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Dramatic Publishing

Tender Lies

A Full-Length Play

By

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THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

*** NOTICE ***

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A special thanks to my
good neighbor and Spanish translator,
Jacqueline Winant.

TENDER LIES
A Full-Length Play
for Four Men, Four Women, Extras

CHARACTERS

BEN . . . . . nearing forty, with a thoughtful, easy manner*
ARLO. . . . . .about fifty-five, a strong man of working-class background confined to a wheelchair. A good listener; an instant friend.
BENBO . . . . . Ben at sixteen, bright and friendly, but not yet sure of himself.*
ELLIE . . . . . in her mid-seventies, frail and defeated-looking. A woman with aristocratic attitudes and a desire to have life done with.
SHEILA . . . . . Benbo's mother, in her forties. A compulsive talker who is immensely insecure.
ISABEL . . . . . A young, very beautiful woman of twenty-one. She is guarded and sometimes bitter, but capable of great warmth and expression.
MRS. GALARZA . . . . . a woman in her late fifties, overweight and gregarious, but lacking ambition.
MR. BELLON. . . .a man between forty and fifty-five, intelligent, unsure and completely insensitive without meaning to be.
MR. FULLER . . . . . about forty-five, polite and correct.
TWO POLICEMEN

*Played by same actor.

TIME: The Past and The Present
PLACE: San Jose, California

PRODUCTION NOTES

SET

The single set for the play is the porch of a crumbling Victorian in San Jose, California. A sidewalk leads from DR to the porch at C. The porch spans about half of the stage. A railing surrounds it. Three steps are at the center of the porch. A portion of the steps is covered with a ramp for a wheelchair. There is a swing on the L side of the porch. To the back of the porch is the house with a large door in the center and two large, low, functional windows on either side of the door.

L and in front of the porch are several steps leading down into Ellie's apartment in the basement. Also L in front of the porch is Ellie's flower garden with fuchsias, roses and daisies.

R of the porch are the stairs leading to the Galarzas' second floor apartment. These are not connected to the porch, but are a separate staircase running alongside the house. At the top of the stairs are a small landing and the door to the apartment.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

SCENE: The porch of a run-down Victorian house on Seventh Street in downtown San Jose, California.

AS LIGHTS COME UP: Only the outline of the house and porch is visible to the audience. A spotlight picks up BEN as he enters L. He is dressed casually in fashionable clothes and carries a painting under his arm. He crosses in front of the house, pauses momentarily to look at it, then walks DR and addresses the audience. (ARLO is sitting inside the darkened house.)

BEN (inhaling deeply). Can you smell the dill? They drove dump trucks full of it down Seventh Street here. I suppose they still do. Truckloads of dill, and cucumbers, and garlic. We watched a caravan of pickling spices roll by that porch when I was young. You could name the week of the month by the kind of produce pulling into the cannery around the corner.

And if you couldn't see it, you could tell by the smell. This was one of the more *aromatic* neighborhoods in San Jose, where kids like me grew up with a very highly developed sense of *nose*. I can still name the ingredients in a can of fruit cocktail blindfolded – with just one good whiff. I haven't lived on this block for twenty-one years, but the street looks surprisingly the same. (He glances back at the house.) Poverty is very stagnant, at least in its outward appearance. Rich people, of course, can afford to do things over in their own image. I lived in the apartment on the right there for three years. (He points to the window of his apartment.) It was the cheapest refuge my mother, who was running away from my father and New York City, could find. Not long after she found the apartment, she found a job in the personnel office at the cannery. This house changed us. It changed everyone who lived here. Not in a very great way – human beings can be modified, not revolutionized – but in a way worth remembering. I am a writer now, and writers are always re-collecting their past. Something happened today which made me think of this house, made me think it was time to come back, gather up the memories and take them with me. (He pulls the painting out from beneath his arm.) I saw this painting in a small gallery in San Francisco this morning. It's an oil of the house, done in nineteen sixty-one, the last summer we lived in that apartment. I've only seen it once before, but I knew it the moment I saw it. Any of us who lived here would know it. The most outstanding feature of this painting is that it is a lie. (He holds up the picture.) This house doesn't look anything like the house there. (He indicates the

house behind him.) In fact, it's difficult to believe they were intended to be the same place. But it is the same place, you must take my word for it. You see, that house (he points to the one behind him) is only a vision of the mind. Look how it's peeled with age, and how the wood is pocked with abuse. That is what some would call realism; it is the hard truth. (He indicates the painting.) This, though, is a vision of the heart; immune to reality. Don't misunderstand me. I know the value of hard truth. But every artist also knows the value, and the beauty, of a tender lie. (BEN steps R, sets the painting down and takes off his glasses and his shirt. He now wears only a white T-shirt and slacks. He is BENBO more than twenty years younger. Warm summer evening light rises slowly to bathe the porch as ARLO, sitting inside his apartment window in a wheelchair, struggles to put a card table and three chairs through the window onto the porch.)

