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Dramatic Publishing

In the Garden of the Selfish Giant

By
SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(IN THE GARDEN OF THE SELFISH GIANT)

ISBN: 1-58342-215-3

For Gayle Sergel Brown,
with gratitude and love

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Acknowledgments:

A great many kind and talented people contributed to the development of this play, too many to name in full here. The playwright is deeply grateful to all who participated in the readings and productions mentioned below, including the audiences, young and adult, who responded with such generosity and thoughtfulness.

In the Garden of the Selfish Giant received the IUPUI/IRT/Bonderman National Playwriting Award and was workshopped and given a staged reading as part of the Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman IUPUI/IRT Playwriting Symposium in May 2001. The reading was directed by Pamela Sterling. Manon van de Water served as dramaturg, and Amy Grant-Godin was the team's graduate assistant.

A later version was honored with the Aurand Harris Playwriting Award, presented by the New England Theatre Conference. A staged reading was presented at the November 2003 NETC Conference in Providence, R.I.

In June of 1999, an earlier draft was toured as a staged reading to several libraries and other locations in Baton Rouge, La. The tour was sponsored by the Baton Rouge

Little Theater and Playmakers of Baton Rouge, and was under the direction of Roy Hamlin.

In March of 2002, another staged reading was presented in two schools in Austin, Texas, sponsored by Zachary Scott Theater's Project InterAct and directed by Judy Matetzschk.

Good Company Theatre for All Ages, a community outreach project of Drury University's School of Education and Child Development, presented the first full production at The Library Center in Springfield, Mo., January 24–26, 2003. Sponsored by The Community Alliance for Compassionate Care at the End of Life and directed by Jodi Kanter, it featured the following cast:

Maggie Paula Cunningham
Brianna Cierra Williams
Susan Melody Williams
Allison Elaine Jenkins

The script was further refined after a second production at Highland High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, May 2–3, 2003, with the following cast and staff:

Maggie Jessie Mulvey
Brianna Kelley Thome
Susan Audrey Wilson
Allison Katrina Anne Smithee

Production Staff

Directed by Tiffany Rowland
Produced by John D. Newman
Lighting by Jessie Portillo

In the Garden of the Selfish Giant

A Play in One Act
For 2 Women and 2 Girls

CHARACTERS

MAGGIE . . 11, bright, attractive, moodily teetering between
childhood and adolescence

BRIANNA . . 9, precocious, energetic, sensitive, imaginative,
unusual

SUSAN . . Maggie's mother, 30s, wrestling with unresolved
anger, but good-hearted

ALLISON . . RN and Hospice worker, a few years younger
than Susan, warm and funny

Time: The present; summer days and evenings.

Place: One set, depicting the back porch and yard of Maggie's grandmother's house in a small town. The setting is a state of mind as well as a place, representing the prevailing atmosphere among the characters: at first, closed and weed-choked, but slowly opening up, healing and clearing. The set may be realistic or suggested, but Maggie's tree must be a climbable object.

Playing time: About 45 minutes.

In the Garden of the Selfish Giant

SCENE 1

AT RISE: *MUSIC. LIGHTS up. A summer afternoon. MAGGIE is seated UC in a tree in the backyard of her grandmother's house, sulking. Wooden steps UL lead to a porch and screen door at the back of the house. At DR, there is a section of a tall wooden privacy fence, with a knothole at child's eye level. Upstage of the knothole is a gate, now closed. The rest of the fence need not be seen, but encloses the entire backyard. An alley runs alongside the fence at right, outside the gate. Downstage of the unseen portion of the fence running along the apron is a sidewalk. On another small section of the fence, DL and visible to the audience, is a handmade sign in block letters: TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. The "climbing tree" is in full leaf. Beside the porch steps and along the fence at left, a neglected but still-blooming rose garden fights masses of weeds for sun and space. The garden continues, invisible but referred to by the actors, along the unseen downstage section of the fence, marked, perhaps, by fallen trellises, shards of broken pots and other signs of neglect.*

MUSIC fades as BRIANNA enters DL. She is wearing shorts over a bathing suit and has a towel draped across

her shoulders. Pretending to be a tightrope walker and chanting her own version of circus music, she inches her way along the sidewalk, “balancing” herself with outstretched arms. Once or twice, she executes a particularly daring turn or leap—after which she interrupts her chanting to provide the sounds of her private audience with sotto voce “yays” and “bravos.” Finally, she leaps off the “tightrope” at DR and strikes a triumphant pose.

