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Dramatic Publishing

Pulitzer Prize Nominated

CHARM



Comedy
by
Kathleen Cahill

“*Charm* is not about brandishing spectacle but is, instead, a magical balancing act of the grotesque, hilarious, frustrating, thrilling, introspective and dreamy. Chock full of grace and bliss.” Christopher Soden, *Examiner.com*

Charm – Comedy. By Kathleen Cahill. *Cast: 5m., 3w.* Told in the style of magical realism, *Charm* presents the story of an extraordinary woman: the brilliant, but forgotten, American writer and feminist, Margaret Fuller, who inspired Nathaniel Hawthorne’s masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter*. Set in an imagined America of the 1840s, the play portrays Margaret’s emotional journey from a plain, bookish young woman suffering unrequited love for her handsome cousin to the confidant of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau and the *New York Tribune*’s first female war correspondent, writing dispatches from the front lines of the Italian revolution. Margaret recounts her personal exploration of the spiritual movement, Transcendentalism, and her intimate—if frustrating—friendships with the icons of American literature, all of whom lacked the ability to express their feelings for her. Nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, the play mixes comedy and tragedy in a magical world where statues talk, characters speak anachronistically and the ordinary and the surreal exist side by side. “Cahill supposes what also must have been true—that Fuller had to fight to be taken seriously in a world that expected women to mind their manners but nothing more than that ... but she also finds in Fuller a woman not content to live a constricted, 19th-century-womanly life, and she has made of her a heroine for our still conflicted times.” (*Elizabeth Maupin on Theater*) *Flexible staging. Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: CP2.*

Cover: Orlando Shakespeare Theater production featuring (l-r) Katherine Michelle Tanner, Allison DeCaro and Brandon Roberts. *Photo: Tony Firriolo. Cover design: Susan Carle.*

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KATHLEEN CAHILL



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(CHARM)

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“*Charm* received its world premiere production at the Salt Lake Acting Company in Salt Lake City, Utah, Executive Producers Keven Myhre and Cynthia Fleming and was developed at The Lark Play Development Center, New York City; at Icicle Creek Theatre Festival, Leavenworth, Washington; and at Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, Florida.

Charm received its world premiere at Salt Lake Acting Company (Keven Myhre and Cynthia Fleming, executive producers) in Salt Lake City, opening April 14, 2010. It was directed by Meg Gibson; set design was by Keven Myhre; lighting design was by Jim Craig; sound design was by Cynthia L. Kehr Rees; costume design was by Brenda Van der Wiel; the dramaturg was Sydney Cheek-O'Donnell; the production manager was John Geertsen. The cast was as follows:

MARGARET FULLER Cheryl Gaysunas
GEORGE PARKER/SAM WARD/RENE DESCARTES. . .
Jay Perry
RALPH WALDO EMERSON Nicholas Wuehrmann
ORESTES BROWNSON. Max Robinson
HENRY DAVID THOREAU Robert Scott Smith
NATHANEIL HAWTHORNE/COUNT O . . . Brik Berkes
LYDIAN EMERSON/OLD WOMAN/
OLD ITALIAN WOMAN. Jayne Luke
ANNA BARKER/SPARKLER Carianne H. Jones

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I realized, as I was writing *Charm*, that I had been unconsciously affected by the paintings of Henri Rousseau...the stiffness and artificiality of his figures, the way that the ordinary and the extraordinary appear together in the same painting and the way that things which don't belong are treated as if they do. For example, he paints an upholstered sofa into a painting of the jungle, where a naked woman lies in a pose of extreme formality.

Correspondingly, I have written anachronisms into the play. There are awkward pauses, and characters who are not spontaneous, but stiff and uncomfortable in their bodies. Like Rousseau's paintings, the overall effect is intended to be playful and serious, sophisticated and naive, comic and moving.

This is crucial to understanding *Charm* and how a naturalistic approach would strangle the play.

