

THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY

Dramaturgical and Scenographic Dossier

Theater creation project - Madison alone, conceived as the second part of a diptych



Reference image: bi-frontal space, lateral bleachers, central table, entrance upstage and full depth of the room.

Working version for Kelli Connors / Carousel Music Theater. This English version is intended to give a global view of the artistic and spatial proposal while the full production dossier remains in progress.

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1. Foreword - love as revelation, not anecdote

This dossier deals, for the moment, with Madison alone. It is conceived as a continuation of the Phedre dossier, without yet merging the two works into a single diptych document. Here, Madison appears as a play of apparition: the apparition of a man in a kitchen, the apparition of desire inside a regulated life, the apparition of a memory which, twenty-two years later, asks to be handed down.

The performance is not simply the account of a four-day passion. It is the story of a woman who, long after choosing not to leave, refuses to let die the part of herself that was revealed by that encounter.

The dramaturgical core is therefore double: on one side, the incandescent event of 1965, almost impossible to grasp because it exceeds words; on the other, the late act of writing, in 1987-1989, through which Francesca transforms a secret into an inheritance. The play does not tell the story of an adultery. It tells the story of the irreducible part of a life, that burning point at which an ordinary existence suddenly opens onto the infinite and then must nevertheless resume its daily form.

The whole performance must hold inside this tension: four days were enough to give a whole life, but that whole life had to continue without the person who had revealed it.

The proposed scenography - central table, lateral bleachers, sheets or suspended canvases upstage, projections of bridges, roads, woods, houses and rural America - turns the stage space into a place of memory rather than a realistic decor. The kitchen exists, but as a center of gravity. The road exists, but as an inner projection. The bridge exists, but as a mental, sensual and moral passage. The audience is placed on both sides of the table, almost inside the house, almost inside the confidence.

2. The sources of the story and the memory device

The play is built on an address to the children. Francesca writes, rereads, entrusts, explains. From the opening, the table is not simply a domestic piece of furniture: it becomes the altar of transmission, the desk of confession, the place where a mother ceases to be only a mother and becomes a complete woman again. The letter opens a fracture in time: 1987 calls 1965; death calls desire; secrecy calls the stage.

The presence of the voice-over is essential. It should not be merely narrative, but spectral. It comes from a time in which everything has already happened. It carries Francesca's painful peace, but also her urgency: the children must know, and the audience must understand that what will be played is not a sentimental recollection, but an intimate truth saved from silence.

The dramaturgy therefore progresses as an affective investigation. The children open an envelope; the audience enters that envelope. The objects - table, letter, cigarettes, brandy, dress, camera, bouquet, suitcase, guitar - are pieces of evidence. But this trial is not meant to condemn or acquit. It is meant to do justice to an inner life.

3. Dramaturgical outline

Francesca Johnson, an Italian-born woman living in Iowa, lives with her husband Richard and their two children on an American farm. One day in August 1965, while her family is away at the Illinois State Fair, a photographer named Robert Kincaid arrives at the house. He is looking for Roseman Bridge, one of Madison County's covered bridges. Francesca can give him directions; she chooses to accompany him. That tiny choice opens a breach.

Between them, recognition is immediate. Robert is not only a man passing through: he is the one who sees what Francesca believed was lost. Francesca is not merely a woman available by chance: through Robert, she rediscovers her sensitive intelligence, her desire, her culture, her humor, her body, her Italian past and her capacity to dream. In four days they cross an entire life: meeting, conversation, meal, walk, music, eroticism, love, the proposal to leave, and renunciation.

Francesca does not leave. Not out of cowardice, but because she knows that her departure would destroy lives that depend on her. Sacrifice does not cancel love: it transforms it into duration. Robert leaves, but he remains within her. Twenty-two years later, Francesca asks that her ashes be scattered at Roseman Bridge, symbolically joining the man to whom she wants to give what remains of herself after having given her life to her family.

4. The central question - what is a fulfilled life?

Madison asks a simple and vertiginous question: can a life be true when it is divided between fidelity and desire, between duty and revelation, between what one gives to one's own and what one keeps for oneself? The play does not settle this morally. It does not say: Francesca should have left. Nor does it say: Francesca was right to stay. It makes us feel that both truths coexist and that neither destroys the other.

