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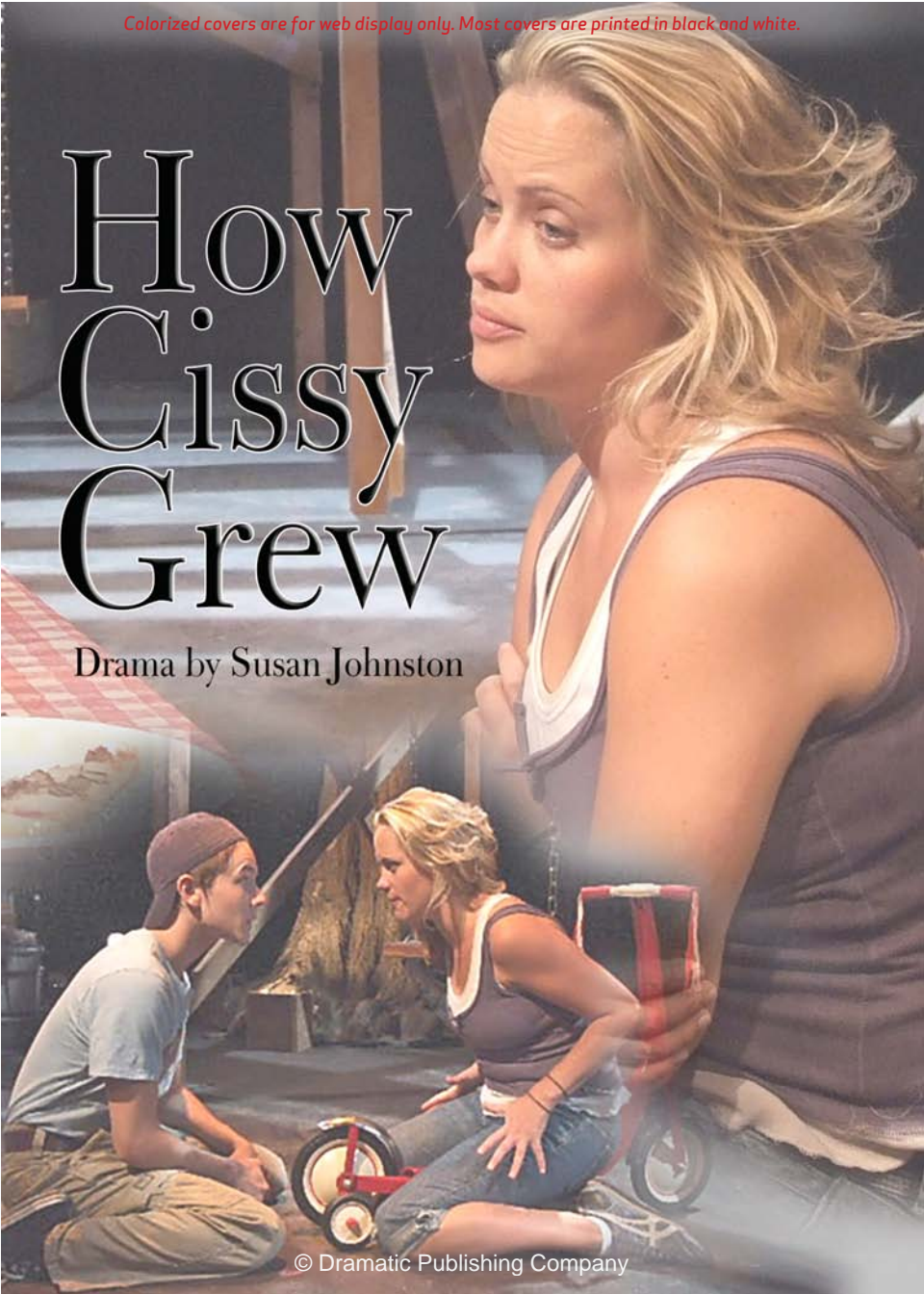
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Dramatic Publishing

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How Cissy Grew

Drama by Susan Johnston



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“Compelling glimpses into the aftermath of a horrific event.”

