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**Dramatic
Publishing**

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lower case

By

STEPHEN ENERSEN



Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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STEPHEN ENERSEN

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(LOWER CASE)

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lower case received its premier production in the January slot of the 70th season at The Lincoln Community Playhouse (Lincoln, Neb.) on January 15, 2016.

Cast:

George..... Laurence Mota
Meredith..... Rachel Brown
Josh Mason Gustafson
BetsyDiane Gonzolas

Production Staff:

Director Mary Douglass
Scenic Designer Kathleen Turner
Technical Director..... Nick Turner
Stage Manager/Costume Coordinator.....Karen Statham
Lighting Designer Mark Mesarch
Graphic DesignerBronson Gierhan

lower case

CHARACTERS

GEORGE: 45–50 years old. Married at 22, divorced at 34, single since. Works at home as a freelance business writer. Not a hunk but still appealing (though God knows why) to the mid-life, recycled dating pool.

MEREDITH: 35–40 years old. Former high-school English teacher who has gone back to school in theatre, working toward an MFA in directing. Knows what she wants; very focused.

JOSH: 22 years old. Traditional (meaning young) theatre student. School chum of Meredith. While the text calls for him to act as Meredith's protector, he can be physically large (looking like he could indeed protect her) or physically small-but-swaggering in the protector role (like Don Knotts' character, Barney Fife, on *The Andy Griffith Show*).

BETSY: George's older sister (by three years). An attorney. In control. Has never gotten out of the "older sister" role, always trying to advise, lead, protect and fix her brother even though her brother doesn't need her help. Same ethnicity as George.

SCENES

Act I, Scene 1: George's living room, Tuesday afternoon

Act I, Scene 2: Same, Wednesday afternoon

Act II, Scene 1: Same, immediately following

Act II, Scene 2: Same, three hours later

JOSH. Remember Friedman's lecture yesterday? "How can

you do a part, even the smallest part, convincingly, if you don't create a—"

JOSH & MEREDITH. "History for the character."

MEREDITH. Josh, I don't think we have time to create a whole relationship here. Let's just make it an improv, OK?

GEORGE (*entering with three coffee mugs and distributing them*). Sorry it took so long. I started another pot. (*To MEREDITH.*) So, you are a drama student at the university?

MEREDITH. Yes.

GEORGE. You surprised me. I expected someone younger.

MEREDITH. Well ... if I'm not what you're looking for, I'm sorry. We'll leave.

GEORGE. No no no. Bad word choice ... again. You *are* what I'm looking for. Ideally the person would be someone more your age. Even a bit older. I just assumed I'd have to settle for some twenty-year-old actress wannabe. No, this is ... this is great ... better ... yes.

MEREDITH. Impressive backpedaling. I'm what is politely called a nontraditional student. I taught high-school English, which means, by default, that I also taught drama. Discovered I like the drama more than the English so I'm here working on a master's of fine arts in directing.

GEORGE. So, you really are about thirty-five or so.

MEREDITH. About.

GEORGE. And Josh, you're—

JOSH (*artificially low voice*). About ... thirty.

GEORGE. A drama student, too?

JOSH (*sheepishly*). Yes.

MEREDITH. How do you know Dean Strickland, Mr. Jamison?

GEORGE. Please, call me George. We play poker together.

MEREDITH. Poker? ... Makes me wonder why he recommended me? Did you win or lose?

GEORGE. What?

MEREDITH. Just joking ... I hope. Um, we need to leave fairly soon, so can you tell me about this short acting job you have? Especially the weird part?

GEORGE. Yes, ah, well, it's a little hard to explain ... (*Longish pause.*) ... Fact is, I, um, I ... need to hire a mistress.

(*MEREDITH shows surprise, takes offense and shoots an incredulous look to JOSH.*)

JOSH (*thinking he should act like a protector; using a distinctly John Wayne voice*). Hey there, cowboy, that's my woman you're talking to.

GEORGE (*to JOSH*). I'm not asking her to actually *be* my mistress. (*Back to MEREDITH.*) No, no. I'm looking for someone to *play* my mistress.

