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Family Plays

THE POT BOILER

Comedy adapted by I.E. Clark

Based on the one-act satire by

Alice Gerstenberg



THE POT BOILER

Comedy. Adapted by I.E. Clark. From the one-act satire by Alice Gerstenberg. Cast: 6m., 3w. or 4m., 4w. Popular in vaudeville, the play was shortened to five players; Mr. Sud assumed the part of Ivory himself and addressed his remarks to the audience instead of to Wouldby. The stagehand's role may be handled by a real stagehand who has no onstage lines (his one offstage line may be spoken by any member of the cast). Wouldby may be played by a woman. *The Pot Boiler* is a classic of the American stage. It shows Mr. Sud demonstrating how a truly great playwright (himself) constructs a play. For blocking, he uses desktop items such as Mrs. Pencil, Mr. Ruler, Mr. and Miss Ivory (letter openers, of course) and Mr. Inkwell. As he piles cliché upon cliché and the melodramatic plot unfolds, it becomes obvious that this brilliant satire might be describing one or more prominent playwrights of today. *The Pot Boiler* was first produced at the Player's Workshop in Chicago on Nov. 20, 1916, under the direction of Elizabeth Bingham. It was later produced by the Theatre Workshop in New York, Arthur Maitland Theatre in San Francisco, and the Hollywood Community Theatre in California, as well as elsewhere throughout the world. *Simple set. Costumes: modern clothes. Approximate running time: 30 to 35 minutes. Code: PJ6.*

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098-3308
Phone: (800) 448-7469 / (815) 338-7170
Fax: (800) 334-5302 / (815) 338-8981

www.FamilyPlays.com

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The Pot Boiler

THE POT BOILER

A One-Act Satire

By

Alice Gerstenberg

New Edition

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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THE POT BOILER

Cast

Thomas Pinikles Sud, the author
Harold Wouldby, the novice
Mr. Ivory, the father
Mr. Ruler, the hero
Miss Ivory, the heroine
Mr. Inkwell, the villain
Mrs. Pencil, the vamp
Stagehand

In vaudeville the play was shortened to five players; Sud assumed the part of Ivory himself and addressed his remarks to the audience instead of to Wouldby. The Stagehand's role may be handled by a real stagehand, who has no onstage lines (his one offstage line may be spoken by any member of the cast). Wouldby may be played by a woman.

●

First produced at the Player's Workshop, East 57th Street, Chicago, November 20, 1916, under the direction of Elizabeth Bingham. Later produced by the Theatre Workshop, New York; Arthur Maitland Theatre, San Francisco; Hollywood Community Theatre, Hollywood, California; and elsewhere throughout the world. Published by Stewart & Kidd Co. in a volume of "Fifty Contemporary One Act Plays" of the world, compiled by Shay and Loving.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Alice Gerstenberg was one of America's most popular playwrights of the first quarter of the twentieth century—and one of the first women to achieve prominence as an author for the American Theatre. Her best-known plays are **OVERTONES** and **THE POT BOILER**.

THE POT BOILER is a clever satire on play construction and directing, poking fun at the pseudo-successful writer of popular plays whose “genius” consists of clichés, stereotypes, and prosaic climax speeches like “I am coming back.” Although written in 1916, the play seems remarkably descriptive of some popular playwrights of the 1970's and '80's.

THE POT BOILER probably works best when set in the 1920's, although it is equally effective when the time is “the present” (see Production Notes, p. 18). Its ease of production, with no scenery, few props, and easy-to-find costumes makes **THE POT BOILER** a favorite play for all groups today as it was in the cantonments of the United States and the trenches in France during World War I and in vaudeville during the hey-day of that popular form of entertainment. **THE POT BOILER** has earned a well-deserved spot in American theatre history.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Properties

Briefcase full of manuscripts, small slips of paper with pins—Sud
 Pencil, inkwell, ivory letter opener, ruler—on desk
 Red tie—Mr. Ruler
 Gloves, hat—Mrs. Pencil
 Teacups, teapot—on table
 Liqueur bottle (arrack)—Miss Ivory
 Manuscripts—each performer
 Notebooks—Sud (in pockets)
 Deck of playing cards—on table
 Revolvers—2 on table; one each in pockets of Mr. Ruler, Mr. Inkwell, Mr. Ivory

Costumes

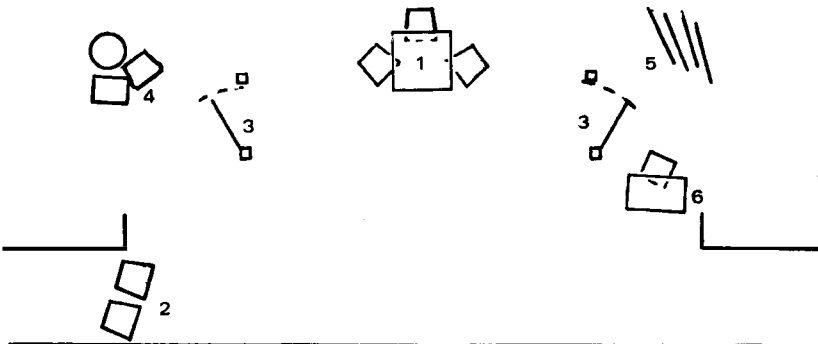
This play may be set in any period, from World War I to the present. Or the characters in the “rehearsal” on stage may represent a period (such as the 1920’s) while Sud and Wouldby are dressed to represent “the present.” Specific details include an all-black costume for **Mr. Inkwell**, an all-white costume for **Miss Ivory**, long evening gown for **Mrs. Pencil**, a blue tie for **Mr. Ruler**, coat and tie for **Sud**.