—*VARIETY*

“70 searing minutes.”

—*LA DAILY NEWS*

How Cissy Grew

Drama. By Susan Johnston. Cast: 2m., 2w. One tiny moment of carelessness can change everything. In West Virginia, a baby girl named Cissy is abducted, then swiftly returned to her parents. She is so young when it happens that she cannot remember, but, still, the legacy of those few terrible days haunts her family for the next 20 years. Though she has no proof, Darla, Cissy’s pot-smoking bartender mom, blames Butch, her former football star boyfriend and Cissy’s father, for the abduction. She’s convinced he was stoned and lying to her about what actually happened. Her constant accusations push Butch into a life of twelve-stepping, self-righteous Holy Roller-ism. While her parents fight over how best to raise her, Cissy grows up to become a sexually promiscuous, fearless and sometimes callous young woman with a penchant for her mom’s stash and innocent boys. When she becomes pregnant at 14, her family implodes, leaving Cissy and Darla clinging to the past while Butch chases after a more promising future. *How Cissy Grew* is a nonlinear drama exploring defining moments in one family’s life as they struggle to stay together in the face of guilt, blame and addiction. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 75 minutes. Code: HA2.*

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311 Washington St.
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ph: 800-448-7469



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HOW CISSY GREW

By
SUSAN JOHNSTON



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“D-I-Y Project in association with SeaGlass Theatre.”

D-I-Y Project presented the world premiere of *How Cissy Grew* at El Portal Forum Theatre, North Hollywood, Calif., in association with SeaGlass Theatre, October 16 through November 23, 2008, directed and produced by Casey Stangl.

CAST

Darla Erin J. O'Brien*
Butch James Denton
Cissy Liz Vital
The Guy Stewart W. Calhoun

PRODUCTION STAFF

Set Design Laura Fine Hawkes
Lighting Design Trevor Stirlin Burk
Sound Design C. Andrew Mayer
Costume Design Jennifer May Nickel
Stage Manager Kimberly Van Luin
Prop Design Jim Williams
Public Relations Wayne McWorter Marketing
Original Music Lauren Adams
Consulting Producer Diane Levine

* *Denotes membership in Actor's Equity Association.*

HOW CISSY GREW

CHARACTERS

DARLA: plays 25-45, white, West Virginian. An alcoholic smoker and a protective mother. Physically strong, emotionally frigid, she is utterly self-conscious about her appearance. Northerners would call her a redneck but she's pure working class. Strong accent.

BUTCH: plays 21-41, white, West Virginian. An alcoholic pothead who cleans up his act, gets sober, finds God and a whole new life. As addicted to meetings as he was to booze. Strong accent.

CISSY: plays newborn to 20, white, West Virginian. Independent, strong-willed and living dangerously, she is spirited and determined to find her way out of W.V. Sexually promiscuous, intelligent and ambitious.

A MAN: early to mid-20s, plays all other roles.

SETTING

Charleston, W.V., and Manhattan.

Over a twenty-year period from 1991 to 2011.

PRODUCTION CONSIDERATIONS

For the world premier production directed by Casey Stangl, actors were kept onstage for the entirety of the performance. The unused characters watched as the scenes took place as if looking back over memories.

If this approach is to be repeated, directors will need to add Cissy and Darla to the final scene—see end of playbook.

The stage was kept relatively bare with a swing stage R and a slightly elevated platform with built-in subway pole stage L.

All actors moved furniture; lights and sound determined place and time; cigarettes and joints were not actually lit. Theatricality and suggestion. Fluidity.

HOW CISSY GREW

MOMENT ONE

(Thirteen years after it happened. DARLA, 37, and BUTCH, 33, in a car. DARLA examines a map. Extreme tension. NOTE: Bold and underlined text indicates which actor should pull focus and when.)

DARLA (*looks around, waits*). Well, that was it, Butch, you missed it. Again.

DARLA (*cont'd*).
Everytime, we make this drive—I tell you but you don't listen 'cause I'm just the idiot with the map.

