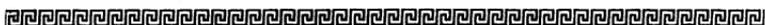


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A Play in One Act

The Birthday Present

by

PETER BROOK



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY
CHICAGO



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(THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT)

THE BIRTHDAY PRESENT
A Play in One Act
For One Man and Two Women

CHARACTERS

CELIA

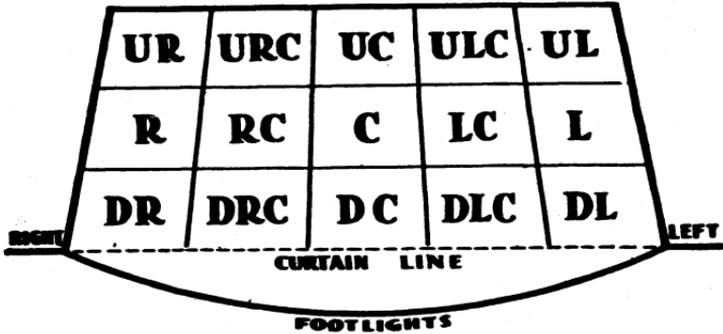
OLDER WOMAN

MICHAEL

PLACE: *London*

TIME: *The present*

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.

The Birthday Present

The curtain rises on a small room without much furniture. There are two armchairs, with a small table between them. On the table are an ash tray and a clock. At R there is a small side table with several bottles and glasses, and an ice bucket on it. On the wall is a Cézanne reproduction.

A young woman, CELIA, is revealed sitting in an armchair. She is serious, thoughtful, attractive. Her eyes are shut. An OLDER WOMAN is standing behind her.

CELIA

. . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .

(She takes a deep breath.)

. . . five . . . six . . .

(She opens her eyes.)

It's no good. I can't go through with it.

OLDER WOMAN

Of course you can. You know you can.

CELIA

I may break down.

OLDER WOMAN

You won't. I promise you.

CELIA

But it's been so long. I don't know what he'll look like. He may be bald, fat. Anything ----

OLDER WOMAN

That's just why it's so important ----

CELIA

You'll stay very close?

OLDER WOMAN

I'll be in the other room.

(A doorbell rings.)

There!

(She moves toward the door L.)

CELIA

(calling after her).

You won't come unless I call you?

(The OLDER WOMAN has gone off L.)

Now.

(She closes her eyes. The bell rings again.)

. . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .
relax . . .

(She takes a deep breath, gets to her feet, walks decisively across the room, and opens the door URC. MICHAEL, a man

of about her age, perhaps a year or two older, is standing there. They both look at one another for a moment.)

CELIA

Hullo, Michael.

MICHAEL

Hullo.

CELIA

Come in.

(He does so.)

Let me take your coat.

(She takes coat, both of them ill at ease.

She puts coat over chair, and gestures toward table.)

What will you drink: gin, sherry?

MICHAEL

Scotch, please. I mean, if there is any.

CELIA

Yes, of course.

(She holds up a bottle.)

Oh, how dreadful! It's empty.

MICHAEL

That's quite all right.

CELIA

I'm terribly sorry. I should have remembered you like it.

MICHAEL

How could you. Anything else'll do.

CELIA

I am sorry.

MICHAEL

It's really all right. A gin'd do fine.

CELIA

(pouring gin).

You used to say it rotted the brain.

MICHAEL

Perhaps mine's too rotted to matter any more.

(They both laugh. An awkward pause.)

CELIA

Cheers!

MICHAEL

Cheers! Good to see you.

CELIA

Thanks.

(He looks around.)

MICHAEL

How long have you been here?

CELIA

Just a couple of months. Isn't it pleasant? Do sit down.

(She sits.)

MICHAEL

Thanks.

(Instead of sitting he goes over to the wall
and looks at the picture.)

So you've still got the Cézanne.

(He looks around.)

How extraordinary!

CELIA

What is?

MICHAEL

The same chairs. Different walls, different
doors and windows. But the same things in more
or less the same places.

CELIA

Is that very strange?

MICHAEL

I suppose not. I just didn't expect it, that's all.
You know, all day I've been thinking what it'd be
like, seeing you again. I imagined you, and what
I'd feel, and what we'd say, but I never thought of
the same furniture . . .

CELIA

One takes around what one's got. It'd be very ex-
pensive if one had to get brand new equipment
every time one's life changes.