My research into 1840s Concord, its customs and circumstances, produced this stiff Rousseauian effect. Fashions of the time had bodies so tightly bound up it was indeed hard to move. Elevated thought was one escape from the uncomfortableness of the body. And uncomfortableness, in itself, was thought to be a sign of higher civilization, a necessary aspect of good society. An easy, unselfconscious physical life belonged to the animals, and Concord thought it was better than that.

It is important to the themes and meaning of the play that Hawthorne and Count O are played by the same actor. Margaret and Hawthorne are, in a sense, one another's muses. As Margaret experiences physical intimacy and wholeness through her relationship with Count O, Hawthorne is able to connect, body and soul, and finally create his masterpiece.

It is also important that Anna and Sparkler are the same actor.

A tone of early vaudeville/19th-century theatre is right for this play. The supertitles can appear as handwritten signs that are carried on or announced by actors as they exit or enter.

CHARM

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

These historical characters are not realistic; they are surrealistic.

MARGARET FULLER - She is very plain but magnetic in spite of it. She glows with something more rare than beauty. It's so rare in fact that most people don't understand why they are drawn to her.

GEORGE PARKER - Large, brawny, decent and deeply conventional.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON - Brilliant, passionate, remote.

ORESTES BROWNSON - A scholar with a chip on his shoulder.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU - Elfin and gnarly, built like an acrobat, mentally and physically.

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE - A handsome young writer obsessed with his work, secretive, emotionally repressed.

LYDIAN EMERSON - Hidden. Conservative. Angry.

RENE DESCARTES (played by GEORGE PARKER) - Statue of a French philosopher.

SAM WARD (played by same actor as GEORGE PARKER) - A good-looking, wealthy young man who is weak, self absorbed, spoiled, conflicted.

ANNA BARKER - A gorgeous young woman who is wealthy, talented and generous.

AN OLD WOMAN (played by same actor as LYDIAN)

COUNT O (played by same actor as HAWTHORNE, but transformed) - Italian, doesn't speak English, extremely sexy in the best possible way.

OLD ITALIAN WOMAN (played by same actor as LYDIAN) - A go-between. Speaks with an Italian accent.

SPARKLER (played by ANNA BARKER) - A sea nymph with sparking feet.

TIME AND PLACE

From 1830 to 1850, in Concord and Boston, Massachusetts, and in Rome.

CHARM

MARGARET

(She appears very far upstage. She is wearing a classic mid-19th-century dress consisting of a long skirt made from several acres of blue/green fabric, a tight bodice buttoned all the way to the neck and tight sleeves cuffed at the wrists.

This dress is a prison.

She walks slowly and carefully, with great dignity and posture, winding her way downstage, crossing from left to right. Finally, she reaches a spot at the center, downstage. She stops. We should feel that she is going to introduce us to an evening of high-mindedness and culture.

At last, she speaks to the audience:)

MARGARET. I hate this dress.

(As the scene changes to sunlight, a tree, a pond...)

MARGARET (*cont'd*). I am thought to be homely. Not just my face and body. I am singled out by my actions. My “masculine demeanor.” My “unfeminine” quality of mind. I believe that if I were living in another era I would not be thought homely. I would not feel ugly. I don't have any good reason for believing this except that I find it comforting and I believe all comforting thoughts should be encouraged. What else does one have for protection against the hard stones of life?

YOUNG MARGARET AND GEORGE

(MARGARET sits on the ground with a book in her lap. Her skirts billow around her. There is a large picnic basket beside her. We become aware of her cousin GEORGE, handsome, physical, a swimmer, drying himself behind the tree. MARGARET is watching him, fascinated by his masculine beauty. She would like to see more of him, but all she can see is his head, sometimes a shoulder, and an occasional arm.)

MARGARET (*can't help herself*). You're so beautiful, George.

GEORGE. What?

MARGARET. You do not have to hide behind a tree. I am not afraid of your body.

