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Playbill for Aida

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Lovers & Older Strangers by Harry Haun

Renée Taylor and Joe Bologna, collaborators in life and love for over 30 years, celebrate a long run together with their new play, *If You Ever Leave Me... I'm Going With You!*

[[image - color photograph of Taylor and Bologna in front of theatre]]

Years into their marriage, Renée Taylor and Joseph Bologna overheard their respective mothers nattering away and realized that they must have met as infants. He lived on East Second Street off Avenue J, she lived on Ocean Avenue off Avenue J, and their mothers frequented the same shopping district in West Flatbush, baby carriages in tow.

As Taylor tells it: "We think our carriages passed, and I threw a rattle into Joe's carriage. It hit him on the head. He picked himself up, looked at me and said, 'That's the girl.'"

"Elephants and Bolognas never forget," he obligingly concurs. Then, rubbing his noggin, he postscrips, "I always wondered why, when we make love, I have this throbbing..."

Some call it Luv, some call it The Rattle of a Simple Man, whatever—it's still very much with them, and you can see for yourself these days at the Cort Theatre. This month they are celebrating their 36th year of marriage (and 37th year of turbulent togetherness) by throwing themselves a Broadway show called *If You Ever Leave Me... I'm Going With You!*

The title, like the content, comes from real life. "When we were first married," he recalls, "we had a big fight, and she said, 'Pack your things and get out.' So I start packing. And when I started packing, she started packing. I said, 'What the hell are you doing?' She said, 'If you ever leave me, I'm going with you.' It has been our running gag ever since."

Their play is an emotionally large and happy two-hander about a husband-and-wife writing-and-acting team— named, funnily enough Joseph Bologna and Renée Taylor—who are indeed the central characters (and narrators) in the story of their life together. Hand in hand, they take the audience on the interrelated journey of their private and professional lives, revealing instances of real life that they translated into theatre.

It's a six-step program. They enact

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The secret to the success of their union, according to Taylor, is "comedy and sex..." "And pasta," says Bologna.

scenes from their Off-Broadway offering (Bermuda Avenue Triangle), their Emmy-winning TV special for Marlo Thomas ("Acts of Love and



Other Comedies"), their Writers Guild Award-winning HBO special ("Bedrooms"), two scenes from their first Broadway collaboration (Lovers and Other Strangers) and a scene they wrote for Taylor's mother to do with David Burns. In between, they tell where they came from to get there. It's a life-imitating-art-imitating-life marriage-go-round.

"The real reason we wrote it is that we wanted to work together," Bologna admits. "Producers would call us up and say, 'Would you like to tour in one of your plays?' We'd say, 'No. We've done it. We want other people to be in them.' As actors, we want to believe that only we can play our parts. As writers, it's the opposite: We want everybody to play them, to go out on tours with them. Then we started saying, 'Why don't we write something for ourselves—something just for us?' Over the years, people always ask us the same questions—'How do you write together? How do you get along? How much of what you write is true? Who are the characters really based on? How did you meet?'—so we thought we'd answer those questions as a play."

After their first rattling encounter and before they formally met, Bologna and Taylor lived parallel lives. While he was a barker at Coney Island, she was at Macy's demonstrating a dozen different ways to wear "the fashion sheath smock." He had hot and cold running summers (in a dry cleaning plant, 135 degrees by the presses; or in the freezer of an ice cream company at 35 below). She spent her summers as a dance extra on "The Guy Lombardo Show," getting groggy on "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White." She was playing the Catskills while he was across the mountains in "the Italian Alps," working the resorts as waiter/lifeguard/softball player/emcee/gigolo. "If you were a hit in those resorts," he remembers, "you were the superstar in your universe."

Taylor found superstardom harder to assert itself in the Catskills: "I had just spent thousands of dollars for my musical arrangements and my gown, and I came out in the Catskills and said, 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,' and someone in the back yelled, 'Oy, English!' I have been thinking of making that the title of my autobiography."

Her big break, figuratively and literally, came when she was auditioning for "The Jack Paar Show" as a singer and her zipper broke. "They put me on the show that night, and Jack Paar asked me to be a regular, and started me off on my career. [Comedy writer] Goodman Ace saw me on the Paar show and signed me up to be on Perry Como's show as a regular.

Taylor was understudying Luv on Broadway when the full-blown Bologna passed in front of her radar, courtesy of their mutual manager. "I was looking for a writer for a one-woman show, and he said, 'I'm going to introduce you to somebody you're going to have a comedy rapport with.' That was it. I think it's what holds us together—comedy." She looks over to Bologna to second that motion. "Comedy and sex, right?"

"And pasta. Comedy, sex and pasta at the same time is a trifecta you can't beat," he says.

Two days after their first meeting, Bologna called Taylor in to audition for a cereal commercial he was directing. When he asked her to do the scene with more abandon, she threw the cereal in the air and said, "Whee!" He said, "Thank you, we'll call you." Two minutes later, the phone in the conference room where they were doing the auditions

rang. It was Taylor. She said, "I thought you were going to call." He said, "Where are you?" She said, "I'm in the lobby." He said, "Wait a minute, I'll be right down."

That was their first date, and they have been making beautiful comedy ever since.

Of all the glowing reviews that *If You Ever Leave Me... I'm Going With You!* has garnered, Taylor's favorite came from the critic who said, "They give marriage a good name."

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