



**by John Kolvenbach**  
**Presented by Paragon Theatre**  
**February 14 - March 14, 2009**  
**Study Guide**

## Introduction

Think of your favorite love song. Is it a ballad? Perhaps an ode set to a catchy tune? A sonnet in three power chords? What is the song that will never fail to make you think of a moment when you fell in love?

In his play, *Love Song*, John Kolvenbach presents a lyric poem in representation of the power of loving another person to transform us at our very core and bring forth our most authentic inner life.

## Playwright



### Biography

John Kolvenbach lives and works in lower Manhattan. He is an MFA graduate of Rutgers University. His plays have been produced in Chicago, Denver, New York, London, Rome, Sydney and many other places around the world. He is also the author of *on an average day*, *Goldfish*, and *Fabuloso*.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Kolvenbach](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Kolvenbach))

### Playwriting Process

In an interview with the *Hartford Courant*, Kolvenbach describes his playwriting process

Usually, I don't develop plays by using anyone else's process. By the time I get to the theater, the play is reasonably complete. I write, then I do a hundred drafts, then I do readings in my house with actors I know. I rewrite, we do another reading, I rewrite, then I usually do a reading for an invited audience, rewrite, then do a reading for an audience of about 30 people. Then I decide whether it's garbage or something that should be seen. Part of this comes from not wanting to show anyone anything I'd be embarrassed by. Also, I feel like before you want to look to somebody else for an idea, you want to work from the original source.

(<http://www.courant.com/entertainment/la-ca-ppfkolvenbach27apr27,0,2678172.story>)

## **Writing of *Love Song***

In two different interviews, Kolvenbach references the power of otherwise seemingly simple, popular love songs to “get under [his] skin” and impart something beyond their schmaltzy exterior. He lists his inspirations as albums by Phil Collins, Lou Reed, Neil Diamond and Joni Mitchell.

(para. from <http://www.steppenwolf.org/watchlisten/backstage/detail.aspx?id=126>,  
<http://www.citybeat.com/cincinnati/article-16349-simple-things.html>)

Kolvenbach wanted to write about different kinds of love. “Filial love, romantic love, the kind of love that exists in a marriage that has gone stale, love as a kind of contagion and love as a kind of disease,” he says. “I wanted to write a fable about romantic love and whether it is illusory, whether we create the ‘other’ — as it were, our partners.” (<http://www.citybeat.com/cincinnati/article-16349-simple-things.html>)



## **Director’s Concept**

By Jarrad Holbrook

### **What’s it about?**

Love and, well, life in general, can never be fully experienced until we come to terms with our pasts, our fears, and our needs. In *Love Song*, Beane develops “the courage to want” after being ignited by the abandon that is Molly. He is no longer drowning in his fear of being denied. His sister learns, through Beane’s contagious contact and her husband’s somewhat fanciful persona, to embrace another side of her controlled demeanor. Love and “life” are within us all the time, but as the characters learn, we have to make the choice allow love and “life” to flourish inside.

### **Design Elements**

When considering the design elements of this show, I can’t help but think of literal mechanisms involved in the production. The idea of gears working in the background to move walls or ceilings really strikes me, as does copper wiring that would be part of the flickering lamp. Within the mechanics of the script itself, we find that the show begins with the screws and gears tightening hard and fast on Beane. Soon they begin to slow, and finally they are reversed completely by the end as Beane regains control over his own fears and makes the first steps to be in command of his life. Using this idea of gears, screws, and wiring, we can arrive at an overall palette based on different types of metal, rust, and oil.

### **Set**

With the allusions to closing walls and ceilings (which we don’t have to do in the exact same way described, but the overall effect should still remain) and the multitude of scene changes, the main concern here is how to make the set functional. Focusing on how the set will operate can inform the remaining aesthetic.

### **Lights**

There’s a lot of room to play with varying degrees of warmth onstage, especially with the scenes in Beane’s apartment. What is the relationship with how his

character evolves and how the lighting changes in his apartment? Also, considering the episodic quality of the show, I would like to consider bumping lights in and out for the scenes and saving a nice slow fade for the final moment.

### **Costumes**

I see a lot of separates and layers that we can add and take away to create different looks for the different scenes. Perhaps keeping Molly and Beane in the same outfit throughout but vary their levels of distress. However, I would like to experiment with Molly's hair in each scene. Hair mascara, hats, obvious wigs, etc, to work along with the increasing effect she is having on Beane.

### **Props**

In addition to standard props like keys, a cup, etc, there are also food and drink props such as the turkey club that will be eaten every night as well as the "magic bottle" of whiskey. I don't anticipate props beyond the ones listed in the script.