BUTCH.
It's tricky. Darla, stop, whatever, we'll turn around—
It's not the end of the world, we'll get back on the right road—

DARLA. If I say it, it must be wrong—that's how you are—as a person. Holier than thou.

BUTCH. You don't know me, Darla, so don't pretend like you do.

DARLA. Oh yeah, you've changed—

DARLA (*cont'd*).

—and you've grown and I'm, what now, Mr. Moralism? **Not the perfect picture you had in your head** about the mother of your child.

Well, fuck you, Butch.

You think those damn meetin's raise a kid?

Takes more than twelve steps to get that right.

I'm the one who's there every day and every night. Where are you?

Sittin' in circles

bitchin' and moanin'

to strangers. Boo-fuckin'-hoo. Poor me.

Darla makes me—Cissy makes me—my mom was—my dad was— **It's all everybody else's fault but yours. You know, you gotta actually be in somebody's life to have your snotty-ass opinion about it.**

Your Higher Power won't raise your child for you or screw your wife for you, there ain't no Big Book in my bed at night. **You think**

BUTCH.

You know, **it hasn't been easy for me with you drinkin' and smokin'.**

You're still working at that damn bar when **you know I'm trying to stay sober.**

But you, **you are so sick in your own disease** you can't see past the nose on your face. **You need me drunk and stoned, Darla,**

so you don't have to look at yourself in the mirror.

And I'm done, I'm totally done being that mirror.

All I've ever wanted is for you to start actin' like a parent with some common sense in your head.

But you're in a complete state of denial. You still act like this is some kind of phase we'll all outgrow but she's grown. It's done. It is. It's done.

I've tried, man, **I've tried to save her, I've tried to save you, I've tried to save this family, I'm in this goddamn truck still trying to save us but you have worked against me every step of the way.** I

you can love yourself and everything will miraculously fall into place. What about lovin' Cissy like she is and not tryin' to fix her all the time? What about lovin' me? **You don't love me anymore. You sit in judgment of me** 'cause it makes you feel healed and better than me and you're not. **You are so not better than me.**

mean, where do you think Cissy got her first stash, Darla? She got it out of your drawers. You've let her turn that house into a hangout and **then you wonder why I can't stand to set foot in my own house?** Everyday I have to stop myself from leavin'. **I can only save myself.** That's all I can do. Maybe that's the only thing that will do any of us any good at all.

BUTCH (*cont'd*). I'm moving out, Darla. I'm done tryin'.

(They drive in silence for a moment. DARLA looks out the side window.)

DARLA. Nice fuckin' vacation.

MOMENT TWO

(Twenty years after it happened. CISSY, 20, leans against a subway pole staring at NY GUY, 20s. He's reading. He notices her staring. She doesn't look away. He does. He looks again and she walks over and sits beside him.)

CISSY. You remind me of a guy I once knew, a kid really.

NY GUY. Is that good or bad?

CISSY. Both. You gotta girlfriend?

NY GUY. You don't play games.

CISSY. Why waste the time?

NY GUY. No, no girlfriend.

CISSY. But you had one. Recently.

NY GUY. Not so recent. This guy you knew, he was your boyfriend?

CISSY. He wanted to be.

NY GUY. Was that the good part or the bad part? (*She smiles.*)

CISSY. Guess.

NY GUY. D'ja pick him up on the train too?

CISSY. It was a bus and who says I picked him up?

NY GUY. I took it as a safe bet.

CISSY. I'll ignore that. For that matter, who says I'm picking you up?

NY GUY. Not me, for sure.

CISSY. You said "too," did you pick him up on the train "too" as in also, like you think I'm picking you up.

NY GUY. You're not?

CISSY. I am. Totally.

NY GUY. Nice.

CISSY. So what'cha think, good or bad?

NY GUY. I'm gonna have to go with both.

CISSY. We're gonna get along just fine.

MOMENT THREE

(One month before. DARLA and CISSY, six months, at the kitchen table. DARLA makes a bottle for CISSY.)