BRIANNA. TADA! *(She bows to her “audience,” blowing kisses with wild abandon.)* Ah, zank you, zank you, zank you. You are all zo verrrry kind! *(She accepts a pretend bouquet.)* Ah, ze flowers! Zank you, zank you!

(She turns to exit grandly into the alley at right, stops, drops her circus pose, glances around to check that she’s alone, and treats herself to a peek through the knothole into the forbidden yard, unaware that MAGGIE has been watching her from the tree with amazement and disdain.)

MAGGIE. What are you looking at? *(BRIANNA gasps in surprise and jumps back, covering her mouth to stifle the sound. She looks around, but there’s no one with whom to share this incredible discovery except MAGGIE herself.)*

BRIANNA *(calling softly through the knothole)*. Hey! *(MAGGIE slides out of the tree, but doesn’t respond, except to squint suspiciously toward knothole. BRIANNA calls a little louder.)* Hey, you! What are you doing in there? Can’t you read?

MAGGIE. Read? Read what?

BRIANNA. The sign on this fence! “Trespassers will be prosecuted”!

(A mirror image of BRIANNA, MAGGIE closes one eye and peers through knothole with the other. For a moment, she and BRIANNA freeze, eye to eye, equally fascinated, suspicious and unwilling to draw back. Finally—)

MAGGIE. Who *are* you?

BRIANNA. Who *are you*?

MAGGIE. I asked first.

BRIANNA *(hesitates, then pulls back so MAGGIE can see more than her eye)*. My name’s Brianna Morgan, and I’m nine years old. Almost ten. *(A beat to let that news sink in, then, at knothole—)* Your turn.

MAGGIE. I’m Maggie. Campbell. And I’m...nearly twelve.

BRIANNA *(truly impressed)*. Twelve! Wow! You’re almost a teenager!

MAGGIE *(likes the idea)*. Almost.

BRIANNA. *Cool!* But...what are you doing in *there*, Maggie?

MAGGIE *(reminded to sulk)*. None of your business.

BRIANNA. Is, too.

MAGGIE. Is *not!*

BRIANNA. Is *too!* This is *my* neighborhood, and we have Neighborhood Watch. We’re supposed to report suspicious strangers.

MAGGIE. Well, you can report that I’m not suspicious and I’m not a stranger. This is my grandmother’s house.

BRIANNA (*aghast*). Really?

MAGGIE. Yes.

BRIANNA. That explains a lot.

MAGGIE. What? Explains what?

BRIANNA. Why you're allowed in there. (*Beat.*) And why you're acting like such a snot.

MAGGIE. I am not a snot!

BRIANNA. Well, you're not exactly friendly—

MAGGIE. Why should I be friendly? *You're* the stranger, not me—and you're pretty suspicious, too, peeking into my grandmother's private garden like that. Go away!

(At this point, BRIANNA may step away from the knot-hole and continue the conversation from in front of the downstage, invisible portion of the fence. If so, she and MAGGIE must "create" the fence between them by never looking directly at each other and by raising their voices slightly as if calling back and forth over the barrier between them.)

BRIANNA. Runs in the family, I guess.

MAGGIE. What runs in the family?

BRIANNA (*striking a shriveled, squinting pose as she explains*). *Squinchedness.*

MAGGIE. What?

BRIANNA. My mom says your grandmother's heart is all *squinched* up—always has been. Only now, it's finally *squinching* itself to death.

MAGGIE. There is no such word as "squinch."

BRIANNA. There should be. *Your* heart's probably all *squinched* up, too.

MAGGIE. It is not!

BRIANNA. Yeah, well. I was just trying to warn you to get out of that garden before she *prosecuted*, which means she would take you to court and have you thrown in jail. And she would, too. She's *that mean*.

MAGGIE. No, she isn't!

BRIANNA. Maybe not to you, since you're her granddaughter and all. So, never mind. I'm going swimming. Bye. *(She runs off.)*

MAGGIE *(goes to the gate and opens it)*. Hey! Hey, wait a minute! *(BRIANNA is gone. MAGGIE kicks gate shut in frustration.)*

SUSAN *(comes out onto porch through screen door)*. Maggie?

MAGGIE *(sullenly)*. What?