JOSH. You want someone to *play* your mistress, not *be* your mistress.

GEORGE. Yes. Yes, that's it, exactly.

MEREDITH. Are you married, Mr. Jamison?

GEORGE. No.

MEREDITH. Then how can you have a mistress?

GEORGE. I mean I'm not married now. I got divorced about ten years ago.

MEREDITH. For having a mistress?

GEORGE. No, that had nothing to do with it. No, I mean, I didn't have a mistress. She just wanted out of the marriage. But that's not the point. Oh, where to start? ... Look, since the divorce, I've had a fair number of romantic involvements ...

JOSH (*still in cowboy character*). Are you braggin', mister?

GEORGE. No ... explaining. (*To MEREDITH.*) Some got to the serious stage, but they all ended for one reason or another. The last one a few months ago. And basically, I've concluded it's just not worth it. I'm through.

MEREDITH. Through? With women?

GEORGE. With romantic involvements.

MEREDITH. So what do you need a mistress for?

GEORGE. Well that's the thing, isn't it? I'm through with romantic involvements, but I don't want to be completely through with women, if you know what I mean.

JOSH (*to MEREDITH*). I think I know what he means.

MEREDITH. Yes, Mr. Jamison, I think we do know what you mean and I think we have to be going now. (*Starts to stand.*)

GEORGE (*comes out of the chair and moves toward her with his hands up as a "Stop, don't leave" signal, but it looks to JOSH as if he is going to push her back down into the couch*). No wait! Please, please.

JOSH (*moves in between them in a John Wayne style to stop GEORGE*). Hold on there, pilgrim. You best leave the little lady alone.

GEORGE (*to MEREDITH*). I need someone to play the part of my mistress for one night.

(MEREDITH shoots him a hard look.)

GEORGE *(cont'd)*. No, no; not night. Evening. Evening. One evening. A dinner party. That's all.

MEREDITH. You're not married?

GEORGE. No.

MEREDITH. The people at the dinner party think you're married?

GEORGE. No. It's at my sister's house. They know I'm not married. And it's not really a party. Just my sister and her husband, I think.

MEREDITH. Then what do you need a mistress for?

GEORGE. It's complicated, and on top of that, it's ... really stupid. But if you'll just sit down, I'll explain it all. It makes perfect sense. It's stupid but it makes sense.

(MEREDITH sits, with body language that says "This better be good, buster." JOSH doesn't know what to do so he keeps standing.)

GEORGE *(cont'd, to JOSH)*. You, too, Duke. Or do you have to go feed your horse?

(JOSH sits.)

GEORGE *(cont'd)*. OK. So ... after my last involvement ended, my sister was giving unsolicited consolation in her big-sisterly way and was about to start setting me up with friends of hers. I started a rant about how relationships don't work and aren't worth it and how I was giving up on the whole process.

She said I couldn't give up on it because I couldn't be celibate. I agreed that was a problem. Then I blurted out that I was

going to solve that problem by “hiring” a mistress. And she said I couldn’t have a mistress because I wasn’t married and I explained that’s why I had to hire one. I said the advantage of a mistress is that she knows you’re married so there’s a limit to her expectations. It doesn’t get complicated like a regular relationship. But if you’re not married she figures she’s not your mistress but your girlfriend, and that’s where it starts getting all ... messy. Well, we went several rounds on that and if you have a big sister you know how bossy and controlling and impossible they are, and—

MEREDITH. I’m a big sister.

GEORGE (*takes a beat, looks at her, decides not to even try commenting or backpedaling and goes on*). And she told me I was being silly and she had two friends either one of whom would be perfect for me.

To keep that from happening I told her I was really serious about hiring a mistress, and she wanted to know how I was going to do it and I said I didn’t want to discuss it but I had a plan and she said I didn’t and I said I did and she said “I bet you won’t follow through” and I said “I bet I will.”

It was just like childhood all over again. Before I realized what was happening, we actually made a bet. But I haven’t followed through.

