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Dramatic Publishing

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The Pursuit of Happiness

Comedy by Richard Dresser



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The Pursuit of Happiness

“OFFERS LAUGHS AND KNOWING NODS,
ESPECIALLY FOR BABY BOOMERS.” — *Variety*

Comedy. By Richard Dresser. *Cast: 3m., 2w.* Annie and Neil have placed their hopes and dreams on the shoulders of Jodi, their bright and high-achieving 18-year-old daughter, a high-school senior. Their own regrets and slightly diminished lives will be transformed if only Jodi can get into the right college. But Jodi has other ideas. She wants to take charge of her life, not perform it for the enjoyment and bragging rights of her parents. So she completes her college application but doesn't send it in. By the time Annie and Neil discover this, the deadline has passed and they face the ultimate horror of a child who isn't going to college. Desperate measures must be taken. Annie goes off to her college reunion where a classmate named Spud Ketchum, who had a passionate and unrequited crush on her in college, is now on the admission board. This troubled, lovesick man, unhappy in his own life, just might be able to get Jodi into college. It will be a test of what Annie is willing to do for her beloved daughter. Meanwhile, Jodi's painfully honest college essay has a profound effect on everyone who reads it: her parents, Spud Ketchum and Tucker Nugent, a self-appointed "friend of the family." All are forced to reconsider the choices they've made in their own lives. *The Pursuit of Happiness* is about a culture run amok with bare-fanged competition and a crazed obsession with achievement. The turmoil of college admissions exposes the fault lines in the family and forces Annie and Neil to confront how far they've drifted from their youthful ideals. By the end of the play, Annie, Neil and Jodi are teetering on the verge of a new and more authentic chapter in their lives. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 2 hours. Code: PB8.*

Cover photo: The Laguna Playhouse, Laguna Beach, Calif.,
featuring (l-r) Matthew Reidy, DeeDee Rescher and Joanna Strapp.
Photo: Ed Krieger. Cover design: Jeanette Alig-Sergel

ISBN-13 978-1-58342-568-8

ISBN-10 1-58342-568-3



9 781583 425688

0 2 0 0 8



Dramatic Publishing

311 Washington St.
Woodstock, IL 60098
ph: 800-448-7469

www.dramaticpublishing.com



Printed on recycled paper

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

By

RICHARD DRESSER



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS)

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The Gersh Agency, 41 Madison Ave., 33rd floor,
New York NY 10010 • Phone: (212) 997-1818

ISBN: 978-1-58342-568-8

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In addition, all producers of *The Pursuit of Happiness* must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“Originally commissioned and produced by The Laguna Playhouse, Laguna Beach, California, Richard Stein, executive director, Andrew Barnicle, artistic director, January 2007.”

* * * *

The Laguna Playhouse in Laguna Beach, Calif., Richard Stein, executive director, Andrew Barnicle, artistic director, presented the world premiere of *The Pursuit of Happiness* in January 2007. The production was directed by Andrew Barnicle and included the following artists:

Annie DEEDEE RESCHER
Jodi JOANNA STRAPP
Neil. MATTHEW REIDY
Spud. PRESTON MAYBANK
Tucker. TIM CUMMINGS

PRODUCTION STAFF

Scenic Design TOM BUDERWITZ
Costume Design JULIE KEEN
Lighting Design PAULIE JENKINS
Sound Design DAVID EDWARDS
Casting Director MICHAEL DONOVAN, C.S.A.
Production Stage Manager NANCY STAIGER
Assistant Stage Manager HEIDI WESTROM
Production Manager JIM RYAN

The Contemporary American Theater Festival, Shepherdstown,
W.V., subsequently produced *The Pursuit of Happiness* July
2007, directed by Ed Herendeen, with the following:

Annie ANDREA CIRIE
Jodi CARTER NILES
Neil FRANK DEAL
Spud LOU SUMRALL
Tucker SHEFFIELD CHASTAIN

PRODUCTION STAFF

Set Design ROBERT KLINGELHEOFER
Costume Design DEVON PAINTER
Lighting Design D.M. WOOD
Sound Design SHARATH PATEL
Stage Manager DEBRA A. ACQUAVELLA
Assistant Stage Manager KERI SCHULTZ
Casting by PAT MCCORKLE C.S.A., KELLY GILLESPIE
Understudies MAGGIE KETTERING, BETH TRIFFON

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

CHARACTERS

ANNIE a woman
NEIL her husband
JODI their daughter
SPUD a college classmate of Annie's
TUCKER a co-worker of Neil's

SETTING

The play takes place in the following locations in Maine:

THE HOUSE

Living room/kitchen
Porch steps

THE COLLEGE

A campus lounge
A dorm room

AN OFFICE

A SOUP KITCHEN

ACT ONE

(ANNIE is in the glow of her laptop working on her Christmas letter.)

