

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING



**BAG &
BAGGAGE**

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING

adapted by Julie Kramer, based on the book by Rona Jaffe
directed by Michelle Milne
September 10-27, 2015

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CAST

Cassie Greer* Caroline Bender
Jessi Walters* Mary Agnes Russo
Kaia Marja Hillier April Morrison
Morgan Cox Amanda Farrow
Arianne Jacques* Gregg Adams
Stephanie Kay Leppert Brenda Zaleski
Andrew Beck* Eddie Harris
Joey Copsey* Mike Rice
David Wilder Savage
Mr. Shalimar
Ronnie Wood

BAG&BAGGAGE STAFF

Scott Palmer
Artistic Director

Beth Lewis
Managing Director

Arianne Jacques
Patron Services Manager

Cassie Greer
Engagement Officer

Emily Trimble
Company Stage Manager

CREW/PRODUCTION TEAM

Michelle Milne Director
Emily Trimble† Stage Manager
Props Mistress
Ephriam Harnsberger Assistant Stage Manager
Melissa Heller† Costume Designer
Megan Wilkerson† Scenic Designer
Molly Stowe† Lighting Designer
Scott Palmer Sound Designer
Matthew Hays Run Crew

*Member of the Bag&Baggage Resident Acting Company

†Member of Bag&Baggage Resident Production Team



INTRODUCTION



A still from the 1959 film "The Best of Everything", based on a New York Times ad that inspired Rona Jaffe's title

Rona Jaffe was born in 1931 in Brooklyn, New York, and grew up in the affluent Upper East Side of Manhattan. Jaffe, a struggling writer, was temporarily jobless in the mid-1950s when she went to visit a friend who was working as secretary to the editor-in-chief at Simon & Schuster. The famous Hollywood producer Jerry Wald happened to be in the room, and told her he was looking for a book about being young, female, and working in New York. Jaffe decided she was the perfect person to write this, and a year later, *The Best of Everything* was born. Published in 1958, it was made into a movie the following year, and was adapted for the stage by Julie Kramer in 2012.

The Best of Everything draws on Jaffe's personal experiences, and the experiences of her friends, to tell the story of five young female employees at the fictional Fabian Publishing Company in New York City. Over the course of two years, we follow the lives of Caroline, April, Gregg, Mary Agnes, and Brenda, as they navigate, work, life, men, marriage, heartbreak, friendship, and everything in between.

BACKGROUND: Women and Work in 1950s America

America in the 1950s experienced a huge boom of suburban communities. World War II had ended in 1945, and along with men returning home, the United States Government had passed the GI Bill in 1944, benefitting war veterans with low-cost mortgages and enabling many young couples across the country to buy their own homes. The first mass-produced suburb - Levittown, New York - was built in 1951, and was rapidly followed by the creation of suburban neighborhoods around the country. These houses were built quickly and cheaply, resulting in uniformity of the design and "homogenous" suburban neighborhoods.



An aerial view of Levittown in the early 1950s

The decade after World War II also included a "baby boom," where millions of Americans began having families. New forms of media - in particular, the television - promoted a consumer culture particularly geared towards families, with pressure to "keep up with the Joneses" with material purchases of items such as cars and appliances. This new media also helped create the new suburban ideal with the television show *Leave it to Beaver*: the white, nuclear family with specific gender roles.



A Metropolitan Life Insurance ad from 1947

Television media also enabled America to fight a propaganda war in the face of the threat of Soviet Communism, which became intrinsically tied to the ideal of the American Woman. The horrors of Communism were depicted in the lives of Russian women, shown dressed in gunnysacks as they toiled in drab factories, while their children were placed in cold, anonymous day care centers. In contrast to the "evils" of Communism, the American Woman was depicted with her feminine hairdo and delicate dresses, tending to the hearth and home as she enjoyed the fruits of capitalism, democracy, and freedom.