Francesca loves Richard with a calm, grateful love, built through time, family, children, work and the farm. But Robert reveals another dimension of love: impulse, eroticism, poetry, risk, absolute availability to the other. The play refuses to rank these two loves in a simple hierarchy. It shows only that they belong to different orders of existence.

The drama is born there. Francesca does not choose between a good man and a bad man, between lie and truth, between duty and pleasure. She chooses between two forms of truth. The greatness of the character lies in the fact that she pays the price of both: she does not betray her family by leaving, but she does not betray Robert by forgetting. She stays, then she writes. She is silent, then she transmits.

5. Francesca - the woman beneath the mother

Francesca is the absolute center of the play. Everything begins with her, everything returns to her. The character must never be reduced to a romantic heroine or to a frustrated woman. She is more complex: cultivated, ironic, restrained, sensual, practical, dreamlike, loyal, audacious in flashes. She lives in a world that has gradually narrowed around her: the farm, the kitchen, meals at fixed hours, her husband's television, neighborhood conversation, the norms of a small rural community.

But this narrowing has not abolished her inner world. It has only buried it. Robert does not create Francesca; he reveals her to herself. He makes visible forces that were already present: her literary culture, her Italian memory, her relationship to the sea, to language, to scents, to music, to gestures. That is why the love that is born is not merely physical. It is a recognition of totality.

Her interpretive journey could be formulated as follows: from polite availability to awakening, from awakening to surrender, from surrender to lucidity, and from lucidity to an assumed secret. Francesca is never passive. Even when she renounces, she acts. The final renunciation is not pure submission; it is a terrible act of responsibility.

6. Robert - the man of the road, the man of the gaze

Robert Kincaid arrives as a stranger, almost as an apparition. Photographer, traveler, poet, man of the roads, he carries with him a freedom Francesca has lost or perhaps never truly possessed. He is not a cynical seducer. His power comes from a rare mixture: intensity, delicacy, solitude, humor, availability to the beauty of the world. He knows how to look. And because he knows how to look, he makes Francesca visible.

Robert is a man of the image, but he does not consume images. He does not take things: he composes them, interprets them, listens to them. His line about photography - not taking a picture, but making one - is fundamental for the staging. It can guide the whole aesthetic of the performance: not to illustrate Madison, but to create before the audience the mental image of Madison.

There is also in Robert a dimension of obsolescence. He feels he belongs to an older world, threatened by organization, standardization and consumption. This melancholy gives him tragic depth. He represents not only the temptation of elsewhere, but a disappearing relationship to the world: taking time, following roads, stopping because a place is beautiful, recognizing poetry in a kitchen, a bridge, a light, a face.

7. Richard and the children - decisive absences

Richard, Michael and Carolyn are absent for most of the 1965 action, yet their absence is active. They are offstage, and yet they organize the final decision. The performance must make us feel that Francesca is never morally alone: the house is empty, but it remains inhabited by the family. Domestic gestures, objects, schedules and habits all recall those who will return.

Richard must not be caricatured. He is not the enemy. He is the man of a world, an era, a conception of marriage and domestic life. His inability to reach Francesca's dreams is not active cruelty. It is a limit. This is precisely what makes Francesca's choice tragic: she is not leaving a tyrant; she would risk wounding a man who loves her in his way, and children who did not ask for any of this.

The children appear at the end as recipients of a truth that exceeds them. They must accept that their mother was something other than a mother. The play forces them, like the audience, to leave behind the family image and to recognize the existence of a complete being behind the maternal function.

8. Main axes of meaning

8.1. The bridge - to cross, or not to cross

Roseman Bridge is both a real place and a major metaphor. A bridge allows passage from one bank to another; Francesca approaches the passage without fully crossing it. She accompanies Robert to the bridge, then returns home. Later, her ashes will symbolically cross that passage. The bridge is therefore the place of deferred possibility: what was not lived in biography will be accomplished in ritual.

8.2. The kitchen - prison, theater, sanctuary

The kitchen is first the place of duties: meals, family, routine, maintenance of the domestic world. But in the absence of her family, it becomes a space of transformation. There, one speaks of art, poetry, capitalism, Italy and desire. One drinks, smokes, dances and loves. The kitchen is no longer only the place where Francesca nourishes others; it becomes the place where she herself is nourished.