ANNIE. “Dear friends, is it possible another Christmas is upon us? Actually, full disclosure, it’s come and gone. Time management issues once again proved crippling. As I write this I’m looking out on the harbor on a gray January afternoon and we are all...” *(Hesitates, resolutely.)* “We’re happy. Except Neil is, well, most of you know that Neil’s job is a reliable source of misery and despair. But at home, he seems content. In a quiet, defeated sort of way. I don’t think he feels sorry for himself, I think he feels sorry for the world. As do I. How fragile it all seems. How hard we try to make it matter. And how much it does matter. In tiny little moments. When Neil wandered in with our Christmas tree on December 26th—which he bought at a tremendous discount—I got all teary-eyed.” *(Beat.)* “As I look back, this has been a year of...change. I decided to leave my job—actually I thought of it right after they suggested it, so it was sort of painful because there really aren’t a lot of jobs out there for people with no practical skills. *(Sighs, resumes.)* “And then there’s Jodi. Somehow she managed a 3.96 G.P.A. while playing field hockey and

volunteering—” (*To herself.*) And this is why people loathe Christmas letters. Boast boast boast! Vomit vomit vomit! (*Resumes.*) “Jodi is off to college in the fall. We don’t know where, but any school would be lucky to have her...” (*To herself.*) Shut up! I mean it! (*Resumes.*) “Of course I’d love it if she went to Bowen, where I went. I want her to have all the experiences I had...” (*Thinks, then to herself.*) Maybe not *all*. I hope she’ll have a little more self-respect than that. (*Resumes.*) “I can look at myself and say, well, Annie, you made it partway up the mountain. But Jodi will get to the very top and I’ll be right there next to her. And that’s a view I can hardly wait to see.” (*LIGHTS FADE on ANNIE.*)

(*LIGHTS COME UP on JODI, who’s reading and correcting what she’s written.*)

JODI. “What they told me is ‘write what you know.’ So it’s my sad duty to report that after nearly twelve years of very expensive private education, I don’t really know anything. Except how to participate in class discussions when I haven’t read the book and why we *must* recycle and how a condom can be your best friend. All of which could have been covered in a handout. The other thing I know is that going to college is total and complete bullshit, the first sickening step of buying into a future that guarantees in ten years you won’t recognize your life. I look at my parents and sometimes it seems as if they just woke up from some long drugged-out sleep. I love them, but please, can we set the bar a little higher than just feeling lucky we weren’t wiped out in the latest disaster? I mean it’s great to survive, but then what?

(Beat.) The main reason I can't sleep is because of the corruption. It starts at the top with the big evil that taints us all. But you hack through that and there's another layer of corruption where you can get what you want if you were born to the right parents or sleep with the right person and you keep going to another layer under that and another under that and you finally get to the bottom and you know who's waiting? You. And probably me, although I fight it from the depths of my soul. There we are, making the convenient choice instead of the hard choice. Finding a warm place in the sunshine when so many are shivering in the cold. It's us. It's all of us. We are weak and selfish and corrupt and when I look at what we've done to the world I know in my heart we are living in hell and it's only going to get worse. *(Beat.)* I'd also like to say I'm sorry this application is late and I would love to attend your college." *(LIGHTS FADE on JODI.)*

(LIGHTS COME UP on NEIL.)

NEIL. It's my pleasure to report on the fourth-quarter activities of our Strategic Planning Group. Economic indicators point to an uncertain future. In such a potentially perilous climate, prudence is, of course, recommended. But we advocate going beyond the normal parameters of prudence into a course of highly aggressive, even speculative prudence. Such extreme risk avoidance may be said to carry undue risk when so many alarm bells would indicate a more restrained course of caution. But we contend that these are such extraordinary times, the uncertainty so great, the risks so potentially devastating,

that the gravest risk would be to avoid risk in a moderate rather than a bold and frankly risky manner. Of course, we could be wrong. *(Beat.)* But I don't think we are. But we might be. Thank you.

