

Donald Margulies'



A Playgoer's Guide

Nick: *You mean there are people on Park Avenue or in Tokyo who have walls in their living rooms especially reserved for the latest Waxman, Number 238? . . . these poor, unsuspecting -- rather, rich unsuspecting -- patrons of the arts have bought, sight unseen, a painting you have not yet painted?*

Jonathan: *Yes.*

THE AUTHOR: Donald Margulies



Born in Brooklyn in 1954, Donald Margulies grew up in Trump Village, a Coney Island housing project built by Donald Trump's father. Margulies was exposed early to the theatre. His father, a wallpaper salesman, played show tunes on the family hi-fi and, despite a limited

income, often took his children to Manhattan to attend Broadway plays and musicals.

Margulies studied visual arts at the Pratt Institute before transferring to State University of New York to pursue a degree in playwriting. During the early 80s, he collaborated with Joseph Papp, and his first Off-Broadway play, *Found a Peanut*, was produced at the Public Theatre. In 1992, Margulies' career really began to take off when *Sight Unseen* won an Obie for Best New American Play. He is now an award-winning playwright and Yale faculty member, and won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Dinner with Friends*.

Margulies has taught playwriting at the School of Drama and now teaches screenwriting to undergraduates. His Pulitzer is only the most recent in a series of awards and honors that includes two Obies, a Dramatist Guild Hull-Warner Award and a Lucille Lortel Award. Two of his plays have also been Pulitzer finalists, and several have traveled throughout regional theaters and to Europe.

Margulies makes his home in New Haven. He is married to physician Lynn Street and has one son, Miles.

THE CHARACTERS: Relationships

Jonathan Waxman is a Jewish painter in his forties going through something of a midlife crisis. He is, according to a press release from the Saint John Theatre Company, "rich, famous, brilliant . . . and miserable." Though his paintings are successful, he seems to want something more. It seems that "Jonathan's pursuit of fame and recognition has led to the casting off of some of his more admirable qualities -- passion, inspiration, creativity. Like many people, he is searching for himself."

Patricia, Waxman's former lover, is now married to Nick, living in what the script describes as "a cold farmhouse in England," and, with Nick, engaged in archaeological research.

Nick, Patricia's husband, is "a flatly skeptical, pragmatic, unromantic man." There is tension between him and his wife over Waxman. His hostility to Waxman and skepticism about his art (and modern art generally) forms one of the central issues of the play.

Grete is a German journalist who asks the surprisingly important question about the role of Waxman's "Jewishness" in his artwork. Grete's aggressive interviewing opens secrets about Waxman and raises the question whether his success is due to the merits of his work or to media manipulation and hype.

" . . . one wonder[s] if he wrote *Sight Unseen*, which dramatizes the life crisis of an artist of similar age, as an autobiographical piece. Then again, you may not care, because the characters onstage are so fascinating and three-dimensional, you'll be too absorbed to worry about people who aren't there." –William Westhoven, Morris County *Daily Record*

THE PLOT: A Short Summary

Sight Unseen is a memory play consisting of eight scenes or moments in the artist's life. However, they are not performed in chronological order.

The story centers on the relationship between Jonathan Waxman and Patricia (he calls her Patty), his former lover. Fifteen years after breaking her heart, Jonathan has an awkward visit with Patty and her husband in England. Waxman travels to Patricia's home in an attempt to repossess his portrait of her to include in a show. She, however, does not want to give the painting back..

A few days later a reporter asks Waxman what role his "Jewishness" plays in his art. Waxman becomes very angry with the reporter for asking such a question. The reporter also gets Waxman to admit that he hired a publicist before he became famous. The final scene is a flashback to Patricia, 17 years earlier, posing for the painting.

This guide was researched by
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