GEORGE. What? (*He steps out from the tree, wearing only his trousers. His chest glistens.*)

MARGARET. Did you have a good swim?

GEORGE. Bracing. (*MARGARET watches him beating his chest.*) Ahh, this is the life for me. Swimming is the

most wholesome, healthful and beneficial activity one can do.

(MARGARET is enamored of his body.)

MARGARET. Teach me to swim, George.

GEORGE. The body is a temple. A temple that needs attention. Swimming is most stimulating to the appetite.

MARGARET. Would you?

GEORGE. Absolutely not.

MARGARET. One lesson?

GEORGE. No.

MARGARET. Why not, George?

GEORGE. Because I would be committing an act of violence. It has been proven that swimming is damaging—

MARGARET. —You just said it was wholesome, healthful—

GEORGE *(overlap)*. —TO THE FEMALE—the female—female *(he has difficulty finishing the sentence)* —the female anatomy. Excuse my frankness.

MARGARET. Oh I don't believe that, George.

GEORGE. It is not a question of belief. It is a scientific fact. *(He grabs his shirt from behind the tree and pulls it on.)* What did you bring me for lunch? I am starving.

MARGARET. Lunch?

GEORGE. Shall I see what you have here in your basket for us to enjoy. *(He digs in, takes out one book after the other.)* Besides books. *(He takes out more books.)* Books and more books.

MARGARET. I thought we might read together...poetry...in the sun, on the grass, together...

GEORGE. It was so heavy I thought you brought a ham.

MARGARET. Do you like Wordsworth...or are you more radical and find that Tennyson expresses the heat of your soul?

GEORGE. You made me carry a load of books into the woods? Where is our lunch?

MARGARET. I didn't make you. You offered to carry the basket.

(GEORGE picks up one of the books, drops it, picks up another, drops it.)

MARGARET *(cont'd., teasing him)*. Teach me to swim and next time I'll bring lunch and poetry.

(GEORGE exhales loudly. He gets up and yanks at a branch.)

GEORGE. I want you to know that I do not blame you, Margaret, I do not blame you for being what you are. It is not your fault...my uncle, your father, has done this to you by insisting on educating you beyond all reason.

MARGARET. I thought we might read to each other...and in that way, a shared intimacy would develop between us.

GEORGE. He has damaged your feminine instincts. I say this with the greatest respect and admiration for you and your father: you are a freak.

MARGARET *(looks stricken)*. I thought you liked me George. *(She weeps.)*

GEORGE. Have I hurt your feelings? I did not mean to.

MARGARET. How would you feel?

GEORGE. I was only being honest. You are different from other women...I feel I can be honest with you.

MARGARET (*wipes her eyes*). Would you have said I was a freak if I had brought you a sandwich?

GEORGE. I might have thought it, but I wouldn't have said it. (*She weeps more.*) That is more like it. A shedding of womanly tears.

MARGARET (*pauses, looks at him, critically...sniffs*). What?

GEORGE. A good cry. A good washing. Do you feel better now?

MARGARET. No. I felt better before.

GEORGE. You seem less freakish now that you are weeping.

MARGARET. Less freakish, but still a freak. I'm a freak to you.

GEORGE. Yes, but not necessarily to others... Your weeping is quite attractive. It is not too late to turn away from a life of tragedy and confusion. You might be able to rekindle the feminine spark in your nature if you throw these dusty tomes away.

(MARGARET really sobs now, a literal faucet of tears. When she wrings her handkerchief, water pours out of it. GEORGE is rather startled by the intensity of it all.)

GEORGE (*cont'd*). There, there, Cousin.

(MARGARET starts to pull herself together. She is reevaluating GEORGE.)

MARGARET (*to someone in the audience*). He is not the man I thought he was.

GEORGE. There, there.

MARGARET. It is true then. All you want is a cupcake.