ARLO (calling out the window). Benbo! I need a hand here. I need two. And how 'bout a couple of legs? I've got a big demand for limbs at the moment.

BENBO (coming up on the porch from R). What are you doing?

ARLO. We're all playing spades tonight out on the porch where it's cool. Besides, I've got tenants moving in upstairs and I want us all to greet them.

BENBO (helping ARLO with the table and chairs). Did you tell my mother about the card game? I don't know where she is.

ARLO. At the all-night pharmacy buying skin cream.

BENBO. Not more skin cream. What is it this time?

ARLO. She thinks she's gonna get a rash.

BENBO. What kind of a rash?

ARLO. She doesn't have it yet, so I suppose it's hard to tell.

BENBO. *Now* what does she think is causing it?

ARLO. Nerves, she said. I set up a date for her tomorrow with Larry Simmons, the warehouse manager down at the cannery.

BENBO. I don't know if that's such a good idea, Arlo. She hasn't been out with anybody in three years . . . since my dad left her. Are you sure she wants to go out with this guy?

ARLO. I didn't ask. I just gave her two movie tickets and told her when to be ready.

BENBO. What about him? Does he want to go out with her?

ARLO. Didn't ask that, either. I just gave him the address.

BENBO. But if they don't really want –

ARLO (interrupting). You're gonna learn, Benbo, that most of us have no idea what we really want. If we did, we'd probably go and get it. As it is, we spend most of our time wanting things that don't make us happy, and the rest of our time trying to be happy with things we don't really want. Put the chairs around the table and I'll bring out the cards. (As BENBO adjusts the chairs and table, ARLO rolls out of the house with a tray of glasses, snacks and cards on his lap. They set the table as they talk.)

BENBO. I don't see why you put up with my mother, Arlo. Nobody else does.

ARLO. She's one of my tenants.

BENBO. I think you have it backward. You're the landlord. You don't have to be nice.

ARLO. I like your mother, Benbo.

BENBO. Listen to her sometime, when she starts going on and on about her age, or her skin problems, or all the people she hates. She invents those idiot rashes, you know? And she doesn't hate people; she's afraid of them. Do you think that's normal?

ARLO. So, who has a corner on normal?

BENBO. She embarrasses me when she starts talking to people, especially about her looks. Why is she so worried about her looks all the time?

ARLO. Your mother wants to be beautiful.

BENBO. It's a little late for that, isn't it?

ARLO. Oh, no! I think she's got a real shot at it.

BENBO. My mother? She's almost forty-five years old.

ARLO. Believe me, Benbo, when it comes to beauty, I've seen some deathbed conversions.

BENBO. She'll never change the way she looks.

ARLO. She won't have to. All she has to do is change the way she sees. It's a vision problem . . . you're gonna learn that, too, some day. (He points to the table.) There, that oughtta do it.

BENBO (walking L and lying down on the swing on the porch). You ever miss the cannery, Arlo?

ARLO. Sure, if I wanted to, I could miss it. We had lots of great guys on the loading dock. We used to race our forklifts around the warehouse. Did I tell you that? We did it when things got a little slow. I made obstacle courses out of the pear crates. Then I'd line us up in relay teams. Four lifts to a team. Then

we'd get one of the truckers to backfire his engine as a starting gun. We'd hand off to one another with a can of green beans.

BENBO (laughing). I'm surprised they didn't fire you.

ARLO. They couldn't. We were the best damn operators they had.

BENBO. How long did you drive a forklift?

ARLO. Just about twenty years. I had to give it up when I started driving one of these. (He is referring to the wheelchair.) It's a different union, you know.

BENBO (uncomfortably). Ya.

ARLO. Well, now, Benbo, it could be worse. The last guy I heard about who was leveled by a box car in a shipping yard, lost more than I did. At least I came out of it with two good biceps and Worker's Comp. I never would've bought this house if something hadn't bumped me off that forklift. Now all I have to worry about is my mortgage payment.

BENBO (sitting up). Have you ever thought of racing your wheelchair, Arlo? Like the forklifts? (He stands and walks over to the porch railing, absentmindedly picking a flower growing on a fuchsia bush near the porch.) We could motorize it. Maybe find an old engine from a Honda Fifty. What about customizing your wheelchair? With tail fins and decals . . .

(ELLIE enters from L just as BENBO reaches for a second flower.)

ELLIE (slamming her cane on to the railing very close to Benbo's hand). My godfry, Benjaman, fuchsias are a very delicate flower, never – I said never – to be pestered. Remove your

hand, please. (As BENBO removes his hand, ELLIE examines the bush, then climbs the steps to the porch. She notices the table and chairs.) Are we playing cards tonight, Arlo?

ARLO. Spades, Ellie.

ELLIE. When did you ask me?

ARLO. When we talked yesterday.

ELLIE (gazing out over the railing into the street). It's useless. I don't recall a word of the conversation. I should write everything down, but I even forget to do that. (She pans her cane along where the street runs in front of the house.) I saw the first truckload of apricots today. The summer season's starting at the cannery.

