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# The Jack Plays

*The House That Jack Built*

*Appoggiatura*

*Miranda*

Three plays by  
JAMES STILL

**Dramatic Publishing Company**

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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### **THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT**

*The House That Jack Built* was originally produced by the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Indianapolis, Janet Allen, Artistic Director; Steven Stolen, Managing Director.

*The House That Jack Built* was developed in part at a retreat at the Weston Playhouse Theatre Company, Weston, Vt.

*The House That Jack Built* was further developed as part of The New Harmony Project conference.

*The House That Jack Built* was the winner of the Todd McNerney Playwriting Prize and given readings at the Piccolo Spoleto Festival.

### **APPOGGIATURA**

*Appoggiatura* was commissioned, premiered and originally developed by the Denver Center Theatre Company, a division of The Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Kent Thompson, Artistic Director.

*Appoggiatura* was developed as part of the LAUNCH PAD Preview Production Program at University of California, Santa Barbara - Department of Theater and Dance, Risa Brainin, Director.

*Appoggiatura* was developed at Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School & Camp, Steamboat Springs, Colo.

### **MIRANDA**

*Miranda* was commissioned and first produced by Illusion Theater, Minneapolis, Michael H. Robins and Bonnie Morris, Producing Directors.

*Miranda* was developed by Illusion Theater as part of Fresh Ink.

*Miranda* was further developed as part of the New Harmony Project conference.

## Foreword

I have had the great good fortune to closely observe nearly 25 years of James Still's playwriting career. The breadth and depth of that career continue to leave me breathless. In our 2017-18 season, we honored James' 20th year as playwright-in-residence at the Indiana Repertory Theatre (IRT), celebrating the vast diversity of his work as well as the close relationships he has developed with our artists and audience. It is the rare playwright who can excel in so many forms, and for so vast an audience. From three-year-olds to 103-year-olds, James' work continues to charm audiences not only in Indianapolis but also across the country.

The IRT produced the world premiere of *The House That Jack Built* in 2012 and was the first theatre to produce all three plays in the trilogy (albeit not in order). We created those all-important second productions of *Miranda* in 2017 and *Appoggiatura* in 2018. Our audiences have enjoyed the conversation about how the plays are both separate and interlinked, giving them wonderful insight into the mind of a playwright in intersection with story and character.

Perhaps most important to the casual reader or producer, these plays stand alone beautifully, with no diminution in their impact by seeing or reading them alone or in any order. For those who see more than one, however, the accumulation of detail is delightful, with the introduction of new characters in each and the appearance of oft-discussed offstage characters appearing in the second and third plays. The plays pass the proverbial baton of family and generation from one to the next, focusing in one play on the middle generation of adults (Jules and Lulu), in another on the split generations of grandparent and grandchild (Helen and Sylvie), and in a third on Miranda, who has pulled herself out of the familial

centrifugal force for reasons only she can reckon with. In each play, James creates a unique social surround for these family members, illuminating their resiliency, their curiosity, their yearning for connection and their zest for life.

James has told me that he actually began writing the trilogy in what turned out to be the middle—with characters taking a trip to Venice as they do in *Appoggiatura*. He soon realized that he didn't know enough about the characters—which is how he began on *The House That Jack Built*, its chronological predecessor. *Miranda* came later, as an exploration of a character about whom much is said but little is known. *Miranda* also reveals a key piece about the polestar character of the trilogy, Jack, who remains an elusive offstage mystery, haunting all three plays. Thus, we watch a playwright's mind at work in deep discovery of character and story. I hope he writes one more play about this family before he finishes with them—I would love to see what fireworks ensue when Helen, Lulu, Miranda, Jules and Sylvie all end up in one temporal plane!

