



Same Time, Next Year: An Affair That Lasted 25 Years

Same Time, Same Place

Bernard Slade's *Same Time, Next Year* begins with a rather unlikely premise. George and Doris meet at a California inn in 1951, fall into bed together, and then discover an inconvenient fact: they're both married to other people.

Neither wants to leave a spouse or break up a family. Instead, they arrive at an unusual arrangement. They'll return to the same inn on the same weekend once every year. And they do—for the next 25 years.

Doris tells her husband she's attending a Catholic retreat. George, a CPA, tells his wife he's visiting an old client in California wine country. Then, once a year, George and Doris resume a relationship that somehow exists alongside their marriages rather than replacing them.

It's adultery with an appointment book.

Watching Two People Grow Up

The play unfolds in six scenes stretching from 1951 to 1975. We meet George and Doris as young adults and watch them gradually become comfortable middle-aged companions. Between meetings, children are born, careers change, fashions come and go, and American society changes around them.

Doris undergoes the greater transformation. She begins as a rather meek housewife but gradually becomes educated, independent, confident, and successful.

George doesn't evolve quite so gracefully. He's more conservative, more guilt-ridden about their affair, and often more resistant to change. At one point his middle-aged enthusiasm for pop

psychology and relentless self-analysis nearly drives Doris crazy. Their differences provide much of the comedy. They also make the relationship believable.

When the Comedy Suddenly Stops

The play is very funny, but its most memorable scene isn't. During one reunion, Doris has become a Berkeley student and opponent of the Vietnam War. George arrives angry, conservative, and increasingly irritated by her politics. Their annual romantic reunion deteriorates into a bitter argument.

Then we learn what is really bothering him. George's son has been killed in Vietnam while helping load wounded men onto a helicopter. George has buried his grief beneath anger and hasn't been able to cry for his son. Finally he breaks down in Doris' arms.

For a play built around a comic extramarital affair, it's a remarkably moving moment. The jokes disappear, and we're left with two people who, whatever else may be said about their arrangement, genuinely love and understand each other.

Twenty-Five Years Later

By the final meeting, George's wife Helen has died. For the first time, he wants to turn his annual relationship with Doris into a permanent one and asks her to marry him. Doris refuses. Her husband is still alive, and she won't leave him.

George announces that he'll marry a family friend instead—a woman who supposedly even knows about Doris. He leaves, then returns and admits that he invented the whole thing. After 25 years, George and Doris are back where they started: together, but not together.

The curtain closes with them embracing, and we know what will happen. Same time, next year.

A Play That Belongs on a Stage

I saw *Same Time, Next Year* performed by a local theater group in Visalia, California, about 30 years ago. I've also seen the 1978 movie with Ellen Burstyn and Alan Alda. I prefer the stage play.

That's no criticism of the movie. It's simply a story particularly suited to theater. There are essentially two people, one room, and a relationship that changes before our eyes. The actors leave the stage and return a few moments later several years older, carrying with them everything that has happened since we last saw George and Doris.

A live audience gets to make those jumps with them. Perhaps that's why the play works despite a premise that shouldn't be particularly easy to admire. George and Doris are cheating on two spouses who, by all indications, are decent people. Yet Slade doesn't really ask us to approve of them. He asks us to watch them.

Over 25 years we see them laugh, quarrel, age, grieve, change, and occasionally understand each other better than they understand themselves. Two actors. One room. Six meetings. Twenty-five years.

That's theater.