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A ONE-ACT PLAY WITH PROLOGUE

What Are We Going To Do With Mama?

ZINITA FOWLER



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY



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(WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH MAMA?)

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**WHAT ARE WE
GOING TO DO WITH MAMA?
A Play In One Act
For Five Women and Three Men**

CHARACTERS

MAMA

JOE, Mama's son
MARTHA, his wife
MARTY, their daughter

AMY, a daughter
GEORGE, her husband

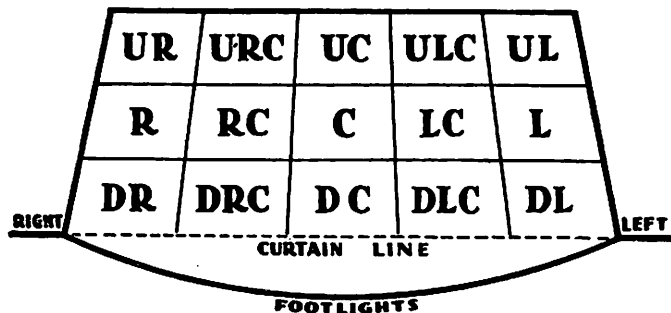
ESTELLE, a daughter

JONNY, a son

TIME: *Present*

PLACE: *Porch and sitting room of Joe and
Martha's house*

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for *up right*, RC for *right center*, DLC for *down left center*, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

PROLOGUE

The stage is in darkness. An old, quavery, off-key voice can be heard singing, "Hush, little baby, don't say a word, Mama's gonna buy you a mockin'bird . . ." (etc.) as lights come up slowly to reveal MAMA seated in her rocking chair on the sun porch [at stage R] singing to a doll she holds in her arms.

(MARTY enters DR, skipping along happily until she spots MAMA. She stops, staring at MAMA with a childish, puzzled frown.)

MARTY. Gramma, what're you doing with my doll?
(MAMA stops rocking and singing and stares at the child.)

MAMA (querulously). Amy, is that you? Where are the other children? You're all going to be late for supper.

MARTY. I'm not Amy, Gramma. I'm Marty. And it's morning. Supper's in the afternoon.

(MARTY backs away from MAMA and sidles into the house through door. Lights dim on porch and come up in sitting room of the house. JOE is standing at the window and MARTHA is seated on the sofa, RC. It is obvious that they have been having a discussion which stops

abruptly as MARTY enters.)

MARTY. What makes Gramma talk so funny, Mama? She called me Aunt Amy and she's rocking my old doll and singing to her. (Giggles.) Kip says she's goin' bananas.

MARTHA (sharply). Marty! I won't allow you to say such things! Kip should be ashamed of himself.

MARTY. Does Kip mean that Gramma is crazy? Is that what he means? She does act awful funny — nearly all the time. (JOE leaves his place by the window and walks over to stand behind the sofa.)

JOE. That's enough, Marty. Run and play now. Your mother and I have some things to discuss before I go to school.

MARTY. Okay. But I don't know why she'd want that old doll. I threw it in the garbage last week. (Laughs.) Wait'll I tell Kip.

JOE (very stern). Marty! (MARTY looks at her father, shrugs, and skips out of room, L. As soon as she is gone, JOE and MARTHA seem to pick up their discussion where they left off when Marty interrupted them.)

MARTHA. There, you see, that's the kind of thing I was talking about. And it's getting worse. You know I haven't minded having your mother here. She was a lot of help when the children were small, but for the last few months — (Makes a helpless gesture.) It's been impossible. You can see the effect on the children, and — well — Joe, I just can't have my friends here any more and it's my turn to have the Faculty

Wives this month —

JOE. I know. I know. It's too much for you. You've done more than your share — we both have. I'm thinking it's time we got a little help.

MARTHA. How about Amy? Could she and George look after Mother Martin for awhile? They don't have any children. Or Estelle? Mama stayed with her several times when she was — sick.

JOE. I rather doubt it. Amy didn't want Mama when she was all right, and I just don't know about Stell. She's so — so unstable.

MARTHA (becoming a little strident). Well, at least they could help us with the expense. The children are getting old enough now to need things that cost money. It's not fair for us to have to carry the full burden of your mother — (Breaks off.) I'm sorry, Joe.