The plays all share an exploration of this extended and unusual family and their journeys to reconnect or escape one another, the magnetic polar opposites of intention. Three generations are united and separated by loss—loss created by divorce, death, dementia and the dislocation of self both geographically and psychically. Each play expands the reach of the family and extends location as a character. In *The House That Jack Built*, several are at home in Vermont on Thanksgiving; in *Appoggiatura*, a different group decamps to Venice for a holiday; and in *Miranda*, we experience the toll taken by Miranda's work in the war-torn Middle East—far from her family. This vast reach of place, particularly in our 21st-century global landscape, speaks to a deep yearning for home: Where is it? Is it a chimera? Is

it possible to find it by searching? Can one be lost and find one's way home? The characters all yearn for a sense of belonging while being deeply distrustful that such a sense is even possible in today's fractured world.

The plays are also united by a theatrical commitment to explore (and explode!) time. It's as if the past is always present, just outside our field of vision, waiting for us to hold still and experience it. In each play, the past overlaps and competes with the present—you might storm out of the house into your own childhood in Vermont, or turn a corner in Venice and find yourself 50 years ago, or re-experience an explosion from years ago as you quietly sit in your apartment today. These sequences don't work like typical flashbacks, but more like seamless and instantaneous jump cuts from one temporal plane to another. The past sometimes soothes and sometimes intercedes like a case of PTSD, but always it is vivid and simultaneous with the present, as can only happen in the theatre. And always it creates profound wonder in the characters who slip back and forth through the time barrier.

Ultimately, the plays exist in very different styles, making the trilogy a delightful collective act. Where *The House That Jack Built* is Albee-esque in its fractured revelation of family dynamic, *Appoggiatura* is Chekhovian in its wistful humor and longing, while *Miranda* is almost a John le Carré action thriller. This experimentation with form awards the reader or audience member with insight into the jazz riffing of a master playwright as he rotates the lens on a set of characters, gaining dimension, depth and diversity as the trilogy progresses.

The hallmark of James' work, both in this trilogy and in all his work, is a deep sense of humanity. While there are social issues in all the plays, the characters' open hearts and their yearning to connect are what drive this writer. In our

technology-driven era, where media so often overwhelms us, James reminds us that human beings must connect and be heard, understood and loved, with all their many differences and flaws, in order for all of us, artists and audiences alike, to deeply experience our humanity.

—Janet Allen  
Executive Artistic Director  
Indiana Repertory Theatre

# Miranda

*Miranda* premiered at Illusion Theater in Minneapolis on January 28, 2017.

CAST:

Miranda ..... Carolyn Pool  
Rose / Lauren ..... Beth Gilleland  
John / Reed..... Steve Hendrickson  
Dr. Al-Agbhari .....Delta Giordano  
Shahid / Waiter..... Ricky Morisseau

PRODUCTION STAFF:

Producing Directors .....Michael H. Robins, Bonnie Morris  
Director ..... Michael Robins  
Scenic Designer ..... Dean Holzman  
Lighting Designer ..... Mike Wangen  
Sound & Video Designer .....C. Andrew Mayer  
Costume Designer ..... Barb Portinga  
Properties Designer ..... Sara Salisbury  
Composer ..... Miriam Gerberg  
Stage Manager ..... Rachael Rhoades.

In a revised script, *Miranda* opened at Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis on March 31, 2017.

CAST:

Miranda ..... Jennifer Coombs  
Rose / Lauren ..... Mary Beth Fisher  
John / Reed.....Torrey Hanson  
Dr. Al-Agbhari .....Arya Daire  
Shahid / Waiter.....Ninos Baba

PRODUCTION STAFF:

Executive Artistic Director .....Janet Allen  
Managing Director ..... Suzanne Sweeney  
Director ..... Henry Godinez  
Scenic Designer ..... Ann Sheffield  
Costume Designer ..... Linda Pisano  
Lighting Designer ..... Alexander Ridgers  
Sound Designer ..... Andrew Hopson  
Composer ..... Gustavo Leone  
Projection Designer..... Chris Berchild  
Dramaturg .....Richard J Roberts  
Casting, Chicago ..... Claire Simon  
Stage Manager .....Joel Grynheim.



# Miranda

## CHARACTERS

Five actors play:

MIRANDA: American, in her late 30s.

ROSE: American (Louisiana), in her 50s.