8.3. Photography - seeing and being seen

Robert photographs bridges, but the intimate stakes lie in the gaze cast upon Francesca. Photography reveals a question: what does it mean to be seen? Not looked at as a wife, a mother, a neighbor, but as a desirable, intelligent, mysterious and irreducible being. The upstage projections can arise from this logic: they are not postcards, but sensitive plates on which memory slowly develops.

8.4. The secret - shame or preservation?

Francesca's secret is not a simple concealment. It is an inner room. For years, it protects what could not survive exposure to social judgment. But in the end, this secret must change status: it becomes transmission. The letter does not ask for absolution; it asks for recognition.

8.5. Eroticism - the spirituality of the body

The eroticism of Madison must be treated without heavy illustration. It is born of approach, delay, listening, temperature, clothes, water, cigarettes, hands, light on a face. It is essential that the performance make the body felt without displaying it. Physical love here is an experience of knowledge: Francesca discovers her own body as a landscape long ignored.

9. A dramaturgy in five movements

Movement	Inner action	Scenic treatment
I. The envelope	Death opens the secret. Francesca writes so that her entire life can finally be read.	Isolated table. Voice-over. Tight light. Upstage still almost black.
II. The arrival	Robert enters the routine. A request for directions becomes an invitation to passage.	Entrance upstage or from the side. Light projection of road, dust, heat, distant bridge.
III. The awakening	Conversation, meal, poetry, photography: Francesca recognizes herself in Robert's gaze.	The table becomes workshop, kitchen, landscape. The sheets begin to receive mental images.
IV. Love	Ordinary time is suspended. Bodies and words create a shared being: the "we."	Warmer, lower light. Night sounds, rare music. More organic, less descriptive projections.
V. The choice and the trace	Francesca renounces leaving but refuses to forget. Memory becomes legacy.	Return of distance. Rain, road, bridge. The sheets become shrouds, screens and veils of memory.

10. Scenographic project - a kitchen crossed by the road



Reference image: central table, close spectators, frontal space with projection onto sheets upstage.

The scenographic project can be held in one simple image: a long table at the center of a bi-frontal space, bleachers on both sides, and suspended sheets upstage receiving projected images. The table is the kitchen, but it is also the road, the bridge, the invisible bed, the writing place, the surface on which traces are deposited. It allows Madison to be staged without cumbersome realism, retaining only what matters: two bodies, a house, a memory, a projected America.

The bleachers replace scattered chairs and give the audience a more concentrated, more ritual presence. The spectators look at the table as a line of division. They are almost witnesses to a meal, almost the children to whom the letter is addressed, almost the neighbors who must not know. This position creates a precious tension: the secret is exposed at the center, but each person receives it in silent proximity.

The visible entrance upstage becomes a dramaturgical axis. Robert arrives through it, or from a diagonal that imaginatively extends the road. Francesca, at first, belongs to the table and to the house. The space must narrate this displacement: at the beginning, she is assigned to the domestic center; little by little, the projections, the light and Robert's presence enlarge that center until the outside enters the kitchen.

11. Projected sheets - memory, linen, veil, screen

The suspended sheets upstage are a very strong idea because they belong both to the domestic world and to the mental world. They are household sheets, signs of Francesca's life: laundry, bodies, the marital bed, women's invisible labor, summer heat, linen drying. But they are also fragile, irregular, porous screens able to receive the images of the road, the bridges and the memory.

We should not seek overly clean projection. On the contrary, the fabric should disturb the image. The bridge should appear like a memory: crossed by folds, shadows and breaths. The spectator must feel that the image is not a pasted-on decor but a memory returning.

The sheets are not only a projection surface: they are the house linen transformed into the surface of the unconscious.

This solution also allows the intimate and the immense to speak to one another. Francesca hangs out sheets; the whole of America is projected onto them. Robert photographs bridges; the house becomes a darkroom. The upstage depth becomes both landscape and brain, exterior and interior, real road and dreamed road.

12. Projected images - avoiding illustration, creating inner states

The projections should be conceived as states, not postcards. They may come from covered bridges, rural roads, woods, farm facades, dust, late-afternoon light, rain, windows, photographic surfaces. But their function is not to say: we are in Iowa. Their function is to make visible what passes through Francesca.

