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Dramatic Publishing

SHAME THE DEVIL!
AN AUDIENCE WITH FANNY KEMBLE

by
ANNE LUDLUM

Based on the writings of Fanny Kemble

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(90-minute version)



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ANNE LUDLUM

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90-minute version

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An early version of *SHAME THE DEVIL! AN AUDIENCE WITH FANNY KEMBLE* was produced in 1980 by The Group, Seattle's Multi-Cultural Theatre. It subsequently toured to Alaska and on the East Coast from Maine to Georgia and was produced at the Berkshire Theatre Festival, the Folger Shakespeare Theatre, the Miniature Theatre and the Piccolo Spoleto Festival.

In 1997, the revised play was presented at the Juneteenth Emancipation Celebration! of the African-American Theatre Project at the University of Louisville and the script was a winner in the Play Reading Project of the American Alliance for Theatre and Education.

SHAME THE DEVIL!
AN AUDIENCE WITH FANNY KEMBLE

A Full-length Play for One Actor

PLACE:

Fanny Kemble's rooms. New York City.

TIME:

Late evening, October 1850.

Running time: Approximately 90 minutes.

SHAME THE DEVIL! AN AUDIENCE WITH FANNY KEMBLE

AT RISE: There are sounds from offstage R: a street door opening and closing, a woman speaking. Then comes the powerful voice of FANNY KEMBLE. She is furious.

Reputation! Reputation! Reputation!
I have lost my reputation!

(FANNY KEMBLE storms in from the hallway, UR. She wears street clothes and carries a purse in one hand. In the other, she brandishes a paper-bound pamphlet.)

Good name in woman, dear my lords and ladies,
Is the immediate jewel of our souls;
Who steals my purse steals trash—

(FANNY flings her purse onto the upholstered chair and criss-crosses the stage.)

'Tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands—
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.

My reputation! My reputation!

(FANNY finishes this speech, arms upraised in a dramatic posture. She takes a pause. Then in a strong but controlled tone, she addresses the audience directly.)

Whenever I am taken by strong emotion, I resort to Shakespeare. How ironic that it is lines from *Othello* which come to me now!

Have you seen this?

(FANNY holds out the pamphlet as if it were an old and very dead fish.)

Mr. Pierce Butler's "Private Statement" about our marriage. "Private" indeed! The general public has easy access to this scurrilous tract. Indeed, it is being hawked this very evening outside the Broadway Performance Hall—was being peddled even as I performed for you there!

(FANNY pulls back the pamphlet.)

You needn't read it. I can tell you its salient points.

(FANNY props up the pamphlet so it stands on her desk.)

On page one, Mr. Butler accuses me of having a "peculiar view" of marriage because of my belief that "marriage is a companionship in which at no time does one partner have the right to control the other." Well?

(FANNY is taking off her gloves.)

Later he says that I suffer from “a sense of imagined oppression.” I have, indeed, that essential tool of my theatrical craft, a vivid fancy, but the events he accuses me of fabricating are, alas, all too true. And “How sharp the point of their remembrance is.” He also claims that I have “an unyielding spirit.” In reality my whole life demonstrates a willingness to accommodate to others’ needs and wants.

(FANNY crosses U and puts her gloves on chair left of bookcase.)

And to have this pamphlet circulated here in New York—tonight, of all the nights of the year! The deep personal hurt this leaflet has caused me since its publication many months ago is now compounded by the threat of damage to my professional career. The esteem of the generality of the people is, of course, essential for my success as a performer.

(FANNY suddenly realizes something; she goes to the desk R, speaking as she crosses.)

Ah! Of course! This explains that nasty little item in this afternoon’s *News Courier*.

(FANNY pulls a crumpled newspaper out of the wastebasket and reads from it.)

Tonight New York City curiosity seekers will crowd the Broadway Performance Hall to see and hear Fanny

Kemble, that ingenué of decades past—many, many decades past—whose eventful private life freely feeds the current appetite for gossip.

The “current appetite for gossip” is not nourished by any action of mine!

I live, as you can see, in modest circumstances. And I devote all of my efforts to the mounting of my solo presentations of our greatest treasure, the plays of William Shakespeare. My purse—though trash, of course—lies empty, and I must provide for subsistence for myself and for the occasional care of my children.

(FANNY glances at the picture of her daughters, then speaks as she crosses to above the desk and drops the newspaper page into the wastebasket.)

Oh, no—the appetite for gossip is currently being fed by the liberal distribution of Mr. Pierce Butler’s insidious booklet.