In addition to the homemaker image, there was tremendous societal pressure on young women to focus their aspirations on a wedding ring. The U.S. marriage rate was at an all-time high after World War II, and couples were tying the knot, on average, younger than ever before, with most women walking down the aisle at age 19. Although women may have had other goals in life, the dominant theme promoted in the culture and media at the time was that a husband was far more important for a young woman than a college degree. If a woman wasn't engaged or married by her early twenties, she was in danger of becoming an "old maid."

With the cultural emphasis on marriage and family, a majority of brides were pregnant within seven months of their wedding. Large families were typical, and from 1940 to 1960, the number of families with three children doubled and the number of families having a fourth child quadrupled. For *single* young women in American society, however, being pregnant was totally unacceptable, especially for white women. Girls who "got in trouble" were forced to drop out of school, and often sent away to distant relatives or homes for wayward girls. Shunned by society for the duration of their pregnancy, unwed mothers paid a huge price for premarital sex.

**show her
it's a man's world**

Van Heusen
man's world
ties

For men only! . . . brand new man-talking, power-packed patterns that tell her it's a man's world . . . and make her so happy it is. And man! . . . how that Van Heusen seamanship makes the fine fabrics hold their shape. And for Christmas . . . here's the Christmas tie that is *really* different. **\$2.00**

Other Van Heusen ties from \$1.00 to \$2.50

Phillips-Jones Corp., N. Y. J. N. Y., Makers of Van Heusen
Shirts • Sport Shirts • Ties • Pajamas • Handkerchiefs • Collars

Housekeeping Monthly published "The Good Wife's Guide" in one of their 1955 issues, offering the following tips:

- Have dinner ready. Plan ahead, even the night before to have a delicious meal ready, on time for his return. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospect of a good meal (especially his favourite dish) is part of the warm welcome needed.
- Prepare yourself. Take 15 minutes to rest so you'll be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your make-up, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh-looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people.
- Listen to him. You may have a dozen important things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first – remember his topics of conversation are more important than yours.
- Make the evening his. Never complain if he comes home late or goes out to dinner, or other places of entertainment without you. Instead, try to understand his world of strain and pressure and his very real need to be at home and relax.
- Don't complain if he's late home for dinner or even if he stays out all night. Count this as minor compared to what he might have gone through that day.
- Arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a low, soothing and pleasant voice.
- Don't ask him questions about his actions or question his judgment or integrity. Remember he is the master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him.

A good wife always knows her place.

This was the era of the “happy homemaker,” where domesticity was idealized, and women were encouraged to stay at home if the family could afford it. Women who chose to work when they didn’t need the paycheck were often considered selfish, putting themselves before the needs of their family.

While women may have been pretty, domestic, quiet, and happy on the surface, many were deeply discontented with this life. Betty Friedan, an early leader of the Women’s Rights movement of the 1960s and 70s, wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, in which she discussed how stifled and unsatisfied many suburban women were in the 1950s:

“Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night - she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-- ‘Is this all?’”

And indeed, within this happy, domestic framework, the seed was being planted for a new female role in American society. The growth of consumerism, media, and suburban living had set the stage for the emergence of the two-income family: homes and cars, refrigerators and washing machines, telephones and multiple televisions require higher incomes, and women in the workplace was part of the answer.



Because of labor shortages during World War II, more women had entered the workforce than ever before; in the post-war era many continued to work in spite of the national emphasis on domesticity and family, though jobs that were acceptable for women became much more traditional. In 1950 women comprised 29% of the work force and as the decade went on that number only increased. By the mid-50s, 70% of all employed women were working in clerical positions, on factory assembly lines or in the service industry; less than 15% of women were employed in a professional capacity; and the number of women in management was even far less, topping out at 6%. Though there was little choice in available jobs, women often pursued work - as they moved to the suburbs and filled their homes with the latest appliances - to allow their family to live in the manner they felt they deserved. Women who had the opportunity to pursue a post-secondary education were also more likely to enter the workforce; these women were the most fortunate as they could demand higher salaries than their less educated counterparts.