JOHN: British, in his 60s.

DR. AL-AGBHARI: Arab, in her 40s.

REED: American, in his 60s.

SHAHID: Arab teenager, 16 or 17.

LAUREN: American, in her 50s.

WAITER: a young man in Amman, Jordan.

NOTE: The actors playing John, Rose and Shahid should also play Reed, Lauren and the Waiter, respectively.

## PLACE

Mostly in Aden, Yemen.

## TIME

2014-2015. Not so long ago.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Patti Weber, Deborah Pierce, Fadia Thabet, Antoine Mefleh, Mohammed Al Ameri and others.

# Miranda

## PART 1

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*(A hotel bar in Amman, Jordan.*

*Recently.*

*JOHN, ROSE and MIRANDA are there.)*

JOHN. ... in some of the better hotels in Dubai, yes, absolutely; and your chances go up considerably at the nightclubs with a pretty girl at your side—

ROSE. All of Bangladesh is hopelessly dry, it's very strictly enforced—

JOHN. But even in Dubai if you're caught slurring the wrong word or taking a drunken tumble on the wrong street, you'll find your arse in the clink. Go fourteen kilometers up the road to Sharjah and it's officially banned, unavailable, does not exist.

ROSE. Saudi Arabia is dry, Libya is dry—

JOHN. You would not believe all the ways that Libya has changed. Libya! Head-spinning. At least when Kadafi was still around you could get a decent drink in Tripoli.

ROSE. He once gave me the greatest interview—Kadafi—and Lord, what a flirt. Would you listen to us? Nostalgic for Kadafi ... ! We really have been in the Middle East too long. *(To MIRANDA.)* Have you ever worked in Libya?

MIRANDA *(lying)*. No.

*( ... )*

JOHN. Not a single blessed drop of anything but a lot of oil in all of Saudi Arabia which frankly just makes you want to drink more.

ROSE. John!

JOHN. It wasn't only me, honestly, nobody seemed happy there because at the end of the day you cannot drink oil. Am I not right? And let's not even make mention of Kuwait. Kuwait City—completely dry.

ROSE. Except for the diplomatic compounds—where it's legal, of course.

JOHN. But who wants to be legally locked away 24/7 with a bunch of legless diplomats?

ROSE. Not all diplomats are drunks, John.

Don't be a hypocrite.

Honestly!

JOHN. It isn't civilized—

that's all I'm saying. Here, at least a man can sit in a bar and have a drink with his lovely bride. And their long lost lovely friend.

*(They all clink glasses.)*

MIRANDA. What made you finally do it? *(Off their looks.)* Get married, I mean.

ROSE. Oh, shocking, I know. But marriage is one of the few things I've never tried. And the older you get, honey, the harder it is to shock yourself. What about you? Ever get married?

MIRANDA *(lying)*. Not even close.

ROSE. Well tell us every little thing. We're only here until it all settles down again in Damascus. It'll only be a day or two, and then they'll give us the OK to go back, it's not

like we haven't been through this a dozen times. Syria is an interesting place to work—but I've always had more of a feeling for Jordan, it's just more relaxed here in Amman—something about it makes me feel like I'm back home in Baton Rouge.

*(MIRANDA laughs, which pleases ROSE.)*

ROSE *(cont'd)*. Where have you been all these years? You just up and disappeared on us. We have really missed you, haven't we, John?

*(JOHN finishes his drink and gestures to a waiter.)*

JOHN *(to ROSE)*. Lovey?

*(ROSE nods, another drink.)*

ROSE. I like your hair this way. It's different, right? The color?—It suits you.

JOHN. Sure you won't join us?

*(MIRANDA waves him away.)*

MIRANDA. The cheese stands alone.

ROSE. When did you stop?

MIRANDA. Few years ago.

JOHN. So you haven't, really.

MIRANDA. Excuse me?

JOHN. People who stop drinking never reference it as “a few years ago.”

MIRANDA *(direct)*. Two years, eleven months, twenty-six days and nineteen hours.