### **Sound**

Between scenes, small bursts of contemporary music will play to cover the scene changes, doing our best to avoid the obvious "love song" in favor of more introspective tunes. Environmental sounds may be added to the scenes in Beane's apartment where the walls close in to heighten the strangling effect.



## **Play Synopsis**

"Love Song: a song about falling in love and the happiness it brings."  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love\\_song](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_song))

Beane is a simple, quiet man who works in a tollbooth. He has a highly driven and successful sister named Joan, who has a propensity for firing interns. Joan is married to Harry, an affable gentleman who enjoys needling his wife. Joan and Harry worry about Beane, whether or not he is completely sane and what they should do to help him.

Beane lives alone in an apartment where the walls seem to move closer and closer to him, and the lights shift level—up and down—irrespective of Beane's attempts to control them. One night after visiting his sister and brother-in-law, Beane comes home to find Molly robbing his house of every possession—barely enough to fill a trash bag. She derides him for his lack of belongings, questioning where he keeps his sentimental items, and suggesting that she finds no proof of his existence other than a cup and a spoon.

The next day, Beane shares lunch with his sister. His encounter with Molly has enlivened him, and makes him want to experience life more fully. Suddenly tastes, smells, and textures have a depth that Beane had never noticed. He craves sense experiences. Joan, in a rush, late as always, wonders if her brother has started doing drugs, or has completely gone over some line into insanity.

Beane returns home. He does not turn on the lights, but questions the air to find out whether or not Molly has come again. She surprises him, catalogues her propensity for violence, only to admit that she has developed a sentimental attachment to his cup. Then she kisses him.

The next evening, Joan paces and frets because Beane is late, thinking that this new woman he has met must have kidnapped him. When he arrives, Beane engages Harry in a discussion of the redundancy of glasses and raincoats, and then elicits a confession from Harry regarding the effect of the smell of melon and a memory that scent elicits regarding Joan. Joan, though initially shocked, finds her curiosity and Harry's desire overwhelming.

The next morning, Joan and Harry, needing a day to themselves to explore their newfound interest in each other, call in fake sick to their respective employers.

Back at Beane's apartment, he and Molly tell each other the abstracted story of the night that they met. As they reach the happy ending, Joan knocks on the door. She and Harry have come over for a surprise visit on their day off. Molly screams at them to leave. Beane tells Molly that the visitors cannot hear her. Molly runs into the bathroom.

Joan and Harry return to their home, discussing the mysterious woman who seems not to exist. This realization reopens their earlier discussion of the status of Beane's sanity. Joan, who once wanted to tie Beane up in a straight jacket now offers sympathy and defends him.

Beane's walls have decided to attack him again. Beane fights back.

Joan comes to visit Beane. To check on him and offer her own tale of love gone awry. Beane admits that Molly is not real, but Joan invites her back into Beane's life anyway and leaves. Molly enters from the bathroom. Beane tells her how he never felt alive until he met her, even though no one else believes that she is real. He explains that he needs to go out and try other real people.



## **Name Game**

**Beane** is a tollbooth worker. A man who lives an austere life. Someone so lonely that he finally creates another person to whom he can connect. The name Beane sounds like the past tense of to be (as in "has been"). Also sounds and looks like bean, as in a small legume—insignificant. The origin (spelled Bean) is Scottish and British, and means fair-skinned. He is practically Prufrockian—like the character J. Alfred Prufrock from T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Beane's life could be measured in coffee spoons. The strength that he finds from his interactions with Molly inspires him to go out and dare to eat a peach—to take the loving part of himself—the part which has rediscovered how to experience out to experience real people

**Joan**, Beane's sister, has a career and an apparent penchant for hiring and then firing inept interns. The name Joan is of Hebrew origin, and means "the Lord is

gracious". She begins the play hard-nosed, set on her business. Beane's opening and revelations, combined with the discovery of her husband's whimsy helps her to reexamine the point in her life when she had stopped feeling, and live into her ability to love.

**Molly**, while really an elaborate figment of Beane's imagination, is nonetheless the catalyst for breaking open the shells around the rest of the characters. A name of Irish origin, which comes from the word "moll", which originally meant "prostitute". Also a version of the name "Mary". Reminds of the word "mollify" which means "to calm in temper or soothe".

**Harry** is Joan's husband. The name is of Old German origin, and it means "home ruler". He has a great sense of playfulness, and seems to want Joan to be able to calm down and enjoy life as it comes.



## Major Themes

### Authenticity

In *Love Song*, we see how various representations of love can make people look into themselves more deeply, and hopefully bring them to their most authentic self.

