SOFTWARE & TECH

Sure Thing A Play By David Ives

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Introduction: A Play That Rewrites the Rules of First Dates

In the vast landscape of contemporary theater, few one-act plays have captured the delightful awkwardness and serendipitous magic of human connection quite like **Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives**. First performed in 1988 as part of Ives' celebrated collection *All in the Timing*, this brief but brilliant piece has become a staple of theater festivals, acting classes, and dinner theaters around the world. At its core, **Sure Thing** is a deceptively simple story: two strangers, Betty and Bill, meet in a café. But what makes this play unforgettable is its structure. Every time a conversation misfires—due to a clumsy remark, a wrong opinion, or a social misstep—a bell rings, and the scene resets, allowing the characters to try a different approach.

This clever mechanism transforms an ordinary encounter into an extraordinary exploration of timing, compatibility, and the "right" way to say the right thing. The play asks a question that resonates with anyone who has ever fumbled through a first date: what if you could erase a mistake and start over? In this article, we will dive deep into the world of **Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives**, examining its plot, themes, characters, and lasting impact on modern theater.

Overview of the Premise and Structure

The entire action of **Sure Thing** takes place in a single café setting. The two characters, Betty and Bill, are both seated at separate tables when Bill builds up the courage to approach her. What follows is a rapid-fire series of attempts at conversation. The play is built on a loop: if either character says something that derails the interaction—such as a snobbish comment about books or an awkward compliment—a bell rings. The actors then return to a previous line, and the dialogue branches off in a new direction.

Characters

- Betty: A sharp, witty, and discerning woman who is waiting for her boyfriend but is open to conversation. She is not easily impressed but is looking for genuine connection.
- Bill: A nervous, eager, and sometimes socially clumsy man who is trying his best to make a good impression. His repeated failures and subsequent resets form the comedic backbone of the play.

The Bell as a Narrative Device

The bell is the defining structural element of **Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives**. It acts as a reset button, allowing the characters to refine their responses. Each reset is not a simple repeat; it is an opportunity for growth. With each new attempt, Bill and Betty learn a little more about what works and what doesn't. The bell creates a rhythmic, almost musical quality to the dialogue, and it keeps the audience engaged, wondering which version of the conversation will ultimately "stick."

Themes That Resonate

Sure Thing is a rich text that explores several timeless themes.

The Role of Timing in Relationships

The title itself—*Sure Thing*—implies a guaranteed success. But the play humorously demonstrates that there is no such thing in human interaction. Timing is everything. A statement that comes off as confident in one reset can sound arrogant in another. The play suggests that connection is less about saying the "right" thing and more about saying it at the "right" time. The constant resets mirror the internal replay we all experience after a conversation, thinking, "I should have said it this way instead."

Social Anxiety and the Fear of Judgment

Bill's nervous fumbling is a universal experience. The play captures the anxiety of meeting someone new—the fear of saying something stupid, of being judged, of being rejected. Each bell ring represents the relief of a do-over, a fantasy we have all wished for in awkward social situations. **Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives** validates that anxiety while also assuring us that persistence and genuine intent can overcome a rocky start.

The Mechanics of Compatibility

The play also examines what makes two people "compatible." It is not just about sharing the same taste in books or movies (though that helps). It is about the rhythm of the conversation, the ability to recover from a misstep, and the willingness to be vulnerable. As the resets cycle through different combinations of personality traits and opinions, the audience sees that compatibility is a dynamic, negotiated process, not a static checklist.

David Ives: The Mind Behind the Masterpiece

To fully appreciate **Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives**, it helps to understand the playwright himself. David Ives is an American playwright, screenwriter, and novelist known for his witty, intellectual, and often metatheatrical work. Born in Chicago in 1950, he rose to prominence in the 1990s with *All in the Timing*, a collection of one-act plays that includes *Sure Thing*, *The Philadelphia*, and *Words, Words, Words*.

Ives' Signature Style

Ives is a master of language and structure. He uses wordplay, repetition, and unexpected twists to create comedy that is both smart and accessible. His plays often break the fourth wall or employ surreal elements to explore everyday themes. In **Sure Thing**, the looping structure is not just a gimmick; it is the method through which he explores the fragility and resilience of human connection. Ives once noted that he wrote the play after observing how quickly a first impression can be shattered by a single wrong remark.