*(A waiter brings fresh drinks for JOHN and ROSE.)*



JOHN. I think the Italians felt at home in Tunisia because the Romans had already been there, you know, in Tunisia, back in Roman times—

ROSE. John, the Romans weren't Italian back then, no one was Italian "back in Roman times"—

JOHN. Technicality, darling. You're shitting on my hypothesis. And there's something so bloody disturbing about a great ancient city like Carthage surviving all those wars only to become a modern-day suburb. That's an awful kind of surrender. Oh how the mighty have fallen.

ROSE. Have you been back? ( ... ) Dana?

*(MIRANDA is distracted.)*

ROSE *(cont'd)*. Dana?

MIRANDA. Sorry, what?

*(MIRANDA's attention drifts away again—intently, as though she suspects something is out of place.)*

*In another scene and another time: an Arab woman, DR. AL-AGBHARI, vies for MIRANDA's attention.)*

DR. AL-AGBHARI. Susanna?

*(From the hotel bar.)*

ROSE. Dana?

----->

*(MIRANDA is drawn to a medical exam room where she joins DR. AL-AGBHARI, who wears a hijab and writes notes in a folder.)*

DR. AL-AGBHARI. And how are you sleeping, Susanna?

MIRANDA. Fine.

*(DR. AL-AGBHARI looks up from her notes. MIRANDA returns her gaze.)*

*DR. AL-AGBHARI places a stethoscope on MIRANDA's chest.)*

DR. AL-AGBHARI. A deep breath, please.

MIRANDA. Why do doctors do that? I mean, it's beating, right? Obviously?

*(DR. AL-AGBHARI places stethoscope on MIRANDA's back.)*

DR. AL-AGBHARI. Another deep breath. What brings you here?

MIRANDA. Work.

DR. AL-AGBHARI. No, I meant what brings you *here*—today. Once more.

*(MIRANDA takes another deep breath.)*

DR. AL-AGBHARI (*cont'd*). The heart is a most interesting organ. In my experience, it cannot keep secrets. Medically speaking.

*(MIRANDA watches DR. AL-AGBHARI, who continues to examine MIRANDA's body.)*

DR. AL-AGBHARI (*cont'd*). You must believe in your work very much, to be in Yemen—now.

MIRANDA. I suppose we're all trying to save the world in our own ways.

DR. AL-AGBHARI. Maybe. But here, saving the world is a luxury. The simple things are no longer simple. This is my country's long childhood come to an end. But what can we expect from a city that sits inside a volcano?

*(From the hotel bar.)*

ROSE *(to MIRANDA)*. The Italians—remember? Dana?

*(MIRANDA is pulled back to the hotel bar.)*

----->

ROSE *(cont'd)*. The Italians would all speak French to the Tunisians, who claimed they didn't understand English except when everybody was talking about American television—what was that TV show we were all watching back then?

*(None of them can remember.)*

JOHN. I've always said that American television is much improved when people talk about it in French. Or don't talk about it at all.

ROSE. Remember our place in Sidi Bou Said? Oooo! Gorgeous, right there on the sea.

JOHN. And the commute into Tunis—easy-peasy lemon-squeezy.

ROSE. It's where he fell in love with the fava bean. It's a fucking fetish, really.

JOHN. 'Tis true. There's little I wouldn't do for a fava bean. Never knew how much I could love them until we lived in Sidi Bou Said.

*(From the medical exam room.)*

DR. AL-AGBHARI. But what can we expect from a city that sits inside a volcano? Mm?

----->

*(MIRANDA is with DR. AL-AGBHARI.)*

DR. AL-AGBHARI (*cont'd*). Why did you come to see me, Susanna?

MIRANDA. As I said before, I'm new—to the city, to Aden—and I'm the type who likes to figure it all out. I like order, I like knowing where I am ... the markets, the doctors, the volcanoes ...

DR. AL-AGBHARI. Do you have reason to believe you're pregnant?

MIRANDA. No.

DR. AL-AGBHARI (*direct*). Did something happen? Did someone hurt you?