(FANNY turns away from the audience momentarily.)

And how am I to answer his attacks?

(FANNY faces the audience again.)

Why, “Virtue is bold and goodness never fearful.” I will tell the naked truth and shame the devil!

(FANNY crosses D.)

Ladies and gentlemen, may I prevail upon you to be an audience for *Fanny Kemble's* "Private Statement"? Oh, you have already consented to stay with me this late evening, as I await the verdict of those arbiters of my professional endeavours, the New York critics. And I am most appreciative of your company.

Within the hour, we shall have the final editions of the local newspapers with their portentous critiques of my debut as a solo reader of Shakespeare plays. May we pass the time 'til then with a recital of my adventures—and misadventures—in this motley world? Thus you, too, may sit in judgment—not on my work—but on my character?

I am most grateful.

(FANNY crosses U and takes off her hat as she speaks; she puts her hat on the chair with her gloves.)

I realize that I am gradually approaching the garrulous time of life, the remembering days—which only by a little precede the forgetting ones. But I shall try to make my tale entertaining as well as enlightening. To that end, and, as "The past is prologue," I must start at the beginning.

(FANNY makes a sweeping cross D and curtsies. As FANNY gives her family history, she is intent on making it clear that she comes from a long line of professional men and women who have achieved great distinction in the arts—and occasional financial success—and whose opinions merit attention. She is establishing her credibility as a person of moral rectitude and intellectual

weight. FANNY is also trying to make evident the degree to which she herself, rather than being "an unyielding spirit," is a woman who acquiesces to the desires and needs of family and colleagues.)

I am Fanny Kemble—London-born—the most English of English women—from the most English of English theatrical families, the Kemble-Siddons family.

My grandfather Roger Kemble was a strolling player in Ireland and England. Of his twelve children, eight survived and all went into the theatre.

My late uncle John Philip Kemble was an actor and a playwright and he built the present Covent Garden Theatre in London.

(FANNY indicates the print of Covent Garden and the etching of Sarah Siddons as "The Tragic Muse.")

My aunt Sarah Siddons—the splendid Mrs. Siddons—acted there. She is, of course, still acclaimed as the greatest female interpreter of Shakespeare to ever grace our stage. She had retired by the time I was born and I only saw her in one public performance—a special benefit for my father. I was but four year old and, alas, I can remember nothing of it—except the terrifying ovation which greeted her first entrance onto the stage.

My dear father is Charles Kemble, to me the most accomplished actor of this century. His Hamlet is courtly; his Prospero is both profound and poetical; his Mercutio is the

most brilliant I have ever seen. Perhaps he is the best Mercurio ever. His "Queen Mab speech" has introduced that elfin sovereign to generations of children—including, of course, my own two daughters.

(FANNY refers to the picture of her daughters and performs the following speech as if she were addressing young children.)

I see Queen Mab hath been with you.
 She is the fairies' midwife and she comes
 In shape no bigger than an agate-stone
 On the fore-finger of an alderman,
 Drawn with a team of little atomies
 Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep;
 Her waggon-spokes made of long spinners' legs;
 The cover, the wings of grasshoppers;
 The traces, of the smallest spider's web;
 The collars, of the moonshine's watery beams;
 Her whip, of cricket's bone; the lash, of film;
 Her waggoner—a small gray-coated gnat,
 Not half so big as a round little worm
 Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid.

(FANNY indicates the picture of her mother and father in "The Taming Of The Shrew.")

My beautiful mother, Marie-Thérèse de Camp, sang, danced and acted from her childhood—both in England and on the Continent. She was much praised for her roles in comedy—particularly for Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Oh, but I assure you, she was a shrew *on the stage only*.

(FANNY crosses and sits on upholstered chair L.)

My mother stopped performing soon after she married my father—although she did return briefly to support me in my London debut. And she was in constant attendance in the theatre whenever any of the family appeared. She was always our most uncompromising critic. Indeed, the highest praise I ever heard from her was, “Well done—yes—quite well done.”

She wrote several dramatic works which were published and produced. And she also contributed some amusing chapters to a kitchen companion called *The Cook's Oracle*. Oh, she was a first-rate cook—a talent which, I am sorry to say, she did not encourage in me. She always said that I had “better occupations.”

Well, as you see, my family relishes artistic and literary endeavours. We also enjoy something which few foreign artists ever know—a uniquely English element in artistic life—respectability.

(FANNY rises and crosses to desk R.)