Other Notable Works

- The Philadelphia: A play about a man trapped in a metaphysical "Philadelphia," where he cannot get what he wants.
- Words, Words, Words: Three monkeys in a cage are tasked with typing Hamlet.
- The Lives of the Saints: A comedy set in a convent.

Each of these works showcases Ives' ability to take a simple, even absurd, premise and mine it for profound insights about human behavior.

Analysis of Key Elements in the Play

Dialogue and Pacing

The dialogue in **Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives** is fast, sharp, and layered. Because the scene resets so often, every line has to count. The pacing is crucial; the actors must move at a brisk tempo to maintain the illusion of spontaneity. The quick back-and-forth also mirrors the rapid-fire thoughts that race through our heads during a nerve-wracking first meeting. Ives' dialogue is naturalistic despite the surreal structure, making the

characters feel real even as they are caught in a temporal loop.

Humor and Wordplay

The humor in **Sure Thing** comes from the contrast between the characters' intentions and their actual words. When Bill tries to compliment Betty and it comes out as a critique, the audience laughs—not at him, but with him, recognizing their own similar blunders. The bell adds a slapstick element; the reset is often accompanied by a physical jolt or a quick freeze, creating a comedic rhythm that enhances the verbal jokes.

Character Development Across Resets

While the play is only about fifteen minutes long, Bill and Betty undergo significant development. Each reset peels back a layer. Bill begins as a bumbling suitor and gradually reveals himself to be thoughtful and earnest. Betty starts as a skeptical woman waiting for someone else and eventually shows her own vulnerability and openness. The journey is not linear; it is iterative. By the end, the audience feels as though they have witnessed a complete relationship arc, condensed into a series of moments.

Production History and Reception

Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives premiered at the Manhattan Punch Line Theatre in New York City in 1988. It was an immediate success and became the anchor piece of the *All in the Timing* collection, which went on to become one of the most produced one-act collections in the United States.

Off-Broadway Success

The original production of *All in the Timing* opened Off-Broadway in 1993 and ran for over 600 performances. Critics praised Ives for his "clockwork precision" and his ability to blend high-concept comedy with genuine emotion. *The New York Times* described **Sure Thing** as "a beautifully crafted miniature that says more about the fragile dance of courtship than many full-length plays."

Global Reach and Adaptations

Since its debut, **Sure Thing** has been performed in dozens of countries and translated into multiple languages. Its universal themes and minimal technical requirements (just a table, two chairs, and a bell) make it a favorite for amateur and professional companies alike. It has also been adapted for radio and film, though the stage version remains the definitive experience.

Why the Play Endures Today

Relatability in the Age of Dating Apps

In an era of swiping and ghosting, the anxieties portrayed in **Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives** feel more relevant than ever. The play captures the awkwardness of making a first impression in a world where one wrong message can end a potential relationship. The bell resets are a metaphor for the way we edit and re-edit our texts, our profiles, and our opening lines. The play reminds us that behind every digital interaction is a real person hoping to say the right thing.

A Pedagogical Tool for Actors and Writers

Because of its tight structure and clear character arcs, **Sure Thing** is widely used in acting classes and writing workshops. Actors practice timing, physical comedy, and vocal variety. Writers study Ives' use of repetition and variation to create drama within a loop. The play is a masterclass in economy: nothing is wasted, every line serves the narrative.

Timeless Comedy

Humor changes over time, but the comedy of social interaction remains constant. The awkward compliment, the

accidental insult, the desperate recovery—these moments are eternally funny because they are eternally
Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives does not rely on topical references or cultural gags; its comedy comes from the universal experience of trying to connect with another person.

Conclusion: A Sure Thing in Theater History

Sure Thing: A Play By David Ives is a remarkable achievement in brevity and depth. In just a few minutes, it explores the fragility of first impressions, the anxiety of social interaction, and the beautiful randomness that leads to genuine connection. Its innovative structure—the loop, the bell, the reset—has influenced a generation of playwrights and has become a benchmark for one-act comedy.

But beyond its technical brilliance, the play endures because it is fundamentally hopeful. It suggests that even when we stumble, even when we say the wrong thing, there is always a chance to start again. And sometimes, if we keep trying, we just might find our sure thing. Whether you are a theater lover, a student of writing, or someone who has ever fumbled through a first date, this play speaks directly to the heart of what it means to be human: flawed, persistent, and always reaching for connection.

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