- At the beginning: images almost absent, or very pale. The house dominates. The outside world remains far away.
- When Robert arrives: the appearance of vanishing lines, roads, bridges, dust, depth. The outside calls.
- During the awakening: images of details, vegetation, light, wood, fragments of bridge, as if Robert's photographic gaze contaminated the stage.
- During love: less realistic, more abstract images - wood matter, sheets, skin, water, reflections, backlight.
- At the moment of choice: the return of a more frontal, harsher image - road, rain, truck, impossible bridge.
- At the end: the bridge may become almost white, almost erased, like a place of disappearance and reunion.

In this logic, the projected image is never more important than the actors. It must breathe with them, withdraw when speech needs nakedness, and return when speech touches the unsayable.

13. The table - axis of performance and instrument of montage

The central table is the organic heart of the performance. It is to this table that Francesca symbolically asks her children to return. Around it the bodies approach. On it the objects are placed. From it time can shift.

It can have several successive functions without realistic transformation: writing table, breakfast table, kitchen table, photographic work table, dinner table, confession table, table of mourning. Its weight matters: it must be anchored, almost archaic. It represents the house, but also what survives those who inhabited it.

The acting can be organized around three regimes of the table: distance, when Francesca and Robert face one another; sharing, when they prepare, drink, smoke, eat; fusion, when the table ceases to be an obstacle and becomes a common surface, almost a horizontal bridge between them.

14. Light - from domestic warmth to inner storm

Light must follow the intimate weather of the play. August 1965 is heat, humidity, suspended time. The light should not be merely realistic; it must make the temperature of desire perceptible. At first: domestic light, low, slightly yellow, almost imprisoned by the house. Then, with Robert: longer diagonals, entrances of sun, backlights, glints on the sheets.

Night is essential: it allows words that the day forbids. Candles, lamps, pendant lights and small sources can create intimacy without closing the space. In a bi-frontal configuration, care will be needed to keep the actors visible without losing the fragility of shadow. Shadow must surround, not hide.

The final rain or the storm of choice can shift the light into a colder, sharper register. The real world returns. Passion must then collide with an almost cruel visibility: one must choose, and the choice is irreversible.

15. Sound and music - an American memory crossed by Italy

Even though this dossier privileges the meaning of the play, sound can help construct Madison's mental space. The point is not to over-musicalize, but to let the outside be heard: summer insects, distant road, engine, radio, wind, steps on wood, shower water, rain, pages, cigarette, dishes, breath. These domestic and natural sounds are the true partners in performance.

Musically, several strata can coexist: the blues of the opening, giving an American depth; Italian opera, recalling Francesca's inner world; Dylan or Robert's guitar, inscribing the period and the road; and above all silence, which must have a major place. Madison is a play in which silence is never empty: it is desire, modesty, decision, memory.

Music must not tell the spectator what to feel. It must open a space. It can arise from a real source - radio, guitar, song - then continue slightly in memory, as if the stage retained a vibration after the source has fallen silent.

16. Acting - to hold back in order to burn more deeply

The danger in Madison would be to play the passion too quickly. The strength of the piece comes from restraint. Everything must be built by degrees: politeness, disturbance, humor, curiosity, recognition, vertigo, surrender, fear, lucidity. The actors must allow the audience time to see love being born, not announce it.

Francesca and Robert meet not only because they desire each other. They meet because they speak a language each thought had been lost. The preparation of the roles must therefore give great importance to intellectual and sensory listening. The conversation scenes are not explanatory tunnels: they are erotic scenes in the deepest sense. Each shared idea brings the bodies closer.

Robert must keep a form of modesty. His freedom is not arrogance. Francesca must keep her power. Her disturbance is not weakness. The more adult, lucid and capable of restraint both characters are, the more dangerous the love will appear.

17. The choice scene - an immobile tragedy

The moment when Robert asks Francesca to leave with him is the tragic summit. It must not be played as a simple couple scene, but as a scene in which two conceptions of existence face each other. Robert offers the absolute: the road, the world, love without division. Francesca sees that absolute, desires it, understands it, but she also sees the destruction it would cause.

This scene demands great sobriety. The temptation would be to push it toward melodrama. On the contrary, Francesca's intelligence must be heard. She knows that leaving with Robert might transform their love itself into guilt, flight and wound. Staying is atrocious, but leaving would not be simple. It is the impossibility of both exits that creates tragedy.