In *The Best of Everything*, we see Caroline, April, Gregg, Mary Agnes, and Brenda, all in their 20s, working as secretaries in the typing pool of a New York publishing company. While they are working girls, most aspire to the domestic ideal of 1950s American life, and men and marriages consume their thoughts and conversations. There is the expectation that women find work only as a means to locating a husband; the job itself is a secondary consideration. Miss Farrow, at the age of 36, is the hardened “old maid,” and Caroline is constantly questioned for valuing her career over her potential future marriage.

**WOMEN WRITING, ADAPTING, AND DIRECTING:
Rona Jaffe, Julie Kramer, and Michelle Milne**



Rona Jaffe, born in Brooklyn, New York in 1931, was the daughter of an elementary school principal and a socialite, and grew up privileged, unlike many of the characters she writes about in *The Best of Everything*. But similar to some of her characters - Miss Farrow and Caroline in particular - Jaffe was professionally ambitious, and after graduating from the Dalton School and Radcliffe College by the age of 19, she became a file clerk at Fawcett Publications and proceeded to work her way up to becoming an associate editor. Also like her characters, Jaffe had numerous romantic adventures, though she never married, preferring to avoid what she once dismissively described as “the rat race to the altar.”

Much of *The Best of Everything* is based on Jaffe’s own experiences as a working girl in the publishing world, as well as on the experiences of her college best friend Phyllis, who was the personal secretary to the top editor at Simon & Schuster. Jaffe also interviewed fifty working women as she set out to write her book, mostly to compare notes and question them about things that were normally not mentioned in polite company. “Back then,” Jaffe wrote in her forward to the 2005 reissue of *The Best of Everything*, “people didn’t talk about not being a virgin. They didn’t talk about going out with married men. They didn’t talk about abortion. They didn’t talk about sexual harassment, which had no name in those days. But after interviewing these women, I realized that all these issues were part of their lives too.” All of these less-savory issues make an appearance in *The Best of Everything*: it is frank about women’s newfound sexual freedom; it is honest about their ambitions; and in addressing these ideas unapologetically, *The Best of Everything* was considered racy and controversial upon its initial publication.

Jaffe also questioned whether there is even such a thing as “the best of everything” and, through her work, pointed out the great myth in the 1950s promise of “having it all”, far before many other writers were able to articulate this idea. Though *The Best of Everything* sometimes gets described as “superficial” and “empty”, it is, in fact, one of the first pro-feminist works to even ask whether managing a career and a romance were compatible. *The Best of Everything* continues to have resonance with American culture today: the gender pay gap still exists, and women in positions of authority in the workplace is still a topic of discussion, with the continued prevalent idea that a woman must “be a b****” in order to advance her career.



“Secretary and Boss” from Lambert/Getty Images



50s secretary pinup illustration by Gil Elvren

After publishing *The Best of Everything* in 1958, Jaffe went on to write cultural pieces for *Cosmopolitan* magazine during the 1960s, and publish fifteen more novels between 1960 and 2003. Before her death in 2005, Jaffe established herself as a patron of the arts, founding the Rona Jaffe Foundation in 1995, which provides grants to emerging female writers. “All writers need support,” she is quoted as saying, “but many women in early career have fewer resources available to them and often many demands made upon them. It gives me great pleasure to help some of them make their way at this early stage.”

TERMS TO KNOW



The typing pool at the Mattel offices in New York City in 1956

typing pool: a group of secretaries working at a company available to assist any executive without a permanently assigned secretary. After the widespread adoption of the typewriter but before the photocopier and personal computer, pools of typists were needed by large companies to produce documents from handwritten manuscripts, re-type documents that had been edited, type documents from audio recordings, or to type copies of documents.

temp: slang for “temporary worker” - a situation where the employee is expected to leave the employer within a certain period of time. Temporary workers may work full-time or part-time, depending on the individual case. A temporary work agency, temp agency or temporary staffing firm finds and retains workers; other companies, in need of short-term workers, contract with the temporary work agency to send temporary workers, or temps, on assignments to work at the other companies. The staffing industry in the United States began after World War II with small agencies in urban areas employing housewives for part-time work as office workers. Over the years the advantages of having workers who could be hired and fired on short notice and were exempt from paperwork and regulatory requirements resulted in a gradual but substantial increase in the use of temporary workers, with over 3.5 million temporary workers employed in the United States by 2000.