MICHAEL

Quite true.

(Sharply.)

So they must have got a mixed bag of associations for you by now.

CELIA

(simply).

It's quite true. They have.

MICHAEL

I should have fought for its custody.

(Pause.)

I suppose you kept it in store while you were away.

CELIA

Yes.

(Another pause.)

Please sit down.

MICHAEL

Thanks.

(He sits in the armchair opposite hers.)

CELIA

So what's it like?

MICHAEL

What?

CELIA

Seeing me again.

MICHAEL

Oh . . .

(He shrugs.)

You're looking well. Are you quite all right again?

CELIA

Quite. I feel wonderful.

MICHAEL

What was it exactly? One heard all sorts of rumors.

CELIA

Well, first of all, in Rome -- you know I was in Rome ----

MICHAEL

Yes, someone mentioned ----

CELIA

-- well, in Rome I had a kind of breakdown. Usual thing. And it seemed to tie up with that pain in the spine I used to have.

MICHAEL

Yes, I remember ----

CELIA

So they did a lot of tests and then I went to Vienna and stayed a bit there and then ended up in Bad Gastein for a year and that really put me on my feet again.

MICHAEL

A lot of treatment?

CELIA

No. Mainly rest, taking the waters. The calm regime of a mid-Victorian spa.

MICHAEL

And boredom?

CELIA

(laughing).

Yes, a great deal of that.

(A little pause. They light cigarettes.)

MICHAEL

(in a new tone).

I was very touched by your present.

CELIA

I'm glad. By the way, many happy returns.

MICHAEL

Thanks. You know, I really couldn't believe my eyes. I'm sorry, that sounds terrible -- but I couldn't make it out. I came down to breakfast this morning, thinking how sad it is to be too old to get a birthday present and there it was, that great big parcel.

CELIA

I wondered whether you'd guess the handwriting.

MICHAEL

Actually not. I thought I recognized it, but I wasn't quite sure.

CELIA

That's not very flattering.

(A slight pause.)

MICHAEL

It's seven years, you know.

CELIA

Yes, I do know.

(Another pause.)

So, go on, you opened it. Then, didn't you guess?

MICHAEL

Half, I did. As soon as I pulled off the paper and saw the picture of Venice on the cover, I knew it was something to do with you. But I wasn't sure, and I had a dreadful suspicious feeling it was some sort of joke. Then I opened the book and saw what you'd written inside . . . I was very touched.

CELIA

(smiling).

It just shows we shouldn't have got out of the habit of giving each other birthday presents.

MICHAEL

I can't take the blame for that. For the first two years after the divorce, very splendid presents were sent 'round.

(He smiles.)

Unacknowledged. So in the end one gave up.

CELIA

I was very rude, I know. But thank you now. It's better late than never. I was touched, too, every time -- really, I was.

MICHAEL

Were you? That's what I so much wanted to know. You could have sent a picture postcard.

CELIA

Silence was easier.

(Abruptly.)

Have you been to Venice since?

MICHAEL

(hesitating).

No.

CELIA

But I met someone who said he'd seen you there a couple of years ago.

MICHAEL

Yes, of course, that's right. Yes, I did go once.

CELIA

(getting up).

Were you alone?

MICHAEL

No.

CELIA

It's too silly. I've no right to complain. But we did say we wouldn't ever ----

MICHAEL

I didn't go to any of our places.

CELIA

You didn't stay at Maria's?

MICHAEL

No.

CELIA

But you must have sat in St. Mark's ----

MICHAEL

Well, naturally ----

CELIA

There you are. I'm sorry, Michael. I don't mind at all. It's only rather sad, the way one forgets things, the way good things spoil.

MICHAEL

(awkward).

I hadn't really meant to go there, but one way and another --

(He bursts out laughing.)

Isn't it absurd? Your attacking me and my feeling guilty. I was almost apologizing. Anyway, you're quite right, I shouldn't have gone. I had a ghastly time and it was all a complete fiasco, if that's any consolation.

CELIA

(smiling).

I don't think I need that sort of consolation. I've grown up since you last saw me.

(She has got up and come over to MICHAEL with the gin bottle in her hand.)

Say when.

MICHAEL

Steady.

(He puts his hand against hers.)

Is that the same ring?