Lights and Sound

Except for Sud’s directions to bring up “more border lights, please” at the beginning of the play, no lighting effects are called for. The only sound effect is the “pop” of a prop gun (which could be made verbally by Mrs. Pencil). Keep in mind that what we are watching is supposedly a rehearsal of a new play.

The Set

The set represents the undecorated stage of a professional theatre. A rehearsal is in progress. There may be a stack of flats on one side, an array of furniture and prop boxes on the other, and the bare stage wall at the rear. A stagehand brings on two self-supporting door frames.



- Scale: 1/8"=1'
- 1—Table and chairs
 - 2—Chairs or stools for Sud and Wouldby
 - 3—Free-standing door frames (with or without doors)
 - 4—Stack of furniture, prop boxes, etc.
 - 5—Stack of flats or set pieces
 - 6—Desk and chair

THE POT BOILER

[SCENE: A stage only half set for a morning rehearsal and dimly lighted. At one side of the stage is a small desk. At Up Center are a small table and chairs. SUD, a successful playwright, enters in a hurry carrying a briefcase full of manuscripts]

STAGEHAND. *[Offstage]* Good morning, Mr. Sud.

SUD. Good morning, Gus. Just set two doors, that'll be all I'll need this morning. We're rehearsing for lines. *[Steps downstage and calls front. STAGEHAND sets up free-standing doors Left and Right]* Joe, I'm expecting a young man; it's all right, let him in.

WOULDBY. *[From auditorium, back]* I'm here now, Mr. Sud.

SUD. Come up, Mr. Wouldby. Some more border lights, please.

WOULDBY. It's very good of you to let me in.

SUD. I was fond of your father. I am glad to see his son.

WOULDBY. I have written a play, too.

SUD. Too bad, too bad, you make the price of paper go up.

WOULDBY. It must be wonderful to be the master playwright of our day. Everybody knows Mr. Thomas Pinikles Sud.

SUD. *[Setting stage]* Yes, it is a privilege to be a friend of mine.

WOULDBY. *[Pursuing Sud]* Will you read my manuscript, sir?

SUD. Never roll a manuscript. I see very well you don't even know the first principles.

WOULDBY. How can I learn the first principles? No one will tell me.

SUD. Wait, I shall do a great thing for you; let you stay and see a dress rehearsal of my latest play, "The Pot Boiler." In it I have used all dramatic principles.

WOULDBY. What are they?

SUD. *[Stepping to desk and holding up each item as he introduces it]* Well, for instance, this pencil is the woman in the case. *[He places the pencil in position on the desk. The actress playing MRS. PENCIL may enter and take a similar position on the stage]*

WOULDBY. Pencil.

SUD. This inkwell is the villain, although that's really too dark for him. Deep-dyed villains are out of fashion.

WOULDBY. Inkwell.

SUD. The heroine is Miss Ivory—this letter opener.

WOULDBY. Ivory.

SUD. Mr. Ruler is the hero.

WOULDBY. Ruler.

SUD. [*Other characters enter from wings*] I haven't finished writing it, but we're going through it this morning as far as I have written, then I shall see how to go on. Here are the players now. Line up, please, and let me see your costumes. [*SUD studies them*] That's nice, Miss Ivory, nice and white, but, Mrs. Pencil, what do you mean by wearing an evening gown!

MRS. PENCIL. A vamp always wears a vampish gown.

SUD. But it is afternoon; I wrote tea time, not dinner.

MRS. PENCIL. One always wears evening gowns—in all the smart productions I've been in—

SUD. That will do, I'll speak to you after rehearsal—Mr. Ruler, no red tie?

RULER. [*Changes blue tie for red*] All right, sir.

SUD. Inkwell, you are the villain but I didn't say pirate. You are much too black.

INKWELL. You want me to go light on the dark stuff? All right, I got you.

SUD. [*Clapping his hands*] Now to work—to work, clear the stage! [*MRS. PENCIL and RULER go out Left. MR. and MISS IVORY and INKWELL go out Right; that is, they hide behind the piled up scenery of the open stage*] Go and take that chair over there, Mr. Wouldby. [*WOULDBY sits in the indicated chair*] You must imagine that this room is the library in Mr. Ivory's house. [*SUD claps his hands and takes a seat at the edge of the acting area next to Wouldby*] Ready.

