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Dramatic Publishing

THE EXCEPTION

A Play

by

OLGA HUMPHREY



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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OLGA HUMPHREY

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(THE EXCEPTION)

Cover design by Susan Carle

ISBN 0-87129-787-6

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Artemisia Gentileschi is widely considered the most important pre-modern woman painter, an influence on such masters as Rembrandt and Velázquez, yet few know her name. She was born in Rome on July 8, 1593, and died in Naples in 1652. The play takes place from 1611-1612, when Artemisia was eighteen to nineteen years old. "The Exception" is a fictionalized treatment of real events.

"The retired life of a woman was an impossibility for her and so she lived aggressive, independent and exposed, forcing herself into the postures of self-promotion, facing down gossip, and working, working with a seriousness that few other women have permitted themselves to feel."

—Germaine Greer

"In Gentileschi's paintings, women are convincing protagonists and courageous heroes, perhaps for the first time in art "

—Mary Garrard

"A proof of her genius and its atrocious misdirection."

*—Anna Jameson upon seeing Artemisia's masterpiece,
"Judith Slaying Holofernes"*

THE EXCEPTION

A Play in Two Acts
For 4 Men and 4 Women (with doubling)

CHARACTERS

ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI a painter, 18-19
ORAZIO GENTILESCHI her father, a painter, 50s
LUCIA BALDASSARE early 30s
AGOSTINO TASSI a painter and tutor, 30
GIUSEPPE MALFI an advocate, 40s
TUZIA MIDAGLIA a chaperone, late 50s-early 60s
FABRIZIO URSINO a patron of the arts, 50s
THE MIDWIFE 40s
JUDGE MANDOTTI >
COURT TORTURER > these roles may be doubled

TIME: 1611-1612.

PLACE: Rome, Italy.

SETS, COSTUMES: Sets should be fluid. One scene should flow into the next, as much as possible. The costumes can suggest the period without being overly elaborate.

THE EXCEPTION received its world premiere at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, November 20, 1996, and included the following:

CAST

ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI	Bliss Daniel
ORAZIO GENTILESCHI	Mike Thomas
LUCIA BALDASSARE	Elizabeth Barnes Keener
AGOSTINO TASSI	Brandon Keener
GIUSEPPE MALFI	Matt Weber
TUZIA MIDAGLIA	Gina Berquist
FABRIZIO URSINO	Danny Thompson
THE MIDWIFE	Kelly Gilbride
THE JUDGE	Rob Hanlin
ATTENDANTS	Julie Cowden Kelly Gilbride

PRODUCTION STAFF

Director	Kent Brown
Scenic Design	Michael J. Riha
Costume Design	Lori Warmack
Lighting Design	D. Andrew Gibbs
Sound Design	Emily Drake
Properties Design	Greg Crouch

ACT ONE

SCENE: *Rome, Italy. The year is 1612, the spring. A small, impossibly cramped office chamber made all the more confining by stacks of books and papers everywhere. Obviously, this single room belongs to a person of learning, perhaps a scholar.*

AT RISE: *LUCIA BALDASSARE stands in the midst of the madness. She sorts through the endless piles, not getting much done, her frustration on the rise. ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI enters the office quietly. She stands and watches LUCIA, not uttering a word, waiting for her to take notice of her presence. A stack of books falls over with a loud thud. LUCIA coughs from the dust. She turns, startled, to see ARTEMISIA.*

LUCIA. How long have you been standing there, girl?

ARTEMISIA. I'm sorry, I didn't mean—

LUCIA. Of course, you didn't. *(She returns to the business of packing things. ARTEMISIA waits a moment before realizing she is being ignored.)*

ARTEMISIA. Pardon me?

LUCIA. I have no alms for the poor. Thank you.

ARTEMISIA. I...

LUCIA. What is it?!

ARTEMISIA. Forgive me, I can tell that you are quite occupied...I...I came here this afternoon on this quite lovely day...Do you know I saw the first blooms today?
(*Beat.*) I came here...

LUCIA. To drive me mad, is that it? Smell a flower for me on your way home.

ARTEMISIA. Are you Lucia Baldassare?

LUCIA. Yes?

ARTEMISIA. I've come to speak with you.

LUCIA. How unfortunate. I was hoping you would say, "I've come to pack all these books and papers for you, brew you some tea, soak your feet in comfrey and yarrow." (*ARTEMISIA is silent.*) What do you want?

ARTEMISIA. I am in need of advice.

LUCIA. Ahhh, yes. Turn around, walk through the door, and be gone. That is good advice.

ARTEMISIA. I seek counsel in legal matters.

LUCIA. That, my dear girl, was my father's domain.

ARTEMISIA. I was told—

LUCIA. It matters not what you were told. (*Beat.*) He died two weeks ago and I'm in the process of organizing his belongings and taking them away. The man could not file to save his life. Ptolemy precedes St. Augustine, who, in turn, follows Benedictus. Perhaps he filed under the Arabic alphabet. (*Beat.*) Do you want me to recommend—

ARTEMISIA. Someone else?

LUCIA. Well, of course—Could you pass me the Aristotles there, to your left? Next to the Vasari.

ARTEMISIA. Vasari? Your father appreciated art?

LUCIA. He had fine tastes. I hate art. (*Beat.*) Well, what is your name?

ARTEMISIA. Artemisia.

LUCIA. That's it? Artemisia? As in Aphrodite or Minerva?
Sprung forth from Zeus's head, are you?

ARTEMISIA. Artemisia Gentileschi.