GEORGE. Cupcake? (*Excited, he looks again into the basket.*) Did you bring cupcakes?

(MARGARET is looking at him, and drying her tears. She is considering what to do. She pauses.)

MARGARET. To think that I was admiring your manly form only moments ago. I was imagining what it would feel like to touch your body, your skin, to experience an electric jolt of lust as I ran my lips across your stomach, to slip my hand down your hip, to touch you, to feel your manliness grow hard in my hand.

(GEORGE blanches. GEORGE blinks. GEORGE is turned on, and GEORGE is shocked. GEORGE opens his mouth. No words come out.)

MARGARET (*cont'd., to someone in the audience*). I was just a girl then, when George Parker made me weep. But after that, I learned to put my passion into my writing. And I wept no more.

MARGARET AT THE DIAL

(MARGARET enters carrying her manuscript.

In the room, RALPH WALDO EMERSON, in charge; HENRY THOREAU, with specimens of insects in his

pockets; red-faced ORESTES BROWNSON and NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE are sitting in a semicircle. HAWTHORNE's face is half buried in the collar of his shirt. Nearby, on a table, there is a tiny teapot and teacups. Emerson's wife, LYDIAN, sits in a chair beside the tea set. She is dressed in so much black we cannot see her face.)

EMERSON. Miss Fuller...please. Sit down.

(But there is no place for her to sit down. There is no empty chair. The men look at one another. Everyone moves one chair to his right and HAWTHORNE, who was on the end, walks across the semicircle and sits in the chair beside EMERSON. But there is still no empty chair.

EMERSON turns and looks over his shoulder at LYDIAN.)

EMERSON (*cont'd*). Lydian! (*She stands. He stands. He walks over and takes her chair. He brings it forward and puts it in front of the semicircle. LYDIAN remains standing. To MARGARET.*) Please...

(She sits down. A pause. She waits for someone to speak. But no one does. Finally:)

MARGARET. I brought samples of my writing. Essays and a few poems. Which I have published elsewhere. I'm especially proud of my essays on human rights. May I— (*She offers them.*)

BROWNSON (*declining*). We are aware of your opinions, Miss Fuller.

(A long pause. THOREAU goes into a fit of coughing.)

BROWNSON (*cont'd*). We've never had a woman at one of our meetings.

MARGARET. But, Mrs. Emerson is here—

BROWNSON. Here, but appropriately silent and invisible.

EMERSON. My wife Lydian is not here as a member of the editorial board.

THOREAU (*boyish enthusiasm*). She makes a great cup of tea.

(More silence for much too long.)

EMERSON. I believe you know everyone...

MARGARET. By name only. I am familiar with their work. Which I admire greatly. In many cases...

BROWNSON. Puh!

(THOREAU takes an insect out of his pocket and observes it with great interest as it climbs up his arm.)

EMERSON (*severely, to THOREAU*). Henry!

(THOREAU puts the insect back into his pocket. EMERSON begins his introductions. MARGARET turns her head toward each one as he says their name.)

EMERSON (*cont'd*). Henry Thoreau. Orestes Brownson. Nathaniel Hawthorne—don't look at him, he doesn't like to be observed.

(*MARGARET turns away from HAWTHORNE who has ducked into the large collar of his shirt.*)

LYDIAN breaks a cup suddenly for no apparent reason.

MARGARET starts, and looks at LYDIAN. No one else reacts.

THOREAU coughs.)

MARGARET. Take my— (*Hands him her handkerchief.*)

THOREAU. I couldn't—

MARGARET. Please—

THOREAU. Are you sure?

MARGARET. Of course—

THOREAU. You do not mind?

MARGARET. Not at all—

THOREAU. You have others—?

MARGARET. Several—

THOREAU. I do not want to take it if it is your— (*Best.*)

EMERSON (*impatiently interrupting*). —Take her handkerchief, for God's sake, Henry! (*He grabs the handkerchief from MARGARET and gives it to THOREAU.*)

THOREAU. Thank you.