DARLA. It's a miracle they survived, you know, little babies your age. Before bottles, well, I guess they didn't. Some of 'em did. But a lot didn't. (*CISSY squeals.*) I know, it's terrible to think about. But that's how it was. And the women, their tits were like watermelons. Then they'd turn into big saggy sacs of empty stretched skin—woo! I wouldn't wanna wake up and see myself lookin' like that. Don't get me wrong. I loved havin' them watermelons, like a Victoria's Secret model, your daddy loved 'em too, let me tell you. That's what I'll look like if I ever get the money for my boob job. Gonna be a while at the rate we're goin'. Couldn't have the normal formula, could ya, with your constipation. Gotta have the good stuff. Only the good stuff for my baby. Well, it's better than endin' up with those sad sacs hangin', that much I know. Plus that breast pump hurt like shit, y'know, it really hurt. They don't tell you that shit in those lovey-dovey, everybody pull out your boob classes. It's all natural this and it's better for you that. Well, no thanks. I can't have your daddy runnin' off with some twenty-three-year-old watermelon-chested hussy while I'm tuckin' my tits into a support bra. You gotta keep things lookin' good or else you end up alone. You remember that. (*CISSY cries.*) All right, now, hold your horses. Would it kill you to wait a second? Momma's comin'. It's ready, see, here's your bobby. Just had to get it warmed up. It's all nice and perfect. Nice and perfect. (*She feeds the baby.*)

MOMENT FOUR

(CISSY approaches the swing. She kicks it, dances around it. Flops into it, on her stomach. Pushes herself, higher and higher. Pretends to fly.)

MOMENT FIVE

(One week before. DARLA and BUTCH drinking, smoking in a bar. Rebel country music in the background.)

DARLA *(sloppy)*. She told me to get outta her house.

BUTCH *(combative)*. Why, what'd you do?

DARLA. I didn't do shit.

BUTCH. You must have said something.

DARLA. Don't take her side in this. Why are you takin' her side, you weren't even there.

BUTCH. I'm just sayin', I've heard you guys fight.

DARLA. She pushes me.

BUTCH. You gotta stop lettin' her get to you.

DARLA. How the hell do you stop her, she's like a machine pushin'—every—button.

BUTCH. That's what mothers do.

DARLA. No, that's what she does. Other mothers, some mothers aren't like that.

BUTCH. You gotta make an effort.

DARLA. Why do I have to make the effort?

BUTCH. She's your mother.

DARLA. I don't care, she's crazy. You don't know, you haven't seen her in all her glory, you have no idea what I deal with, you have no idea.

BUTCH. You need to stop that.
DARLA. What?
BUTCH. You need to stop fightin' with her.
DARLA. *She* needs to stop.
BUTCH. It's bad for the baby.
DARLA. Don't tell me how to—I know what Cissy needs.
BUTCH. You gotta stop that shit with your mom.
DARLA. I was tryin' to tell you what she did. You're not listenin' to me.
BUTCH. I am.
DARLA. No, I'm tellin' you she threw me out.
BUTCH. Same fight every time.
DARLA. No, she's not gonna baby-sit anymore.
BUTCH. What are you talkin' about?
DARLA. I told you to listen. That's what she did.
BUTCH. She's baby-sittin' now.
DARLA. Yeah, tonight, fine, 'cause Cissy was asleep and settled in but after tonight, no more.
BUTCH. When were you gonna tell me this?
DARLA. I've been trying—
BUTCH. How the hell are we supposed to work?
DARLA. Work. Groceries. Cleanin'. Errands. All of it. You gotta start helpin' me out—I'm not gonna be able to do all this by myself now.
BUTCH. If we could afford for you to stay home—
DARLA. But we can't. And I've maxed out my vacation days.
BUTCH. She's takin' this out on Cissy now?
DARLA. She wants to punish me.
BUTCH. She knows we need her help.
DARLA. That woman wouldn't piss on me if I was on fire.
BUTCH. She is one miserable—

DARLA. Oh no, she loves this part. She lives for it. She loves that I need her for somethin' again. That she's in control and she's eatin' it up. Like her one last shot at runnin' my life. This is the kind of stuff that makes her happy.