MIRANDA (*thinking about it; finally*). No.

DR. AL-AGBHARI. All of my patients are women. I would like to believe their hearts feel safe with me. Do you understand?

(*MIRANDA clocks this.*)

DR. AL-AGBHARI (*cont'd*). Yemen is a country of many secrets but no mysteries. At least none we talk about.

MIRANDA. But that makes it sound quite mysterious.

(*They look at one another.*)

DR. AL-AGBHARI. Based on my examination and the little you've chosen to tell me, it is my professional opinion that there is nothing more I can do for you. I sincerely hope your stay in Aden is a pleasant one, Susanna.

(*DR. AL-AGBHARI gathers her things to leave.*)

MIRANDA. What about your personal opinion?

DR. AL-AGBHARI (*puzzled*). I have no personal opinion.

MIRANDA. None?

DR. AL-AGBHARI. Not about you, I do not know you.

MIRANDA. That's true. (*More for herself.*) Proof, gotta have proof ...

(*DR. AL-AGBHARI looks up from writing a final note.*)

MIRANDA (*cont'd*). Sorry, something my father always said.

(*A sudden, powerful, silent flash of light on ROSE and JOHN at the hotel bar in Amman.*)

MIRANDA (*cont'd*). I do feel dizzy sometimes. At night my heart races. And I'm not sleeping.

DR. AL-AGBHARI. I can give you something to help you sleep.

(*From the hotel bar.*)

ROSE. Dana?

(*MIRANDA starts to go.*)

DR. AL-AGBHARI. Susanna?

(*From the hotel bar.*)

ROSE. Dana?

----->

(*MIRANDA turns and is back at the hotel bar months earlier with ROSE and JOHN.*)

MIRANDA. Sorry?

ROSE (*teasing*). Well I guess you never were one for chit-chat.

MIRANDA. I'm listening.

*(ROSE laughs.)*

MIRANDA *(cont'd)*. I was. I am! I'm listening. *E.R.*

ROSE. What?

MIRANDA. The TV show everyone was always talking about in Tunisia. It was *E.R.*

*(MIRANDA reaches out and touches ROSE's hand.*

*A great flash of light.*

*A sudden loud explosion.*

*Then deep darkness.*

*Sirens.*

*The WAITER steps out of the smoke and wreckage.)*

WAITER. *Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago:*

*In following him, I follow but myself;*

*Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty,*

*But seeming so, for my peculiar end:*

*For when my outward action doth demonstrate*

*The native act and figure of my heart*

*In compliment extern, 'tis not long after*

*But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve*

*For daws to peck at:*

*(In Arabic.) Ana lestu man ana.*

*(In English.) I am not what I am.*

*(Danger settles, lingers.*

*The WAITER is gone, like a shadow disappearing.*

----->

*An office in Aden, Yemen.*

*Purposefully nondescript, makeshift, messy.  
Piles and piles and stacks of BOOKS, everywhere.*

*Late night.*

*REED—Sean Connery and Daniel Craig rolled into one  
secret agent man; the weary, less debonair American  
version—shaken not stirred.*

*Rapid-fire, rote.)*

REED. Name?

MIRANDA (*quickly*). Susanna Jones. Born May 31st.

REED. Year?

MIRANDA. None of your business.

REED. What year?

MIRANDA. 1980 in Sacramento fuck you California.

REED. Nice.

MIRANDA. Moved around as a kid because my parents were free spirits, dropped out of college to join the Peace Corps where I discovered my affinity for using theater to build relationships with locals and empower them with the art of storytelling, and why does Susanna's life have to sound like a fucking profile on Craigslist?

*(MIRANDA impatiently flips through a binder of papers.)*

MIRANDA (*cont'd*). How do they explain my Arabic? Rosetta Stone??

REED. Save the dramatics for being Susanna. In your hands, I have a hunch she's the type. What brings you to Yemen?

MIRANDA. Work.

REED. What kind of work?

MIRANDA. An international group that works with young people using the arts to explore collaboration and negotiation as models—as MICRO-models of peace.