MARGARET. You're welcome.

THOREAU. It is very kind of you.

MARGARET. Do not mention it. How long have you had that cough?

THOREAU. Months.

BROWNSON. He caught it from a squirrel.

THOREAU. No I did not.

EMERSON (*suddenly claps his hands. Irrked*). *Can we get down to business?*

BROWNSON. I should hope so.

EMERSON. We invited you here, Miss Fuller, because your writing has caught our attention.

BROWNSON. Your attention, Waldo. My attention has not been caught.

EMERSON. Miss Fuller already knows that I find her work stimulating. We have been corresponding about it.

MARGARET. I have enjoyed our discussions on so many topics, Mr. Emerson.

EMERSON. Yes.

MARGARET. The soul's yearning...the male and female principle of nature and how they might finally be joined in an intercourse of ecstatic union—

(EMERSON breaks in before she reveals things he may have said to her a letter.)

EMERSON. And etcetera, yes... (*Clears his throat nervously.*) But let us move along.

(EMERSON clears his throat again. THOREAU coughs. BROWNSON sniffs disapprovingly.)

MARGARET. I admire *The Dial*. A journal striving to break new intellectual ground.

BROWNSON. You have read it?

MARGARET (*ignores this stupid question*). There are so many things I would like to do for *The Dial*.

BROWNSON. Do FOR us?

MARGARET. I would like to see it become even more profoundly bold. To take a definitive stand against slavery, and to promote the rights of women. I have many dreams for its future.

BROWNSON. We have no need of dreamers at *The Dial*. We are in full possession of reality.

MARGARET. It is only dreamers who can understand reality.

(*LYDIAN breaks another cup.*)

THOREAU. You have such a big mind, Margaret, as big as the sky. Thoughts fly across it like flocks of geese.

BROWNSON. Honking geese. I will not stand for *The Dial* being turned into a circus for mountebanks.

EMERSON. On the contrary—

MARGARET. —Why should I be denied to traverse the starlit deserts of truth?

BROWNSON. I understand why the truth might be starlit but why is it in the desert?

MARGARET. The truth is demanding and relentless, hard to reach and hard to live in.

BROWNSON. I find the phrase obscure.

MARGARET. Please ask Mr. Emerson to explain it to you. It is his phrase, not mine.

HAWTHORNE (*suddenly*). Point.

(*A pause.*)

EMERSON. Miss Fuller is a remarkable woman—mentally, and spiritually remarkable. It's sometimes hard to believe she is a woman.

MARGARET. I am a woman.

BROWNSON. Really?

EMERSON. I think she will bring new spirit to our endeavor.

THOREAU. She is the only woman I know who appreciates insects. The typical female reaction is— (*He goes to LYDIAN and shows her his beetle. LYDIAN shrieks! To MARGARET:*) I read a testimony to beetles in one of your essays.

MARGARET. I like the shiny ones locked up in their blue green carapace.

THOREAU. *Popillia japonica*.

EMERSON. Please put that bug away, Henry.

MARGARET. I identify with them.

BROWNSON. You identify with bugs?

MARGARET. I feel that I too am locked up in my blue green carapace. (*Knocks on the bodice.*) My hard shell.

BROWNSON. A woman does not belong on an editorial staff.

THOREAU. Are you afraid of her?

BROWNSON (*throws THOREAU a sharp look*). Unless it is a journal of housekeeping or needlework. (*He stands up.*) But apparently my opinion is of no consequence.

(He exits.)

HAWTHORNE stands up, walks to MARGARET and shakes her hand.)

MARGARET (*gratefully*). Thank you, Nathaniel.

(LYDIAN breaks three more cups. MARGARET looks at LYDIAN. HAWTHORNE looks at MARGARET. He walks off. He walks back and speaks to her.)

HAWTHORNE. I can't write.