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Plays on Principle: Ten 10-Minute Plays

By

PAT MONTLEY

Dramatic Publishing Company

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Plays on Principle (which originally included seven of the ten plays here) was premiered at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore in 2019 as part of a bicentennial celebration. The production was funded by a Creativity Grant awarded to the playwright by the Maryland State Arts Council.

CAST:

Christine Demuth	Michelle Lee
Chris Edwards	Richard Peck
Flinn Leigh Eng	Vernon Rey
Melissa Feliciano	Molly Ruhlman
Layla Hodge	Owen Sahnnow
Timothy Johnson	Sally Wall

PRODUCTION:

Director	Pat Montley
Set, Sound & Lighting Designer	Daryl Beard
Stage Managers	Naomi Berkenbilt, Javier Jaramillo
Set Crew	Jim Houston, Scott Macleod, Richard Peck, Owen Sahnnow

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For Sally
my best critic
and dearest

Just Deserts

CHARACTERS

DERRICK: any race; high-school senior, has been cast as the Duke in *The Merchant of Venice*.

PENNY: any race; high-school senior, has been cast as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.

TIME: The present.

PLACE: A rehearsal room—bare, except for two chairs.

Question: Which is more important—justice or mercy?

(At lights up, DERRICK and PENNY, both carrying scripts of The Merchant of Venice, enter to run lines. DERRICK sits with his script open. PENNY closes hers and remains standing.)

PENNY. How long do we have?

DERRICK. Mr. Donaldson said about ten minutes. He's just re-blocking the scene where Antonio makes the deal with Shylock. Then you'll need to get back for Portia's scene with Nerissa. So come on, let's have it.

PENNY *(takes a deep breath, concentrates, recites matter-of-factly)*. The quality of mercy is not strained.

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath;

(She forgets what comes next, makes a face. DERRICK holds up two fingers.)

PENNY (*cont'd*). It is twice blest;

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:

(She strains to remember. DERRICK makes a show-off-the-biceps gesture.)

PENNY (*cont'd*). 'Tis mightiest of the mightiest—

DERRICK (*interrupting*). “In.”

PENNY. 'Tis mightiest *in* the mightiest: it becomes

The thronèd monarch better than his crown;

(She forgets, makes a face. He gestures holding a scepter.)

PENNY (*cont'd*). His scepter shows the force of temporal power,

The attribute to awe and majesty,

Wherein doth sit the fear—

DERRICK. “Dread and fear.”

PENNY. Dread and fear of kings;

(PENNY revs up. Then on a roll, she rushes to the finish line.)

PENNY (*cont'd*). But mercy is above this sceptered sway;

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,

It is an attribute to God himself;

And earthly power doth then show like God's

When mercy seasons justice.

DERRICK (*trying to be supportive rather than critical*). Well, Penny ... you got the *lines* anyway ... almost.

Well, Penny ... you got the *lines* anyway ... almost.

PENNY (*disgusted with herself for forgetting*). Yeah. As long as you're there to cue me.

DERRICK. I will be there. I'm in that scene. It's my one scene. Too bad we didn't have a little more "justice" in casting. I really wanted Bassanio, and instead I got the Duke—a walk-on.

PENNY. He's not a walk-on, Derrick. He's the big man in Venice.

DERRICK. Nevertheless, he's only in Act Four, Scene One. Fifty-seven lousy lines. I got a walk-on, and Lanny Myers got Bassanio. Is that fair? Is that "just"?

PENNY. You've got a great costume.

DERRICK. What if The Don had given Portia to Cylene, and Nerissa to you? Would you think that was fair?

PENNY. I'd trust his judgment.

DERRICK. Really? When we all know you're a much better actor.

PENNY. This is high school, not Broadway. Teachers make choices for, like, our educational benefit or whatever.

DERRICK. If that's true, what's the point of auditions?

PENNY. To give us the experience. To challenge us.

DERRICK. So if someone rises to the challenge and does the best audition, shouldn't they get the lead they deserve?

PENNY. All other things being equal, yes.

DERRICK. What other things?

PENNY. Well, the teacher might feel it's, like, more fair to give a lot of students the chance to play major roles than to have the same kids play the leads all the time.

DERRICK. But would that be fair to the more talented students—like you?

PENNY. Doesn't the same thing happen in sports? Coaches try to make sure everybody plays.

DERRICK. Yeah, but they only send in the second string when the score is, like, so lopsided it doesn't matter.

PENNY. Anyway, you wanting to play Bassanio only proves how *undeserving* you are. If you were a true actor, you'd want to play Shylock. He's the real lead.

DERRICK. But I—

PENNY. Obviously, The Don was right to give you a walk-on.

DERRICK. But I wanted to play Bassanio so I could ...
(*Stops himself.*)

PENNY. Could what?

DERRICK. Could get the chance to ... never mind. (*Getting back to the subject at hand.*) Do you really believe it? That mercy is more important than justice?

PENNY. Of course. Don't you?

DERRICK. I don't know. Justice is pretty important. I mean, like everybody deserves equal treatment, don't they? If we don't have that, we have, well, chaos. Even Portia admits that if the Duke doesn't let Shylock take Antonio's pound of flesh—like he's entitled to according to the bond they signed—then, well, that lapse will set a precedent, and then the law itself in Venice will be in jeopardy.

PENNY. I thought you were asking about the real world—not Shakespeare's made-up world.

DERRICK. Shakespeare's *is* the real world. Real ... passions.

PENNY. OK, let's take an example from *our* real world. You have siblings?

DERRICK. A younger sister and a baby brother—(*Teasing.*) who look to me, of course, as a perfect role model.

PENNY (*dismisses this last with an eye roll*). Do your parents treat you all equally?

DERRICK. Sure.