BUTCH. That is—one sick—what kind of grandmother—

DARLA. I said she's crazy, you don't listen, you think I'm exaggeratin'. The bitch is bi-polar.

BUTCH. How are we gonna do this?

DARLA. We're gonna have to break up the housework and the errands. I can't get the groceries anymore. I'll make the list and shit but you're gonna have to pick 'em up, okay, Butch? I need you to handle that this week, all right?

BUTCH. Of course, baby, whatever you need.

MOMENT SIX

(Fourteen years after. CISSY sits on the bus. A WV BOY, 15, sits a few seats away. WV BOY looks back and forth from CISSY, trying not to get caught. This goes on for some time before she notices. Once she notices, she stares at him until they make eye contact.)

CISSY. You got something to say to me?

WV BOY *(quickly looks away)*. No. *(CISSY glares at him. He smiles to himself.)*

MOMENT SEVEN

(Two days after. DARLA and BUTCH in the grocery store aisle.)

DARLA *(fragile)*. Was this the aisle?

BUTCH *(handling her gently)*. Yes.

DARLA. The exact aisle?

BUTCH. Yes.

DARLA. And where was she?

BUTCH. She was in the cart, in her car seat. I made sure she had her teething ring.

DARLA. And where was the cart?

BUTCH. It was here. It was right here.

(DARLA stands in that exact place.)

DARLA. She was here. *(Gasping for breath.)* I can't remember...what was she wearing? I can't remember—

BUTCH. Honey, honey, she had on the little dress with the pink stripes, remember? You remember.

DARLA. The pink dress with the stripes. It has matching tights. I can't remember, did she have on the tights?

BUTCH. She did. She did. You do a good job with her, Darla. She looked so pretty.

DARLA. I can smell her still. The shampoo we use. She always smells so clean. Can you smell her, Butch? *(He shakes his head.)* Do you think she was asleep? Do you think she saw him? What if she saw his face? Oh God, I hope she didn't see him. Tell me she was asleep.

BUTCH. She was. She was asleep, Darla.

DARLA. Where's my baby, Butch? Where's my baby?

BUTCH. I don't know. I don't know.

DARLA (*falls to knees*). Oh my God, oh my God. She's gone, my baby's gone. (*BUTCH kneels down to hold her.*)

MOMENT EIGHT

(*CISSY, 20, in bed with NY GUY.*)

CISSY. Hypnotize me.

NY GUY. What?

CISSY. Try to hypnotize me. Come on, do it. Sit up, look me straight in the eyes, say things slow and draw your words out, like you're trying to put me under.

NY GUY (*wiggles his fingers, joking*). Woooooooooooo—

CISSY. I'm not kidding, man, I'm serious. There's shit inside, you know, inside all of us, that we don't remember but we know, we know and it drives us and we're not even in charge of that shit, it just runs the show and you gotta like look that shit in the eye, you know, you gotta stare it down, you gotta. I mean, we don't even know what we're made of, you know, our brains and shit, we only understand like three percent of that and there's like a whole universe out there, there are more than a bajillion stars, serious, and people don't even believe that there are UFOs out there but there are, I mean we can't actually be so arrogant to think that we're the only living things in an entire fuckin' galaxy 'cause we're just dots. Dots. And we think it means something to be here and fuck each other and we think if we find someone to fuck that we'll matter but we don't matter, we

don't and everything we do is just that shit inside that we don't even remember and so we have to get to it, I have to get to it. I have to stare it down. Gimme another bump. (*He doles out the coke. She snorts it. He snorts.*) Okay now, sit up and do it for real. I mean it! For real this time! Hypnotize me. (*She stares him down.*)

NY GUY. You're creeping me out.

CISSY. 'Cause you can't take it. You're not strong enough.

I can see that. I can see that in your eyes. You can't take me.

NY GUY (*reaches out to touch her gently*). Cissy—

CISSY. Don't.

NY GUY. What did I do?

CISSY. Nothing. You didn't do nothing.