BENBO. Is that why we're getting new tenants, Arlo? Is it somebody who's going to work at the cannery?

ARLO. Um hum . . .

ELLIE. I always enjoy watching the trucks come in from the Central Valley. Except the pear trucks, the trucks from Alviso. I can't bear to watch the trucks from Alviso. My daddy owned five trucks. We were the only orchard with five trucks, Benjamin, five trucks and a Cadillac, the first Cadillac in the Santa Clara Valley. People used to line up along the Alameda just to watch us drive by on a Sunday. I always wore a hair ribbon when we rode in the car, a pale green one. Now *that* I remember, just as if it were this afternoon. (She turns to ARLO, coming out of her reverie.) Spades, did you say? When will you people learn to play bridge? (She takes her place at the card table.)

ARLO. Ben, run in and get the drinks I set out on the counter, will you? (He speaks to ELLIE as BENBO exits inside the

house.) The flowers look good this year, Ellie. Everybody in the neighborhood says so.

ELLIE. I can't bend down the way I should. I can't do all the weeding it takes.

ARLO. We'll get Ben to help you.

ELLIE. When did I first plant that garden, Arlo?

ARLO. Five years ago. You were my first tenant, remember?

ELLIE. We had two gardeners when I was a child. Chinamen. They never spoke a word of English, as I recall. And we had a couple who took care of the gardening when I was married to Walter Eaton. They lived in the carriage house. I think they were Portuguese or some such thing. (She drifts back to the present.) Why did you make me plant a garden when I came here?

ARLO. You said you liked flowers. You're very good with plants, Ellie.

ELLIE. Do you think so?

ARLO. Sure. And the garden makes the house look a lot better.

ELLIE (looking at the house). God knows it needs something. If I were still a rich woman, I'd will you my estate, Arlo, and you could make this house into what it should be. But I suppose you'd be too proud to take the money.

ARLO. Not me. I got over being proud a long time ago.

ELLIE. Oh, well, maybe it's better the Eaton money is all gone. I'd probably just outlive you . . . like I seem to have outlived everyone else I care about . . . and then I'd be stuck with redoing this house myself.

ARLO. You don't have to worry about that. I've got great plans for fixing up this place. You wait and see.

(BENBO returns with the drinks.)

ELLIE. Oh, I've seen how those plans of yours go, Arlo. And if I get an opportunity to make my final exit before then, I'm determined to take it. You'll forgive me, I'm sure.

BENBO (handing the drinks out). Refreshments, anyone?

ARLO. Do you like the fair, Ellie?

ELLIE. What fair?

ARLO. The county fair, at the end of August. Would you like to go to the fair?

ELLIE. What would I want there?

ARLO. I thought you might want to enter your flowers this year. You have to make them up into an arrangement. Would you like to enter?

ELLIE (interested). My flowers? I could do that, I suppose. At the fair? But I can't do all that work by myself.

ARLO. Ben could help. You think about it.

(SHEILA enters R in a flurry, crosses to the porch and climbs the steps. She wears a raincoat, wig, scarf and sunglasses.)

SHEILA (looking at the drinks). I need one of those. I'm roasting in this coat and wig.

BENBO. Why do you wear that ridiculous outfit downtown all the time, Mother? It's over eighty degrees.

SHEILA (taking a drink). Oh, I don't know. It just makes me feel better. Safer, I think. It's a security thing, Ben. I don't want to explain it.

ARLO. Did you get the skin cream?

SHEILA. Oh, I don't know why I bother. That bus down Santa Clara Street is such a snake pit. And I hate talking to those drivers. They're miserable people, just the bottom rung. They always stare at people –

BENBO (interrupting). That's not too surprising in your case, Mother.

SHEILA (taking off her sunglasses). Well, it makes me uncomfortable. I don't like it. (She takes off the coat, scarf and wig.) Are we ready to play spades? Arlo and I will be partners, Ben. You play with Ellie. (BENBO sits down to the right of ARLO.)

ELLIE. I don't want to deal tonight. My hands are stiff.

ARLO (To SHEILA). What about the skin cream? Did you talk to the druggist? (He begins to deal out all the cards.)

SHEILA. Druggists! I hate to talk to druggists. They want to know everything. And they're so cold . . . like iced fish . . . that's what they remind me of, iced fish with cold black eyes. I made sure I got somebody who's never waited on me before, so I could feel safe. I said I wanted something for a rash. He wanted to know more. They always want to know more. What can you say about a rash which hasn't appeared yet?

BENBO. I'm sure you found something.

SHEILA. Well, I had to or he would have thought I was crazy. I told him I had dark purplish blotches with yellow spots.

ELLIE. Lord and Taylor, Sheila! You're such a shallow pretender. Rashes are red. Use a little common sense.

ARLO (finishing dealing the cards). What did he say then?

SHEILA. He asked to see it.