MEREDITH. Couldn’t you just take a date to the dinner?

GEORGE. No. It’s got to be a for-hire arrangement—

(*MEREDITH starts to say something, but GEORGE stops her.*)

GEORGE (*cont’d*). And not just a hooker, either. It’s got to be a regular, continuing mistress-type relationship. That’s the whole point. If I don’t bring my “hired mistress” with me

Thursday night, I lose the bet. Not only that, my sister will wage a relentless campaign to fix me up. And she has a lot of single friends.

MEREDITH. I thought there were just two candidates.

GEORGE. Those are the starters. There's a second team, a third team. A whole depth chart.

MEREDITH. So what you're saying is, you want to deceive your sister.

GEORGE. Basically ... I need to win the bet.

MEREDITH. That's disgusting.

GEORGE. Well, I don't care about *winning* the bet, exactly. I just can't afford to *lose* it. The stakes are very high.

MEREDITH. What, that she'll fix you up with some of her friends? Can't you just say no?

GEORGE. No, that's not the stakes. That's a consequence ... a fearsome consequence ... but it's not the stakes. The stakes are ... Aunt Martha.

MEREDITH. Aunt Martha?

GEORGE. Yes, Aunt Martha. Formidable woman. From every angle. The loser has to play host to Aunt Martha at Thanksgiving for six long, terror-filled days and nights.

MEREDITH. More hyperbole, I presume.

GEORGE. No. Aunt Martha is my mother's older sister. She's bossy, she's demanding, she's whiney. Even Mom has trouble tolerating her. She's been wanting to come visit ever since Dad died. That was three years ago. We all conspired and kept putting her off with one excuse or another because we thought it would be too hard on Mom. Last winter, Mom broke down and told Aunt Martha she could come for Thanksgiving. But this spring, Mom shrewdly moved to a one-bedroom apartment. She has no room for Aunt Martha and especially no room for Aunt Martha's dog, Boner.

(*He holds up a hand to MEREDITH who was reacting to "Boner."*)

GEORGE (*cont'd*). Don't ask. Betsy, my sister, and I both have houses, and we have been trying, ever since Mom's move, to force each other to host Aunt Martha ... and Boner. That's the bet. The loser has to put them up. That's the life and death part. If I lose, I'll die. A slow, six-day, agonizing death.

MEREDITH. Oh please.

GEORGE. All right, maybe not a *death* death. But at the very least, I'll be seeing a shrink for the next ten years.

MEREDITH. Wouldn't Aunt Martha and ... (*Can't bring herself to say the dog's name aloud.*) the dog, be just as hard on your sister?

GEORGE. No. Betsy's got a husband, Carl. She's got two kids ... one of them drives. They can stand guard in shifts while the rest of them get out of the house. They can distribute the misery. I'd have them here all alone.

MEREDITH. So you want to defraud your sister just to win this bet.

GEORGE. Hey, it's not fraud. The bet wasn't about having an unpaid mistress. The bet was about hiring someone to be my mistress. That's all I'm doing. I'm hiring you to be my mistress ... for one night—Evening. Evening.

MEREDITH. You're hiring me to *play* your mistress, not *be* your mistress. There's a big difference.

GEORGE. I don't think so. Does a store hire a bearded fellow to *play* Santa Claus, or to *be* Santa Claus. You know darn well he's a failure at his job if the little kids think he's just a regular guy *playing* Santa. The store hires him to *BE* Santa. So what's the difference? Is the store committing fraud on the little kids?

MEREDITH. Yes.

GEORGE. Well, yes, I guess it is. But it's not immoral. Ask anybody in America and they'll tell you it's not immoral for a store to hire a Santa Claus.

MEREDITH. What are you, a lawyer?

GEORGE (*with disgust*). Nooo. I'm a business writer. The opposite of a lawyer. I write things so people can *understand* them.

MEREDITH. My father's a lawyer.

JOSH. Uh oh.

GEORGE (*another awkward pause*). We haven't hit it off just horribly smoothly here, have we?

MEREDITH. Not the slickest interview I've ever had.

