about it. Sometimes we don't know what to talk about besides that. So we talk about what we did and who we were. And it's all very entertaining. Except that it isn't, and it's a huge waste

of time because we're not those people anymore. Do you know what I mean? You don't, do you?

JOSH: Sure. I mean, my friends do that too. Just on a smaller scale.

AMY: You do?

JOSH: Totally. Hey, I'm reading the book you gave me.

AMY: Do you like it?

JOSH: I like how it's put together. Events could happen in any order and it would be the same.

AMY: That's what I like too. I think it makes more sense. That's how we remember them anyway. I should give you—Isaac gave me this book I haven't been able to get through maybe you'd like it. It's a bunch of fragments, half history and half fiction, and you're not meant to know what's what. It annoys me.

JOSH: Annoys you how?

AMY: I like to know.

JOSH: Why?

AMY: I don't know. I just do. Don't you?

JOSH: I guess I don't care so much.

AMY: Everyone says it's brilliant, this book. Isaac loved it. It's just—

JOSH: What?

AMY: I like to know what's what.

JOSH: Do you guys need time?

AMY: In what sense?

JOSH: Uh, now. This morning. Do you want me to—I have to go into town. So, like, I could go do that and you know, give you guys some more—

AMY: That might be good.

JOSH: Can I get you anything? In town? I have to pay—fucking parking tickets—and overdue book fines. So, I'm going to the DMV and the library, and I could totally swing by, you know, whatever you need—

AMY: Well. No, it's all right. I can go later.

JOSH: You sure? Because I have to go anyway, and it's like—I'd love to save you a—

AMY: Well. Actually. Yes. I could use—just a few groceries—if you have time.

JOSH: The Stop and Shop awaits. Super Stop and Shop. The big one. The granddaddy Stop and Shop. El Mega Grande Big Motherfucking—

AMY: Thank you. And you have to stay for dinner. Will you stay? You'll love Emma.

JOSH: Yeah. I'll stay.

AMY: Good.

(AMY writes a list for JOSH. He drinks more coffee. Watches her. Looks around at stuff. She finishes and hands him the list.)

AMY: Thank you for doing this, Sweetheart.

JOSH: No problem. I'll be back—

AMY: I'll have Isaac ready.

JOSH: Right on.

(JOSH goes. AMY watches him go.)

AMY: Yes. Right on.

aria #2:
i will not be receiving you

EMMA: Hello, You.

This is a message.

For you.

Not an actual phone call.

Just a message.

I've missed your mind—

Your strange hungry sad inquisitive mind.

And all those nights we stayed up talking.

Do you miss me, I mean, mine?

I'm out of town.

Away with friends, my oldest friends

You can't call me here

My cell phone does not get reception.

Which means, I will not be receiving you.

So you can't call.

scene:
your great adventure

EMMA: Men are taught that the Grand Adventure of their lives will be work. Women are taught that it will be Relationship. We move through the world looking for our grand adventure in the form of romantic love, deep friendship, erotic connection. Men move through the world looking to create, to build, to fight. We look for people to connect with. And this, I think, is the problem. It's a difference in expectation.

ISAAC: That sounds right.

AMY: It doesn't sound right.

EMMA: *(To AMY)* You stopped working.

AMY: So? I don't *define* myself by work the way you two do. My job was my job. Yours are both—

EMMA: But that's my point. That's my point exactly.

AMY: It doesn't mean the wedding is the Grand Adventure of my life.

EMMA: You act like it is.

AMY: I do not. (*To ISAAC*) Honey, Josh was here. He came to help you work on—

ISAAC: Oh shit. The attic.

AMY: Right. So I sent him away—he's off getting groceries and paying his library book fines—but you have to be ready when he gets back. So. Go. Hurry. Leave me for the attic. You can be dressed by the time he—

ISAAC: Amy, you can't just send him to the store.

AMY: What do you mean?

ISAAC: Is he getting groceries for us?

AMY: He offered.

ISAAC: He's here to work on the house. He's not your personal assistant.

AMY: He's my friend, and he offered.

ISAAC: And he's going to bill me for his time because I pay him by the hour. To work on the house.

AMY: He offered. And he showed up ready to work and you were busy. And he'll be back in an hour, so, you should maybe get the attic ready. Or yourself.

(*ISAAC leaves, ostensibly to get ready for JOSH and the attic.*)

AMY: (*Calling after him*) And I invited him for dinner. So, will you cook? Please? (*And back to EMMA*) Isaac's become the most amazing cook. He cooks food from every place he's traveled. He can taste something once

and recreate it. The only good thing about how much he travels is how it's improved our culinary lives.

EMMA: You have a whole world here.

AMY: Sometimes. Sometimes it's like that. (*Changing the subject*) I want you to find someone.

EMMA: I'm kind of taking a break from all that. "Finding Someone". I'd sort of just like to live my life, you know?

AMY: I don't believe you.

EMMA: What don't you believe?

AMY: You used to want to get married.

EMMA: Sure. But that's not what happened. Marriage didn't happen. To me. Yet. And I'm not even sure I believe in—

AMY: Use your will. Make it happen.

EMMA: How?

AMY: Take action.

EMMA: You didn't meet Isaac that way.

