

# Becky Shaw

by  
Gina  
Gionfriddo

## – *A Playgoer's Companion* –

"Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match. Only make it the phosphorus kind. That's what playwright Gina Gionfriddo does in her highly flammable comedy of no-manners called *Becky Shaw*." — *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"The play is definitely a story about some very specific people, but their behaviors, manners and interactions are in many ways universal. I find the arrogance, kindness, hope and disorientation generated in Gina Gionfriddo's brilliant play hilarious, appalling and ultimately cause for some self-reflection." -- Kirsten Fitzgerald, Artistic Director, Red Orchid Theatre, Chicago

## The Author



Playwright Gina Gionfriddo was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Becky Shaw*, which had its world premiere at Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival of New American Plays and its New York premiere Off Broadway at Second Stage Theatre. Her other plays include *After Ashley* (Humana Festival, Off Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre, regional theatres, and abroad in Poland); *U.S. Drag* (Off Broadway by the stageFARM, Clubbed Thumb at HERE, and many regional productions); *Guinevere* (Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center Playwrights Conference); and the one-acts *Squalor* and *America's Got Tragedy* (commissioned and presented by the stageFARM). She has received an OBIE Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, The Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, an Outer Critics Circle Award, the Helen Merrill Award for Emerging Playwrights, and an American Theatre Critics Association/Steinberg citation. She has written for the television programs *Law & Order*, *Cold Case*, and *The Borgias*. A graduate of the M.F.A. Playwriting Program at Brown University, she has taught writing at Brown, Providence College, and Rhode Island College. She is currently at work on commissions from Playwrights Horizons and the Center Theatre Group.

## The *New York Times* weighs in on *Becky Shaw*

"Gina Gionfriddo's comedy of bad manners, a tangled tale of love, sex and ethics among a quartet of men and women in their 30s, is as engrossing as it is ferociously funny, like a big box of fireworks fizzing and crackling across the stage from its first moments to its last.

One of the great pleasures of *Becky Shaw* is the way the moral ground keeps shifting underneath your feet. Characters you think you've drawn a bead on reveal new, sometimes unsettling nuances, as the relationships among them gather kinks and wrinkles, just as people do in real life as you get to know them better.

Opinions will differ as to which of the two parties involved in the poisonously bad date is the more toxic agent. Max, the money manager brilliantly, is the more patently noxious ingredient. Armoured from head to toe in a sleek sheath of cynicism, this brusque and brutish fellow casually spits out devastating remarks in a silky, dark chocolate monotone that hardly softens the blows. The recently widowed Susan has multiple sclerosis. Late in the play she confesses to Suzanna that her marriage was unhappy but ultimately the right bargain. "You will never hear me buy into any of this new age nonsense about my illness being a gift," she says. "It has ruined my life, and I hate it. But it was a gift to me in this one respect. It meant I couldn't leave my marriage." [Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times*]

## What happens

When Suzanna sets up the unknown Becky Shaw, with her closest friend Max, little can she forecast the seismic effect it will have on their lives. No modern day Emma Woodhouse, Suzanna's charitable matchmaking leads to a catastrophic first date, that ultimately causes each character in the play to reassess their relationship with one other, forced to clarify the future lives they envisage for themselves. As each character's reaction to the disastrous first date spirals out of their control, the action speeds by, denying the audience a chance to find a stable moral high ground or to take sides in the racing conflict.

"*Becky Shaw* is astonishingly skillful in the way it examines human behavior and personal relationships. This is exactly what great comedy should do. Gina Gionfriddo has written a sharp, cunning play that shifts our perspective about the tensions between love, money, and happiness. It's an incredibly funny piece of writing." -- "Peter DuBois, director of the 2010 Huntington Theatre production.

## Influences

The play draws on the heroines of novels in the 19th Century, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* being a key influence. Gionfriddo was, in fact, reading *Vanity Fair* when she started to write *Becky*

*Shaw*. That novel's anti-heroine, Becky Sharp, much like Becky Shaw, is very socially driven and aspires to be a part of the higher circle. To achieve this, she plans to marry into the family of a wealthy man. Gionfriddo has said that she wanted to take Becky Sharp and place her in a contemporary American setting. Today, gender lines blur and the rules of courtship are made up as they go along – or are they? How much have things changed, and is that for better or worse? *Becky Shaw* does not answer either question but gives us a classical tale of social ambition and love with a distinctly 21st Century "post-Hollywood" sensibility. Gionfriddo asks the questions, "what do you owe a desperate stranger? What do you owe her when you invited her in?" Social obligation and morality are heady points of contention. At the heart of the play is a shrewd exploration of how difficult it can be to act charitably, especially to people you don't particularly like. [Adapted from Almeida Theatre online resources]

"I think we're more uncomfortable with class climbing as a female agenda today because women have, theoretically, so many options to make their own way. And in America, we are very, very attached to our 'American Dream' - the narrative put forth in Horatio Alger's books in the 19th Century in which any child in rags can become rich through hard work. We tend to see poverty as a personal failing." – Gina Gionfriddo

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