GEORGE. Well, do you think we could get along well enough to pull it off Thursday night?

MEREDITH. I don't think it matters because I don't want to participate.

GEORGE. Why not?

MEREDITH. The whole idea is repugnant.

(JOSH pulls out his notebook and tries to write down "repugnant.")

MEREDITH (*cont'd, to JOSH, while still looking at GEORGE*). R-e-p-u-g-n-a-n-t. (*Fully on GEORGE again.*) Hiring a mistress. Defrauding your sister, even if you can justify it on a technicality. None of this is right. I'm sorry, Mr. Jamison, but I'm not the person for this job. (*Stands and heads for the door.*) Let's go, Josh.

GEORGE. I guess Jack Strickland was wrong about you.

MEREDITH. What? What are you planning to tell Dean Strickland? Are you going to hurt me at school just because I won't buy into your scheme?

GEORGE. No, Miss Johnson, I wouldn't do that. If you don't want to do it, that's between you and me. I'll just tell Jack our schedules didn't fit. I'd rather undergo years of therapy than compromise your *sacred* sensibilities.

MEREDITH. Then what do you mean Strickland was wrong about me?

GEORGE. He indicated you were a very good actress. "Talented" was a word he used. I think the term "headstrong" was in there somewhere.

MEREDITH. And you think I'm not?

GEORGE. Headstrong? No, he got that right.

JOSH. Oh yeah.

MEREDITH. A good actress.

GEORGE. I always thought a good actress could play any part, even if she didn't believe in the character's values.

MEREDITH. This is not about my acting ability. It's about the nature of the assignment.

GEORGE. What's the problem? Don't Jewish sopranos sing the "Messiah"?

(*Beat.*)

MEREDITH. Dean Strickland was right about me being a good actress.

GEORGE. Prove it. Look, here's your chance to be *more* than a good actress. Here's your chance to be a good actress who gets *paid*.

JOSH. Ah, the good part.

MEREDITH. All right, Mr. Jamison, What does the job pay?

GEORGE. For a good actress I'm prepared to pay ...
(*Smugly.*) a hundred dollars.

MEREDITH. For an acting performance that will save you a fortune in psychiatric fees? Not to mention your life.

GEORGE. For an acting performance that will take only one evening of your time. And you get a free meal.

MEREDITH. You've got a bet with your sister. Which indicates she's fairly competitive ...

GEORGE. Oh, yes.

MEREDITH. And you think you can just bring a woman in, introduce her as your new "for-hire mistress," and your sister will say, "Oh golly, George, I guess you win the bet."

GEORGE. Not just any woman. That's why I need a good actress. You have to make it believable.

MEREDITH. Right. And to make it believable we have to be able to answer any questions your competitive sister, who's about to lose a bet, may ask. An improvised evening like this will take significant preparation. I shouldn't think you could find a decent actress who would do it for less than four hundred dollars. My fee is five hundred.

GEORGE (*stares daggers at MEREDITH for a moment then turns his attention to JOSH*). Josh, how do you look in a dress?

JOSH. Not too bad in a hoop skirt. I did Marie Antoinette once.

GEORGE. With a John Wayne accent?

JOSH. Not on purpose.

GEORGE. Look, Meredith, I'm not a wealthy man. I'm in a spot here and I think you're trying to take advantage of my predicament. (*For JOSH's benefit, but without looking at him.*) P-r-e-d-i something.

JOSH. I know that one.

GEORGE. Is that part of your highfalutin value system, taking advantage of someone who's up against it?

MEREDITH. OK. Four hundred.

GEORGE. One-fifty.

MEREDITH. Three hundred sixty-three.

GEORGE (*beat, as he puzzles over the odd amount*). Two hundred.

MEREDITH. Three sixty-three.

GEORGE. What's with the sixty-three?

MEREDITH. I have my reasons.

GEORGE. Two forty-seven.

MEREDITH. Aunt Martha ...

GEORGE. OK, three hundred.

MEREDITH. And Boner.

GEORGE. All right! Three sixty-three. That's a lot.