Now respectability is not to be equated with financial security. All during my lifetime, my family's income has been subject to the varying fortunes of the Covent Garden Theatre. My father and my uncles are proprietors there—managers, you in America would say. The theatre seats three thousand spectators and the weekly payroll is for over seven hundred people—more at Christmas season.

Two decades ago—in 1829—Covent Garden Theatre had fallen into enormous debt. “For Sale” signs were posted and the building was to be auctioned to the highest bidder. All of the employees—including, of course, my parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers—were to be set adrift. I had just returned to England from France, where I had completed boarding school. I was quite indifferent to the lure of a stage career: authorship and scholarship appealed to me. One evening I asked my parents to allow me to seek employment as a governess.

But at the breakfast table the next morning, my father said—I can remember his very words—he said,

(FANNY pulls out the desk chair and sits on it; she imitates her father's voice and manner.)

“There is a fine fortune to be made just now, by any young lady of decent talent, on the stage.” The financial disarray of Covent Garden had led me to believe that a “fine fortune” was to be made almost anywhere *except* “on the stage.”

(FANNY rises and returns chair to behind desk.)

Also, there was no indication that I was a “young lady of decent talent.” I had acted only once—in a school play, a tragedy by Racine. And my performance had inspired my headmistress to draw me aside and inform me that my parents need never anticipate my following a theatrical career.

Nevertheless, my mother requested that I learn the potion speech of Juliet and early the next morning, my father took me to the deserted Covent Garden to “try my voice.”

(FANNY crosses to UR.)

I had no audience in the house, no Romeo on the stage. “My dismal scene I needs must act alone.”

(FANNY starts the following speech U, speaking in a barely audible whisper. Very gradually she works her way into an adolescent’s hysterical frenzy, screaming and gesturing wildly.)

I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins,
That almost freezes up the heat of life.
How if, when I am laid into the tomb,
I wake before the time that Romeo
Come to redeem me? There’s a fearful point!
Shall I not then be stifled in the vault,
To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in,
And there die strangled ere my Romeo comes?
Or, if I live, is it not very like,
The horrible conceit of death and night,
Together with the terror of the place—
As in a vault, an ancient receptacle,
Where, for this many hundred years, the bones
Of all my buried ancestors are packed,
Lie festering in their shrouds; where, as they say,
At some hours in the night, spirits resort—
Alack, alack, is it not like that I,
So early waking—what with loathsome smells
And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth,

That living mortals, hearing them, run mad—
Oh, if I wake, shall I not be distraught
And madly play with my forefathers' joints
And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone
As with a club, dash out my desperate brains?

Well, my voice did carry. My father determined to “bring me out” at once. Exactly three weeks later, I made my theatrical debut as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*.

My father was Mercutio. My mother was my stage mother, Lady Capulet. Romeo was played by a Mr. Brown, a rather washed-out actor who had the most unfortunate of legs.

And I was frightened flat. I had to be pushed bodily onto the stage. And, would you believe, not a word I uttered in the first two scenes was audible? Then in the third scene, the balcony scene, the inspiration of the play washed over me and I was completely carried away. At the end of the performance, there was tumultuous applause. Whole bouquets were thrown upon the stage. My parents rejoiced and embraced me. They congratulated me and gave me a watch.

(FANNY touches the watch pinned to her jacket.)

In short, I was a great success. I had saved Covent Garden from bankruptcy and my professional life was determined.

You will please note that although my own desire was for a quiet life of study, I accommodated my family by appearing on the stage.

I came out in other roles that first season. I did Bianca in *Fazio* and Lady Teazel in *The School for Scandal*. Oh, and my favourite—Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. I thought her the most perfect woman. Her third-act speech to Bassanio was the way I hoped I would someday present myself to a lover.

(FANNY presents the following speech as a straightforward, sincere young woman.)

You see me, Lord Bassanio, where I stand,
Such as I am: though for myself alone
I would not be ambitious in my wish
To wish myself much better; yet for you
I would be trebled twenty times myself,
A thousand times more fair,
Ten thousand times more rich,
That only to stand high in your account
I might in virtues, beauties, livings, friends
Exceed account; but the full sum of me
Is sum of something which, to term in gross,
Is an unlesson'd girl, unschool'd, unpractic'd;
Happy in this, she is not yet so old
But she may learn; and happier than this,
She is not bred so dull but she can learn;
Happiest of all is, that her gentle spirit
Commits itself to yours to be directed,
As from her lord, her governor, her king.
Myself, and what is mine, to you and yours
Is now converted. But now I was the lord
Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,
Queen o'er myself; and even now, but now,
This house, these servants, and this same myself
Are yours, my lord.