JOE. No — no, you're right, honey. I don't blame you for feeling that way. (Pauses, then hesitantly.) I — uh — talked to Mr. Sears over at the Golden Glow Nursing Home yesterday. They'll keep Mama for five hundred a month, plus a few extras, like doctor's fees and —

MARTHA (interrupting). Five hundred a month! Oh, Joe, we can't afford that. Kip has to have braces on his teeth and this furniture simply has to be refinished. We just can't do it!

JOE. Not alone we can't. In fact, I wouldn't even make the decision to put her in a home without talking to the others. I think it's high time the family got together and decided what we're

going to do about Mama. I'll get letters off to Amy and Stell and Jonny today.

(MARTHA and JOE freeze in position as lights go down on main set. Lights come up in area designated for Amy and George. AMY is seated on a stool, alone. GEORGE enters L, tugging at his tie to loosen it. AMY looks at him anxiously.)

AMY. How did it go?

GEORGE. Not good. Not good at all. Just about the time I think we have the deal all tied down, something else comes up. (Takes letter from his pocket and tosses it on Amy's lap.) And this didn't help, either. What in hell makes Joe think we can just drop everything and tear out there to Wichita to talk about your mother? God, I need a drink. (AMY picks up letter, opens it and reads quickly.)

AMY. We can't afford *not* to go. She is my mother, you know, and if we're not there, they may try to put her off on us. We simply can't have her *here*, George.

(AMY and GEORGE exit L, arguing, as lights go down. Lights come up on stage area DL. ESTELLE is seated DL by a hand telephone, riffling through a stack of mail.)

ESTELLE. Bills. Bills. Junk mail. (Dumps them in wastebasket. Comes to letter from Joe, turns

it over, looking at it carefully.) Hmm, wonder what Joe wants. (Tears letter open and reads, quickly and nervously. She dials with jerky motions and waits, tapping her long fingernails on the receiver.) Sam? . . . Listen, Sam, honey, I just got some bad news. (Pause.) No, not that. Listen, are you positive those try-outs are in the morning? (Pause.) Well, do you think maybe I could get in early? I mean, I've got to go to Wichita. (Pause.) Yeah, *Wichita*, in Kansas. My brother lives there, and – well, something's come up about my mama. (Pause.) I don't know, Sam. No, I've got to go. (Pause.) Yeah, I understand. Well, look, I'll be there bright and early in the morning. If I can't get in for an early try-out, my family will just have to wait, that's all. (Pause.) Yeah. Okay. Okay. G'bye, Sam.

(ESTELLE hangs up telephone, takes a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of her pocket, shakes one out and puts it in her mouth. She lights up and blows out a puff of smoke as lights go down. Lights come up on stage area for JONNY. He is standing DR with a hoe in one hand and an unopened letter in the other. He squints doubtfully at the letter.)

JONNY. A letter from home! (He tucks the hoe under one arm, opens the letter and reads it. His face brightens and a smile spreads across

his face. He yells.) Yowee! Hey, gang, I'm goin' home to get mama!

CURTAIN

**WHAT ARE WE
GOING TO DO WITH MAMA?**

SCENE: Joe and Martha's sitting room, as in the Prologue. A small bar now stands against the wall R.)

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: MARTHA is seated on sofa with JOE standing nearby. AMY is perched uncomfortably on edge of chair. GEORGE paces up and down, drink in hand.)

GEORGE. How in hell did she get this bad so quick? We were here — oh — five, six months ago, wasn't it, Amy? How could this happen so soon?

MARTHA (gently). It hasn't been soon. It was Christmas the last time you were here — and this is September. If you remember, Mother Martin was very forgetful then —

AMY (breaking in, defensively). You must remember, Martha, that George is in big business. He can't just drop everything and come to see Mama for a few days like — like —

JOE. Like some unimportant teacher, is that what you mean, sis? We don't have to be reminded that George is in *big* business.

GEORGE. Now what in hell do you mean by that remark?

JOE. You know what I mean. (AMY gets up and

goes to stand beside GEORGE.)

AMY. Now, Joe, if you're going to bring up that stock deal again —

JOE. Maybe I am. Maybe I think you and George should be reminded that there was a time when seeing Mama was pretty damned important. You were the ones who needed her then. Remember, Amy? George?

GEORGE (uncomfortably). Well, sure, I remember. But anyone can have reverses in his business deals. That's nothing to be ashamed of.