(LIGHTS COME UP on THE HOUSE as JODI listens.)

JODI. Dad?

NEIL. Oh. Jodi. I'm sorry you had to hear that. It's just a speech I have to give tomorrow. Nerve-wracking at the moment, but in a hundred years it won't much matter.

JODI. I need to talk to you. Before she comes home.

NEIL. What is it?

JODI. I'm hating school. Hating it. It's so worthless and regimented. It's a place of death.

NEIL. But you're doing so well.

JODI. And it so doesn't matter. It's just obedience. I've proved I'm a willing slave. Now can I stop, please?

NEIL. You're almost done. College will be different.

JODI. No, it's the same poison. The same I'm-better-than-you achievement. I'm sick of it.

NEIL. All your friends are going to college.

JODI. I'm sick of my friends. If you aren't throwing up from stress and stealing Mommy's meds then you just don't fit in.

NEIL. We'll talk about it with your mother, okay?

JODI. It's over for me, Dad. And I'm going to need your support in the fight with Mom.

NEIL. Okay.

JODI. Okay I have your support?

NEIL. We'll talk about it.

JODI. Will you back me up, Dad?

NEIL. Let's keep the clay wet.

JODI. Please. I need to know you'll be there for me.

(ANNIE enters with shopping bags. A long look.)

ANNIE. *What?*

JODI. What do you mean, what?

ANNIE. I mean what's wrong?

JODI. Nothing's wrong.

ANNIE. Oh please, I can always tell when something's wrong.

JODI. Well, maybe this time you're wrong.

ANNIE. Maybe. But I don't think so.

JODI. I don't want to go to college.

ANNIE. What?

JODI. I don't want to go to college.

NEIL. She's serious. We almost talked.

JODI. Everything I do is to get the credentials to do the next thing. And I look at the next thing and it's even more disturbing than what I'm already doing. You always encouraged me to think for myself. Well, this is me thinking.

ANNIE. I'm going to cry.

JODI. Please. That is so cheap.

ANNIE. Jodi, you do things your own way. And you'll do this your own way. And I say bravo.

JODI. Bravo?

ANNIE. It's a nasty world out there and you'll have to learn to navigate it for yourself. Neil? Are you okay with Jodi's decision?

NEIL. I thought I was. But now that you are I'm not so sure.

ANNIE. Then let's wait and see where she gets accepted.

JODI. What difference does it make, if I'm not going?

NEIL. You need options. Plan B. My whole life is one giant fallback position.

ANNIE. Once you get accepted you can decide if you want to go or not.

JODI. I won't get accepted anywhere.

ANNIE. Of course you will! You have wonderful grades and killer board scores and inspiring activities and—

JODI. And I haven't actually applied.

ANNIE. Yes you have.

JODI. No. I haven't.

ANNIE. Jodi, you have. You spent forever on your essay which you wouldn't let me read. You took the applications to the post office months ago.

JODI. I went right up to the mailbox and opened it and I just couldn't do it. It felt like my whole life would disappear.

NEIL. It cuts down on your chances if you don't apply. But not by much.

ANNIE. The deadline was December 15th.

JODI. Oops. I guess I missed it.

ANNIE. This isn't fair. It isn't just about you.

JODI. Who else is it about?

ANNIE. Don't you remember our rain forest project? We got third prize and we should have had first—

JODI. That was fifth grade.

ANNIE. You fell asleep. I was up all night with pipe cleaners and Elmer's glue and Dewar's and you went off in the morning all bright-eyed and got a prize. You never even thanked me.

JODI. Thank you, Mother.

ANNIE. Oh, please, I don't want thanks.

JODI. Then what?

ANNIE. We were building something together. The Jamestown Colony and the irrigation system and the Scottish castle—

NEIL. The castle was all me. Remember?

ANNIE. The point is, we were a team. All of us. I was a major part of your education until calculus, which was never meant for children anyway.

JODI. What do you want me to do?

ANNIE. I want you to apply to Bowen.

JODI. But it's too late.

ANNIE. Maybe I can help.

JODI. How?

ANNIE. This may be hard for you to believe but I was quite well known on the campus of Bowen College.

JODI. What were you well known for?