Authenticity is a technical term in existentialist philosophy, and is also used in the philosophy of art and psychology. In philosophy, the conscious self is seen as coming to terms with being in a material world and with encountering external forces, pressures and influences which are very different from, and other than, itself. Authenticity is the degree to which one is true to one's own personality, spirit, or character, despite these pressures. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authenticity\\_\(philosophy\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authenticity_(philosophy)))

### Existence

To quote a song popularized by Dean Martin, "You're nobody 'til somebody loves you" (<http://solosong.net/dino/nobody/nobody.html>). Beane felt that he did not exist until he imagined someone who noticed him. Only then did experience become meaningful to him.

In common usage, existence is the world of which we are aware through our senses, but in philosophy the word has a more specialized meaning, and is often contrasted with essence. Philosophers investigate questions such as "What exists?" "How do we know?" "To what extent are the senses a reliable guide to existence?" "What is the meaning, if any, of assertions of the existence of categories, ideas, and abstractions." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existence>)

### Loneliness

Beane suffers from a loneliness so pervasive that he even begins to believe that the walls and light fixtures of his apartment want to interact with him.

Loneliness is a feeling where people experience a powerful surge of emptiness and solitude. Loneliness is more than the feeling of wanting company or wanting to do something with another person. Someone who is lonely may find it hard to form human contact.

One of the first recorded uses of the word "lonely" was in William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Act IV Scene 1.

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Many people have times when they are alone through circumstances or choice. Being alone can be experienced as positive, pleasurable, and emotionally refreshing if it is under the individual's control. Solitude is the state of being alone and secluded from other people, and often implies having made a conscious choice to be alone. Loneliness does not require aloneness and is often experienced even in crowded places. It can be described as the absence of identification, understanding or compassion. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loneliness>)

### **Kolvenbach explains the symbolism of the moving walls:**

I'm just trying to describe his state of mind. I'm trying to give a theatrical expression to what it might feel like to be him, a kind of picture of who he is in a way that's swift and effective.

As far as what the play is about, it's how our external circumstances can be affected by what's happening internally. So hopefully that metaphor is going to work. When Beane falls in love, his whole world, the way he perceives the world changes. That's also true for Beane's sister, Joan, and her husband, Harry—the way they perceive each other, the way their food tastes, and the way they look to each other. It all changes because of what's going on inside them. Hopefully that initial scene when the room is closing in on him will set that up somewhat.

(<http://www.steppenwolf.org/watchlisten/backstage/detail.aspx?id=126>)

### **Love**

The representation of love pervades every nook and cranny of *Love Song*. The play is an experiment in how different kinds of love—giving, receiving, remembering—shapes and molds our life experiences.

In Plato's *Symposium*, he defines four kinds of love: eros, storge, philia, and agape. These definitions still shape much of discussion of the term in the western world.

#### *Eros*

Physical love. What we would today call lust.

#### *Storge*

Love between people in romantic relationship.

#### *Philia*

Love among friends. Camaraderie. Root for the naming of the city of Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love.

#### *Agape*

Love of the Forms (Goodness, Truth, and Beauty). Plato thinks that this is the highest expression of love, the one which should be pursued above all others. To love the whole world and all the interconnections in it.

Love is any of a number of emotions and experiences related to a sense of strong affection and attachment. The word love can refer to a variety of different feelings, states, and attitudes, ranging from generic pleasure to intense interpersonal attraction. The word love is both a verb and a noun. Love is not a single feeling but an emotion built from two or more feelings. Anything vital to us creates more than one feeling, and we also have feelings about our feelings (and thoughts about our feelings). This diversity of uses and meanings, combined with the complexity of the feelings involved, makes love unusually difficult to consistently define, even compared to other emotional states.

(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love>)



## Other References in the Script

### *Intern*

Either someone imprisoned in time of war (internment camp) or a recent graduate receiving supervised practical training.

*A. M. D. A. A. D. A.*

As Joan surmises, this does not stand for any medical agency.

### *Hairshirt*

Molly refers to Beane's hat (as she is stealing it) as the "hairshirt of hats".

A garment of rough cloth made from goats' hair and worn in the form of a shirt or as a girdle around the loins, by way of mortification and penance. The Latin name is said to be derived from Cilicia, where this cloth was made, but the thing itself was probably known and used long before this name was given to it. The sackcloth, for instance, so often mentioned in Holy Scripture as a symbol of mourning and penance, was probably the same thing; and the garment of camels' hair worn by St. John the Baptist was no doubt somewhat similar. (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07113b.htm>)

### *Verbose*

long-winded: using or containing too many words

([wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn](http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn))

### *Oligarchy*

Government by a few, especially by a small faction of persons or families.

(<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/oligarchy>)

### *Better Mousetrap*

The full quote—credited to Ralph Waldo Emerson—is "Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door." The iPhone is a perfect example of this: develop the newest and coolest thing around, and people will line up for hours to purchase one.

### *Tuberculosis*

A made-up word.