The scenic device can then tighten. The table becomes a boundary again. The projections can lose their warmth. The bleachers, until then accomplices of the secret, become almost a silent tribunal. The audience is not meant to judge; it must experience the impossibility of judging.

18. The ending - giving what remains

The ending is not only a separation. It is a reorganization of time. Francesca stays with her family, but Robert becomes a permanent inner presence. He takes nothing away from her; he accompanies what she continues to give. The final letter allows us to understand that love was not buried: it was kept, then transmitted.

The request that her ashes be scattered at Roseman Bridge has considerable beauty. Francesca gave her life to her family; she wants to give what remains of herself to Robert. This sentence must be the key to the performance. It does not diminish the family. It simply affirms that a part of her belonged only to this love, and that it would be unjust to let it disappear.

Scenically, the sheets can then become shrouds, veils, blank pages, almost empty screens. The projection of the bridge can dissolve into light. The image no longer needs to be descriptive: it becomes a place of passage, almost a funerary place, but a peaceful, luminous, reconciled one.

19. Madison today - why stage this play now?

To stage Madison today is not to cultivate nostalgia for a great impossible love. It is to question the way lives are often built on invisible renunciations, particularly women's lives. It asks what remains unformulated in an existence because family, society, period or modesty do not know how to receive it.

The play also speaks of the memory of parents. It forces adult children - and therefore the audience - to recognize that those who raised us had desires, secrets, mistakes, complex loyalties, zones of fire. It asks us to love beings not despite their secrets, but with their secrets.

Finally, Madison speaks of art. Robert is a photographer; Francesca writes; the performance projects images onto sheets. Everything is a matter of trace. How does one keep an apparition? How does one make survive what lasted only four days? Theater may be the answer: an art of the instant which, like the love of Francesca and Robert, disappears at the very moment it occurs, yet leaves a lasting imprint.

20. Artistic synthesis

This proposal for Madison must assume a clear line: a theater of intimacy crossed by landscape. Two actors at the center, a table, close bleachers, sheets upstage, images breathing with memory. Nothing decorative. Nothing psychological in the narrow sense. The stage as a darkroom: an buried image is slowly developed there.

The performance should be sensual but modest; popular but deep; narrative but poetic; American through its roads and bridges, European through Francesca's Italian memory; simple in its means, vast in its resonances. It must make us feel that love, when it truly arrives, does not merely disturb bodies: it changes the entire understanding of a life.

Madison is not the story of what might have been. It is the story of what was, absolutely, for four days, and was enough to illuminate everything that followed.

21. Staging reference points - working version

- Keep the bi-frontal configuration with bleachers, making the audience witnesses placed at the heart of the secret.
- Use the table as the single stable element: everything else can be light, sound, image and movement.
- Make the sheets a major dramaturgical sign: domestic linen, projection screen, veil of memory, darkroom.
- Avoid illustrative realism in the projections; prefer images that are crossed, fragmented and breathing.
- Work with heat: slowness, humidity, suspended time, daily gestures becoming charged with desire.
- Give silence a central place: the most important decisions must be visible before they are spoken.
- Never make Richard a simplistic foil: the tragedy comes from the coexistence of several loyalties.
- Let the bridge appear as a progressive motif, never as a mere tourist destination.
- Treat the letter as a scenic act: writing, transmitting, asking to be understood.
- Build Robert as a man of the gaze, not as a predator: his strength is first of all his attention.
- Build Francesca as a sovereign woman: her final renunciation is a decision, not an erasure.

22. Short presentation formula

In an Iowa kitchen, a woman unknowingly awaits the event that will give new meaning to her entire life. A photographer is looking for a covered bridge; he finds Francesca. She can show him the road; she chooses to accompany him. Four days later, he will leave alone. She will stay. But nothing will ever be the same again.

Our Madison unfolds in a bi-frontal space: a long table at the center, bleachers on either side, and suspended sheets upstage on which the fragile images of roads and bridges appear. The house becomes a darkroom. The memory develops before our eyes. Beyond the love story, the performance questions what, in a life, remains secret, burning and irreducible, and one day asks to be transmitted.

23. Internal reference notes

Working document developed from the structured text of Sur la route de Madison, from dramaturgical notes concerning the meaning of the play, and from the two scenographic reference images for the table / bleachers / projected sheets configuration.

Working version - to be completed later by the common diptych dossier, final credits, full cast and creative team, final images and production data.