ANNIE. Does it matter?

JODI. Academics? Sports?

ANNIE. I was...popular.

NEIL. She was. Your mother was popular. She was a popular girl.

ANNIE. I think that counts for something. But you have to send in that application.

JODI. Okay.

ANNIE. Promise?

JODI. Yes, Mother, I promise. But that doesn't mean I'll go. (*JODI leaves.*)

ANNIE. This is a nightmare. How could this happen to us?

NEIL. She's worked so hard. Maybe she needs time off.

ANNIE. There's no such thing as "time off." Time continues to pass, you just haven't done anything with it.

NEIL. *I* took time off.

ANNIE. I'm not sure your life is such a great example for Jodi or anyone else.

NEIL. Those were wonderful years. They made me what I am—

ANNIE. Which concerns me. It was different back then. Now you're on one side or another. Starving or trying to lose weight. You need serious credentials just to get a job you hate and a depressing little cell to live in. I'm so scared.

NEIL. Of what?

ANNIE. That she won't go. After all we sacrificed.

NEIL. What did we sacrifice? We bought pretty much whatever we wanted. We always went on vacation.

ANNIE. But we could have bought *more*. We could have gone on *longer* vacations. We came very close to doing without so she would have this opportunity.

NEIL. I want her to be happy.

ANNIE. Of course we want her to be happy. And she will be happy. She has to stay on track. She has to go to college.

NEIL. Do you think she can still get in?

ANNIE. Her only chance is Bowen. I wish we'd given them more money. I wish I'd been a more active alumna.

NEIL. You've been a fine alumna. There's nothing we can do. Just hope.

ANNIE. Hoping isn't enough, Neil. (*LIGHTS FADE on NEIL and ANNIE.*)

(*LIGHTS COME UP on JODI reading her essay.*)

JODI. Think of all the people who gave their lives so we could pursue happiness. Isn't that kind of a lot of pressure? Maybe it's one of those brilliant ideas that's been around too long. It means everyone works too hard and buys too much and the rest of the world hates us. Plus, look around. Has it really made us happier? If you see someone walking down the street smiling, don't you assume they're insane? (*JODI puts the essay in an envelope as LIGHTS FADE.*)

(*LIGHTS UP on a CAMPUS LOUNGE. WILLIAM "SPUD" KETCHUM is alone. One hand is bandaged, he has a drink in the other. ANNIE is sipping white wine and surveying the room. She sees SPUD and goes to him.*)

ANNIE. Spud Ketchum?

SPUD. Annie? Wow. I was just thinking how no one I know ever comes to the reunions anymore.

ANNIE. Do you always come back?

SPUD. I work at the college. Admissions.

ANNIE. Oh, really?

SPUD. It's crazy this time of year.

ANNIE. I can imagine. My daughter Jodi is applying.

SPUD. Yes, we just got her late application.

ANNIE. Too late?

SPUD. Very late.

ANNIE. Oh, dear. Will you still consider her?

SPUD. Doubtful. But I almost never say never.

ANNIE. Well, I stay out of it. Wherever she ends up, I'm sure she'll be happy.

SPUD. Good for you! A lot of parents go crazy, living through their kids.

ANNIE. Frankly, I'm more "live and let live."

SPUD. Yes, I remember.

ANNIE. It's really good to see you, Spud.

SPUD. People call me William now.

ANNIE. You'll always be Spud to me. Those were amazing parties you had. You were always such an upbeat guy.

SPUD. Well, sure, I was drunk all the time. It got to be a problem after college when I was working construction. We were supposed to gut this house but I got the address wrong. Should have been a clue that all the furniture was still there. Anyway, that was my wake-up call.

ANNIE. What did you do, go into a program?

SPUD. No, I just dug deep and got it under control. It saved my life.

ANNIE. Good for you.

SPUD. I go one week totally dry, then the next week I drink whatever the hell I want, don't even try to stop me. This is my drinking week.

ANNIE. You were the one guy I could always talk to.

SPUD. And you were always so good to me. Which meant a lot. There was that whole faction that didn't much like me.

ANNIE. Remember when the parties went all night and we'd go to that diner—

SPUD. Jimmy's. I'm glad you remember. I think about that stuff a lot.

ANNIE. You do?

SPUD. Pretty embarrassing, right?

ANNIE. Pretty sweet, to tell you the truth.