SUSAN. Are you talking to someone out here?

MAGGIE *(technically telling the truth, since BRIANNA is now gone)*. No.

SUSAN *(laughs, trying to jolly MAGGIE out of her mood)*. Were you talking to yourself?

MAGGIE. NO!

SUSAN. Could've sworn I heard your voice. *(MAGGIE turns away, leans against the far side of the tree, trying to shut SUSAN out. SUSAN sighs, tries another tack.)* Pretty day, isn't it? *(MAGGIE ignores her.)* It's warm enough to go swimming. You'd meet the neighborhood kids at the pool. *(MAGGIE is silent. SUSAN tugs at a tangled vine.)* Or, we could spend some time trying to clean up Grandpa's rose garden. What a mess. I can't believe how she's let it go...

ALLISON (*steps out onto porch*). Susan? I'll be leaving in a few minutes. (*Sees MAGGIE, who has peered out at her from behind the tree, suddenly brightening in spite of herself.*) Hey, Pepperoni! Didn't see you lurking behind that tree. (*MAGGIE gives her a shy wave and can't help smiling a little.*)

SUSAN (*crossing to porch to say goodbye*). Thank you, Allison. Thank you for everything.

ALLISON. You don't have to keep thanking me like that. I'm glad I can help. Your mother's had her bath and her medication. She's resting now.

SUSAN. I don't know how I could manage this without you. Without Hospice. I couldn't, that's all there is to it.

ALLISON (*gently*). That's why we're here. I'll stop by tomorrow. (*She starts to go inside.*)

SUSAN. But tomorrow's your day off—

ALLISON. Unofficial visit. Friend of the family.

SUSAN (*ruefully*). My mother has no friends—

ALLISON (*with a sweep of her arm that includes MAGGIE and SUSAN*). I meant the *family*. The *entire family*?

SUSAN. Oh. Thank you. (*Catches herself, laughs.*) I mean...well, *thank you*, Allison! What else can I say? Merci. Gracias. Danke schoen!

ALLISON (*laughing*). You're welcome, Susan. In any and all languages. (*A little louder, to MAGGIE.*) See you tomorrow, Tamale! (*MAGGIE almost laughs at this, but just waves shyly. Her smile disappears as soon as SUSAN turns toward her.*)

SUSAN (*turning away from house and refocusing on MAGGIE*). Any plans for today, Maggie? (*MAGGIE is silent, sullen.*) I said, do you have any plans? (*No re-*

sponse. SUSAN sighs.) Are you going to keep this up all summer? *(No response.)* Look, I know you're angry at me. You've made your point. I know you didn't want to come here. *Neither did I!* But we're here, and we're both going to have to make the best of it.

MAGGIE. She's your mother, not mine. And you always *used* to say the two of you were better off staying out of each other's lives. So what are you doing here now? And why should I be stuck here with you? We've never been here *before!*

SUSAN. Look, she's the only mother I've got, okay? And she's dying. Whatever's gone on between us all these years...well, it really doesn't matter anymore.

MAGGIE *(not trying to get it)*. I don't get it.

SUSAN. *She's my mother!* I've got to be here.

MAGGIE. She has Allison and the other people from Hospice.

SUSAN. Hospice only comes if there's a family member willing to help. I've been trying to explain this to you, Maggie—at home, in the car coming down... If you weren't so busy feeling sorry for yourself, for your "ruined summer," maybe you *would* get it. *(Beat, during which MAGGIE doesn't budge.)* She's my mother. *(No response.)* And I'm *your* mother. *(No response; a beat—then, in exasperation—)* So we're all stuck here together.

MAGGIE. I could've gone to camp like last year—

SUSAN. We've been through this before, Maggie: We have extra bills to pay—

MAGGIE. Then I could have stayed home with Daddy.

SUSAN. Your father's at work all day. He doesn't get summers off like I do—

MAGGIE. I could've stayed home by myself. I'm old enough—I'm nearly twelve!

SUSAN. Maggie, you're here...because...*I want you here!*

MAGGIE. For *what?* (*Overwhelmed by her own unacknowledged neediness and her fury, SUSAN is unable to answer. Teeth clenched, she groans and throws up her hands, then runs inside, letting the door slam behind her. MAGGIE turns away, jaw set, refusing to cry. MUSIC. LIGHTS fade.*)