Third Avenue bars: Third Avenue is located in the Bowery, a neighborhood in the southern portion of the New York City borough of Manhattan. The Bowery went from premier entertainment district in the 1800s, to a skid row of cheap theaters, flophouses, and eponymous bums by the middle of the 20th century. Third Avenue bars in the 1950s would have been among the most disreputable in the city.

Vassar: Vassar College is a private liberal arts college in the town of Poughkeepsie, New York. Founded as a women’s college in 1861 by Matthew Vassar, the school became a co-ed institution in 1969, and has a reputation for being both progressive, as well as populated mainly by children from wealthy upper-middle class families.

Radcliffe: Radcliffe College was a women’s liberal arts college in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and functioned as a female coordinate institution for the all-male Harvard College. It had popular reputation of having a particularly intellectual and independent-minded student body. On October 1, 1999, Radcliffe College was fully absorbed into Harvard University; female undergraduates were henceforward members only of Harvard College while Radcliffe College evolved into the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

Unveiled, The Cross, America’s Woman - fictitious magazines - entertainment, religious, and homemaking - that are referenced in *The Best of Everything*

Louella Parsons: the first American gossip and movie columnist, who began writing for the *Chicago Record Herald* in 1914, and subsequently moved on to the *New York Morning Telegraph*.

Functional Modern in blond oak or grey walnut. Note unusual fitted molding framing the front. Automatic self-rolling tray. Model No. 2655 55995

Make her a Lucky Lane Bride!
GIVE HER A LANE CEDAR CHEST NOW!

A 1951 ad for Lucky Lane Trousseau Chests

trousseau: an assortment of items such as clothing and household linnen that were collected in a chest by an unmarried young woman in anticipation of married life. Building up a trousseau was a common coming-of-age rite until approximately the 1950s, and was the working girl's equivalent of an ambitious young man planning and saving for marriage; it was typically a step on the road to marriage between courting a man and engagement. "Trousseau" can also refer to the chest itself in which these items were stored.

Gimbels: an American department store corporation from 1887 until 1987. The company is known for creating the Gimbels Thanksgiving Day Parade, the oldest parade in the country; Gimbels was also once the largest department store chain in the country. The Gimbels New York flagship store was located in the cluster of large department stores that surrounded Herald Square, in Midtown Manhattan, New York City.

garter-snapper: a term used popularly in the 1920s-1950s that refers to a man who has sex with many different women or has a lot of one night stands. The term originates in this time period due to the fact that women often wore garters to hold up their tights and therefore someone who often "snaps" these garters takes them off.



*A busy New York City automat in 1942.
Image from the National Geographic Archives.*

Automat: a precursor to modern fast food, an automat is a restaurant where simple foods and drink are served by vending machines.

Sardi's: a historic, classy restaurant located in the Theater District in Manhattan, in New York City. Known for the hundreds of caricatures of show-business celebrities that adorn its walls, Sardi's opened at its current location on March 5, 1927.

Greenwich Village: a neighborhood on the west side of Lower Manhattan, New York City, known as the Bohemian capital and the East Coast birthplace of the counterculture movements that shaped the latter half of the 20th century. "The Village", as it's commonly referred to, saw a huge influx of writers, poets, artists, and students during the 1950s, all fleeing from what they saw as oppressive social conformity, and creating their own looser and more liberal culture.

Saks: Saks Fifth Avenue is an American department store chain, incorporated in 1902 as Saks & Company, whose flagship store and corporate headquarters are located in Midtown Manhattan, New York City. Saks quickly gained a reputation as one of the more luxurious department stores, and its legacy and promise of luxury and style lives on today.

