

Love for Menabilly

a play for radio by Jo-Ann Challis

Daphne du Maurier invested money and love in Menabilly – an illustrious Cornish house that she could rent but never own. Why? Perhaps because a house can have a personality as vivid, as demanding and as human as its tenant.

Menabilly is a house with a past, but seemingly no future. Hidden away from prying eyes on a Cornish peninsula, it's been abandoned by its owners and left to rot. Mena is hurting and lonely, and embarrassed by its shabby appearance. But everything changes when a young woman finds the house and is instantly entranced.

The young woman is Daphne du Maurier, who yearns for a house she can get lost in, that gives her the privacy and secrecy she craves. Menabilly needs to be restored and cherished, to be appreciated for all its charms. They would meet each other's needs perfectly.

Years after first discovering Menabilly, Daphne (now a successful author with a husband at war) finally gets the chance to make the house her home. But as Mena can never be sold outside the Rashleigh family, she has to accept a lease with strict conditions attached and huge financial responsibilities. Everyone thinks she's mad. And perhaps she is – mad with love for a house. Mena revels in the adoration and its restored beauty.

But the threat of eviction is always present. Daphne can't imagine living in another house. Menabilly can't bear the thought of losing Daphne and returning to the family who mistreated it. And even if the lease is renewed, there's now another obstacle to their happiness – Daphne's husband Tommy. He's retired from his job with the royal family in London and, for the first time in their married life, lives permanently at Mena. Daphne's dragged down by his neediness and moping. Menabilly resents this third wheel who only used to appear at weekends.

When Daphne has to fight to stay in the home she loves, Menabilly is an otherworldly source of strength and urges her on. When Daphne rails against Tommy's presence, Menabilly comforts her with memories of happier times – times that might one day return. But neither Menabilly nor Daphne can control the future, and eventually they must both face the next stage in their lives.

The story is told from Menabilly's point of view. Mena is an engaging narrator, displaying vulnerability, compassion, egotism and jealousy as it witnesses the conflict of Daphne and Tommy's last years together.

Much has been written about Daphne du Maurier's complicated and ultimately unhappy love life. But her relationship with the house that was her home for a quarter of a century is perhaps the most interesting of all. This play explores a possible explanation for Daphne's obsessive devotion to Menabilly: can a house have its own emotions and desires that bond with and influence those of its human occupant?

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