AMY: But every single step of the way, I'm the one who has made the relationship "happen". And it's all working out. We are finally getting married. We have dated, we have taken breaks, we have broken up, we have seen other people, we have gotten back together, we have been long distance, short distance, we live together, we bought a condo, sold it, made a profit. We went through: an abortion, a new business, two of his fellowships, weddings of all of our friends (except for you) —And who is the one who constantly makes it okay to take each new step? Me. I am the one who does this. I do this because I can do this. Because I am not afraid. Because I had good parenting. I am the one who knows it is permissible—no, pleasurable—to take Next Steps. So. I am the one who laid the

ultimatum on the table, and Isaac responds really well to ultimatums. I give him structure. He needs that. He loves me for the structure I impose. Because otherwise, he'd be lost. You may think you know Isaac, but I can attest to the fact that without me, Isaac would be lost—
stranded—literally—in an airport somewhere, between flights, on a layover, lost. We meet each others' needs. I provide—

EMMA: An itinerary?

AMY: You can't wait for things to happen. Use your will. Find a partner so that you are not alone. Get practical. Realistic. Change the kind of men you date. Change your expectations. Change your whole way of doing things. In fact, I've heard, I've heard, people say, if you just start doing every single thing in a new way, you will get new results.

EMMA: Technically, I'm not "dating" them.

AMY: Look. I love you. I love you, and I want you to be happy like me.

EMMA: That's so funny. Because I want you to be happy like me.

AMY: You don't understand. You were never on the Baby Track.

EMMA: There was a "Baby Track"?

AMY: Yes. And you were not on it.

EMMA: Were you?

AMY: Women who don't have babies go insane.

EMMA: You're kidding.

AMY: There are statistics. Studies. It's true.

EMMA: Who conducted these studies?

AMY: My mother told me.

EMMA: Your mother?

AMY: She came across these studies.

EMMA: I don't have babies. And I'm not insane.
And your mother is—

AMY: Look at the statistics. We have to have babies.
Otherwise we feel some kind of essential loss.

EMMA: I don't feel essential loss!

AMY: What about the phone calls?

EMMA: What phone calls?

AMY: In the middle of the night. The ones that sound like you're drowning. Every single time you get your heart broken, you call, and you sound like you're drowning. Like you are under water, and you can't swim or breathe. And you think you can call any time you want. Like that. When you can't swim or breathe. And like I'm just supposed to—

EMMA: There weren't that many, there aren't that many phone calls.

AMY: You get your heart broken a lot. And it's not your fault. You don't know any better. I'm not blaming you. I'm just saying. You get your heart broken a lot. And you call. And I don't always know—

EMMA: You're my best friend.

AMY: But at a certain point, Em, you have to take responsibility. You have to get on a better path.

EMMA: The Baby Track.

AMY: It's okay, Em. Isaac wasn't on that track either. But now, we are all going to get on the same track. Except you. I don't know what track you want to be on. But Isaac and I are getting on the same track.

EMMA: (*Incredulous*) Are you having a baby?

AMY: It's on the table.

EMMA: What table?

AMY: The proverbial table. Babies are on the proverbial table. Isaac just needs time. (*Changing tracks, another scathingly brilliant idea*) You know, you should call Wendy.

EMMA: Wendy?

AMY: She's single.

EMMA: Is she?

AMY: Wendy meets guys all the time.

EMMA: I meet guys all the time.

AMY: Wendy meets guys online, or sometimes at Singles events, readings, bars even, and she really likes them. And Wendy is always looking for girls to go out with. I think it helps to meet men when you go out with your girlfriends. You don't look desperate. But you do look available. And if you sit in upscale bars, the kind where the drinks are expensive enough that you know the men have jobs. And you're much cuter than Wendy, so if she can meet—

EMMA: Amy. I'm not going to sit in upscale bars with Wendy trying to pick up men with jobs. It's just not about that.

AMY: What's it about then?

(*JOSH enters, with groceries from Stop & Shop. The following two lines may overlap quite a bit.*)

AMY: Because if I were single, I'd be sitting in upscale bars with Wendy.

JOSH: Hey. I'm back. I'll put the groceries on the—

AMY: I'll get Isaac.

(*AMY leaves. EMMA/JOSH alone. JOSH, like EMMA, moves around this kitchen as if it is his.*)

EMMA: I'm Emma.

JOSH: Hey.

EMMA: Hey.

(Beat)

JOSH: You're visiting from—?

EMMA: The City.

(Beat)

JOSH: So you guys have like, all been friends for a long time, huh?

EMMA: Yep. A long time. And you—

JOSH: —live next door. Well. My folks do. I'm kind of freeloading right now, so I kind of live next door, only it's temporary, so I don't like, *live*, there, at least that's what I tell myself about that.

EMMA: Did you know Coral?

JOSH: Totally. We used to hang out. When I was home from school. We'd kind of like—we played guitar and smoked pot. I mean, I did. She watched. And we had great talks. About every single part of life. We both just loved to talk. She told me things.

EMMA: What kind of things?

(ISAAC and AMY return.)

ISAAC: Josh, I'm yours

AMY: *(Turning to the task at hand)* Just bring whatever you think should come downstairs—down. And we can sort through it all down here. I want to make sure we get rid of anything skanky, donate anything donate-able, sell anything we want to sell, basically clean out and make room. *(To EMMA)* He's terrible at getting rid of—

ISAAC: We'll be fine.

(They start to go. AMY, calls after them.)

AMY: Okay. But make sure—Josh, make sure that you actually do find things we can get rid of— And also, if there's anything that needs repair. Or cleaning. We'll sort everything into piles once it's down here.

ISAAC: (*From offstage*) Amy. We're adults. We can figure this out.

AMY: Okay. Fine. Figure it out. (*Back to EMMA*) They won't throw anything away. He's terrible with—

EMMA: So why don't you do it?

AMY: He wanted to.