The Barberry Room: refers to The Barberry Room of the Berkshire Hotel, which originally opened as "the Elbow Room" in April 1938. When it opened, the Elbow Room was one of the most elegant and exclusive private clubs in New York, and continued to be so even after its name change. The room featured mirrors on facing walls to reflect the images of patrons, and was a particular favorite with theatrical and television people, many from CBS headquarters across the street on Madison Avenue.



The Barberry Room's main dining room, photographed c. 1937

QUESTIONS AND PROMPTS

1. Caroline is constantly referred to as “ambitious” by other characters in the play.
 - a. Do you agree that she’s ambitious? What is it that makes her come across this way?
 - b. How are our modern notions of “ambition” similar to or different from the notions that are displayed in *The Best of Everything*?
 2. “I wonder if you could have Miss Farrow’s life without being mean like Miss Farrow?” April muses to Caroline at one point. Do you think being a woman in a successful executive career without being mean and hardened would have been possible in the 1950s? What about today?
 3. Julie Kramer notes in the script that “this is a story about the girls in the typing pool, not the men in the offices, so most of the male characters are played by one actor. Only Eddie is played by a separate actor, because to Caroline, he’s not like all the others. Whether she’s right about that or not remains to be seen.”
 - a. Do you think Eddie is just like all the other men or not?
 - b. What is the effect on the audience of having one actor play four characters when all the other actors are playing single characters?
 4. The title of the play comes from an actual ad that Rona Jaffe saw in the *New York Times*: a job listing that promised job-seeking secretaries “the best of everything.” Julie Kramer uses the line at the beginning of the play, as Eddie wishes Caroline “the best of everything” upon their breakup. Discuss how both Jaffe and Kramer use the phrase ironically.
 5. Rona Jaffe mentions in her 2005 notes on *The Best of Everything* that sexual harassment had no real name in the 1950s. From what you know about the time period, what do you think made men believe that this kind of behavior was acceptable? What about this has changed, and what has stayed the same?
 6. Each female character in *The Best of Everything* has a distinct arc - a journey that she goes on. Describe the arc of each character, and discuss their similarities and differences.
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SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- Read blog posts from the cast and crew at <http://bagnbaggage.org/category/blog-bloggage/>
- Rona Jaffe’s Web Site: <http://ronajaffe.com/>
- Richard Gorey’s lecture notes on *The Best of Everything*: <http://www.joancrawfordbest.com/goreyboe.htm>
- The Book Snob blog: <https://bookssnob.wordpress.com/2011/08/03/the-best-of-everything-by-rona-jaffe/>
- HuffPost* review: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carey-purcell/the-best-of-everything_b_1959346.html
- New York Times* review: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/08/theater/reviews/the-best-of-everything-based-on-rona-jaffes-novel.html?_r=1
- Robert Gottlieb’s *New Yorker* piece: <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/girls-before-girls#entry-more>
- The Times-Tribune* preview: <http://thetimes-tribune.com/lifestyles/scranton-central-alumnae-write-produce-star-in-best-of-everything-adaptation-1.1378055#.UGIMgTCzwYw.facebook>
- The Guardian* book reviews: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/may/28/best-everything-rona-jaffe-review>
and: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/may/08/best-everything-rona-jaffe-review>
- Women in 1950s America: http://bookbuilder.cast.org/view_print.php?book=42401
- The Guardian* on secretaries: <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/sep/15/secretaries-servant-canny-career-move>
- CNN Money* on secretaries: <http://money.cnn.com/2013/01/31/news/economy/secretary-women-jobs/index.html>
- 1950s Opportunities for Women from Edith Hornbook Beer Digital Scrapbook: <http://alanis.simmons.edu/edith/opportunities>
- Notes on the *American Experience* documentary, “The Pill”: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/peopleevents/p_mrs.html
- American Memory of the 1950s Housewife: <http://americanmemoryofthe1950shousewif.bgsu.wikispaces.net/Stereotypes>
- HuffPost Live* secretary discussion: <http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/top-job-for-women-is-secretary/510eb06e2b8c2a13850006ea>