[*There is a pause, then the door Up Left opens and MRS. PENCIL comes in; her pantomime is as SUD explains it to Wouldby in low tones*]

SUD. The adventuress—she comes in—she has been out—she is worried—that nervous twitching of lips—and narrowing of eyes, are always full of suspense—she takes off her gloves, her hat—that's good business. A door opens—she starts—by starting she shows you she is guilty of something—

MISS IVORY. [*Without hat or gloves enters from Right*] Oh, there you are, Mrs. Pencil.

MRS. PENCIL. Yes, I'm back.

MISS IVORY. I thought I should have to drink my tea without you.
[They sit down to tea—MISS IVORY back of table, Up Center, MRS. PENCIL left of table]

SUD. *[In an aside to Wouldby]* That tells the audience what time of the day it is; besides, drinking afternoon tea shows Miss Ivory is in society.

MRS. PENCIL. Isn't your father going to join us?

SUD. *[Aside]* That's merely to show the girl has a father.

MISS IVORY. No, he is talking business with Mr. Inkwell.

MRS. PENCIL. *[Starting]* Inkwell!

MISS IVORY. Yes, do you know him?

MRS. PENCIL. *[Evasively]* I, oh—no—

SUD. She's lying. A vamp always knows the villain.

MRS. PENCIL. No—no—

SUD. *[Aside]* Do you catch it? Do you see how her nervousness suggests that there is a link between Mrs. Pencil and Inkwell? That's where I show my technique.

WOULDBY. *[Scratching his head]* Technique. How can I learn it?

SUD. It is the secret that every playwright locks in his breast. Keeps the young ones out. *Mum* is the word.

MISS IVORY. I am so sorry father has all this trouble with the bricklayers. They shouldn't have gone on a strike—just now—when you are visiting us.

SUD. *[To Wouldby]* That tells that Mrs. Pencil is a guest in Miss Ivory's house.

MISS IVORY. When you were here last year my mother—

SUD. *[Aside]* The girl hesitates—they both look sorrowful; we had to cut down on the cast, so I killed off her mother.

MRS. PENCIL. *[Sadly, with a foreign accent]* Ah, my dear—we were such close friends—since my arrival in this country—

SUD. *[Aside]* You see I had to make her a foreigner. A vamp always talks with a foreign accent.

MRS. PENCIL. I haven't had much time to read particulars about the strike. Does your father still refuse to arbitrate?

MISS IVORY. *[Haughtily]* What right have bricklayers to make rules for my father? He would show his weakness if he gave in—I have—faith that what he does is right.

SUD. *[To Wouldby]* The innocent heroine so cool and pure and white. *[The Right door opens and INKWELL enters—he starts as he sees MRS. PENCIL; there is a straight look of recognition between them which MISS IVORY does not see]*

SUD. [*Aside*] That's a dramatic scene. Doesn't it thrill your spine?

MISS IVORY. Mrs. Pencil, may I introduce Mr. Inkwell—[*INKWELL and MRS. PENCIL bow slightly*] Will you have a dish of tea?

SUD. Cup, cup of tea.

MISS IVORY. [*Walks downstage to him*] Dish, *dish* of tea!

SUD. *Cup!* I wrote cup!

MISS IVORY. [*Temperamentally*] Mr. Sud, last year when I was in England the Duke of Creighton himself offered me a *dish* of tea.

SUD. I don't care a damn about the Duke—I wrote *cup!*

MISS IVORY. Mr. Sud, I'm used to playing the *smartest* parts. It's *dish*—it's dish! or I *quit!* which is it?

SUD. No more temperament, please! Say anything you like! I suggest bathtub!

MISS IVORY. Mr. Inkwell, will you have a dish of tea, and please tell me that you have ordered the strikers to come to father's terms?

INKWELL. [*At right of table*] He is looking through his safe for more papers, so he asked me to wait in here.

SUD. That's an explanation why he came in.

MISS IVORY. [*Offering cup*] How many lumps?

SUD. [*Aside to Wouldby*] That question of the number of lumps is very important; it gives a natural air to the scene.

MISS IVORY. I am going to the dining room to get some arrack for your tea.

SUD. [*To Wouldby*] That's only to show the father has a supply.

INKWELL. [*Nervously*] Oh, please don't trouble—

MISS IVORY. No trouble at all. [*Exits Right*]

SUD. When you want to get a character out, you've got to get 'em out.

INKWELL. [*At right of table, to Mrs. Pencil*] You here?

MRS. PENCIL. [*At left of table*] Shh! I had to come. I couldn't live without you any longer—

INKWELL. But in this house?

MRS. PENCIL. I was her mother's friend.

INKWELL. You are indiscreet—

MRS. PENCIL. I was desperate for you; you kept putting me off—When I read about this strike I had to come.

SUD. Mrs. Pencil is the dreadful woman. A play can't exist without her—

WOULDBY. You mean she was his—