JOE. But I happen to know that you were having more than just a — reverse — if that's what you choose to call it. I may live in the academic world, George, but I do read the papers —

AMY (quickly). None of it got into the papers — at least, George's part of it didn't.

JOE. Because Mama bailed him out, right? But some of the guys involved in that bogus stock deal went to jail because they couldn't lay their hands on any ready cash. Mama saved your neck, George. It's as simple as that.

MARTHA. And when you couldn't pay her back, she lost her home and a lot of her money. I don't think you should forget that, George.

GEORGE. All right, all right, so I lost Mother Martin's money. I just got in a bind, that's all. Money's been tight for a long time. You just don't know how it is in the world of business, Joe. They eat you alive.

AMY. You act like George lost the money on purpose. Well, let me tell you, he's got a deal

going right now that's sure to make enough to pay it all back, plus what the house was worth.

JOE. Yeah, we know. And how many deals does this make that were going to pay off big and get the money to pay Mama back? (Snorts.) Mama's just lucky she had our home to go to when she lost her house, that's all.

AMY (sarcastically). Oh, yes, and you and dear Martha took Mama in out of the pure goodness of your hearts, didn't you? It wasn't that you needed a built-in babysitter and cook and housekeeper when you were having babies like rabbits, was it? Don't try to put on the pure and saintly act with us, Joe!

JOE. Aw, come on, Amy, that's not fair.

AMY. It may not be fair, but it's true. The rest of us knew what was going on around here, how Martha used Mama instead of getting paid help. She must've saved you quite a lot.

MARTHA (angrily). She *liked* helping out. She'd have been miserable sitting around doing nothing and getting in the way. And besides, she wasn't with us *all* the time. She was always having to run out to Minneapolis or some other place to get Estelle out of a mess.

AMY. Oh, yes, just where is our famous actress sister? Does she plan to honor us with her presence?

JOE. She'll be here a bit later. She had some kind of try-out.

GEORGE (at the bar, fixing another drink). Still trying, huh? Looks like she'd have got the message years ago. If you got no talent, you

got no talent.

MARTHA. I wouldn't say that, George. She does work for that TV station in Minneapolis, you know.

GEORGE (sneering). Yeah, doing the weather and that horoscope bit, "Stars With Stella." Some career! Say, maybe she can look in her crystal ball and see the answer to our little problem.

AMY (scolding). George!

JOE. That's really not very funny. (GEORGE shrugs elaborately and moves over toward the window, drink in hand. Bends over and looks out.)

GEORGE. Well, speak of the devil! Stell just drove up in a cab. Now maybe we can get this little powwow under way. I can't stick around here forever. I got business to attend to.

(MARTHA goes to door L and opens it. ESTELLE enters, greeting MARTHA dramatically and then JOE and AMY, with kisses and cries of how long it has been, etc.)

MARTHA. Would you like to go out and see your mother? She's on the sun porch. She might know you. Her mind sort of comes and goes. There are times — less and less frequent — when she's just like she used to be.

ESTELLE. Oh, no, darling, not just now. I'm simply exhausted from that ghastly bus trip and I just don't feel up to it. And I have to go back tonight. I read for a part this morning and I'm almost certain to get a call-back, you know.

George, be a darling and fix me a tiny little drink, there's a lamb.

GEORGE (moving back to the bar). A *tiny* little drink. Now, there's a drastic change.

JOE (showing irritation). Come on, George, let's settle down. We have some serious talking to do and we'll get nowhere by taking little jabs at one another. (GEORGE brings drink over and hands it to ESTELLE. She takes a quick sip and gives him a bright smile.)

GEORGE. Okay, okay. Sorry, Stell. I'm all for getting on with it.

ESTELLE. Well, I wish someone would explain it to me. What's it all about, Joe? I must admit, I found your letter a trifle – well – vague. Is Mama sick?

JOE. Not sick, exactly. I'll just give it to you straight like Doc Saunders gave it to Martha and me. Mama's hopelessly senile. Something about cholesterol blocking the arteries to the brain and destroying most of its function. There's nothing that can be done to improve her condition, I mean. What we can do is try to make her as comfortable as possible – for as long as she has left.

GEORGE (gruffly). And that's how long?

JOE. There's no way of telling. She may have a series of little strokes that will make her more helpless physically or definitely alter her personality. Right now, she's easy to manage, but that could change. Or she could have a massive stroke that would kill her instantly.