LUCIA. Are you related to the painter Gentileschi?

ARTEMISIA. Orazio. He's my father. (*Beat.*) I paint as well.

LUCIA. Do you now? How sweet. You should be aware that there's one thing I dislike more than art. (*Beat.*) Artists. (*LUCIA continues packing.*) Unfortunately, I can't give you any more time. The office is being let to another advocate and I must vacate the premises by tomorrow.

ARTEMISIA. I was told you assisted your father with his cases.

LUCIA. I did research for him, functioned as his clerk, and, as such, I know the law inside and out. All the good it will do me now that he's dead.

ARTEMISIA. If I may ask, what will you be doing now?

LUCIA. Yes, a splendid question. As an unwed woman of thirty-some years, all that awaits me once I've packed up and gotten out of here is, if I am lucky, a position as a seamstress, or perhaps a servant in some sour nobleman's home, or service to the Lord as a nun. (*Bitter.*) I can't sew. I can't clean. And I'll be damned if I am going to spend the rest of my days with a community of bloodless, piddling virgins. (*Beat.*) Then, of course, there's always the high road—whoredom.

ARTEMISIA. Why can't you practice as a clerk? Or even as an advocate for that matter?

LUCIA. Obviously, you don't know the real world. Painting pretty pictures is one thing—

ARTEMISIA. I do *not* paint pretty pictures. (*A beat.*)

LUCIA. Yes, well... What man would trust a woman to represent him in Civil Court?

ARTEMISIA. Perhaps no man, but what about a woman?

LUCIA. I can see that you have that blessed enthusiasm that comes with youth. Don't worry. Life will beat it out of you.

ARTEMISIA. May I sit down?

LUCIA. Have I not made it clear?

ARTEMISIA. I believe a fee is in order. *(She lays down a ducat. LUCIA says nothing. The money obviously tempts her.)* Certainly, your time is worth something.

LUCIA. Why are you here?

ARTEMISIA. I want to bring a suit.

LUCIA. This practice has handled all types of suits: pox from tainted milk, wedding frocks commissioned but undelivered, a boil lancer and pus collector who, while drunk, lanced a man's testicles by mistake...

ARTEMISIA. I was violated. *(LUCIA pushes the ducat back to ARTEMISIA.)*

LUCIA. It's best you seek someone else.

ARTEMISIA. I will pay you well. This is only the start. *(A beat.)*

LUCIA. How much?

ARTEMISIA. Double what your father would normally get for a challenging civil case.

LUCIA. You, girl, have such money?

ARTEMISIA. I've been getting some commissions and I've been frugal.

LUCIA. Was it a stranger?

ARTEMISIA. It was my tutor.

LUCIA. It's unfortunate you know him. You'll never prove anything. I really am sorry.

ARTEMISIA. I would like to tell you what happened.

LUCIA. For what purpose? In the Roman Judicial System, one cannot bring a suit unless one has been sanctioned as an advocate. And, as I told you, I am not an advocate.

ARTEMISIA. Have you ever tried?

LUCIA. The law is a demanding, rigorous, often brutal trade. Certainly not for the meek, and certainly not for women. *(Beat.)* Your view of the world is childish. Yes, you paint and earn wages, but the other trades are not so accepting of...novelties. *(LUCIA turns her back to ARTEMISIA.)*

ARTEMISIA. Please hear me.

LUCIA. There is no point.

ARTEMISIA. I will not leave until you do.

LUCIA. God hates me. I've always suspected that. In the middle of all this, he sends an artist here. *(Beat.)* Do not waste my time. Speak quickly, then get out. *(ARTEMISIA is hesitant given LUCIA's lack of enthusiasm, but she begins—)*

ARTEMISIA. It happened several months ago—

LUCIA. And you come here now?

ARTEMISIA. I have made a mistake...*(ARTEMISIA gets up to leave. The tears start down her face. LUCIA is struck by guilt.)*

LUCIA. Girl, wait. *(ARTEMISIA stops. A beat.)* No tears. Too many have been shed in this office of late. You have come at a most trying time—and I am not in my best humor. Tell me what happened. *(ARTEMISIA sits back down. It takes her a few seconds to start again.)*

ARTEMISIA. It happened... It was in the fall, the morning. Agostino Tassi, my tutor, entered my studio. It was not the day he usually came for lessons. *(Beat.)* As soon as I saw him, I knew there was something terribly wrong.

After it was over, he promised he would marry me and I, being spoiled goods, had to believe that he would. It has become clear over these last few months that he has no intention of keeping his word.

LUCIA. So you want the courts to force him to marry you?

ARTEMISIA. No. I seek justice.

LUCIA. I have great sympathy for your predicament, but there are brilliant advocates who could handle your case.

ARTEMISIA. I understand, as you told me, that women are not allowed to plead cases, but perhaps an exception could be made.

LUCIA. Why do you insist on me?

ARTEMISIA. I thought having a woman would make it easier for me.

LUCIA. Have your mother hold your hand.

ARTEMISIA. She's dead.

LUCIA. Try and understand. If I represented you, if by some miracle it were possible, the case would be a travesty. They would spend as much time mocking me as listening to your testimony. Given the nature of these charges, your name would be spoken far and wide, and I can assure you they would not be talking of your gentility and good grace.

ARTEMISIA. Don't you think I know that?

LUCIA. You want notoriety?

ARTEMISIA. I welcome it.

LUCIA. Why?

ARTEMISIA. You, yourself, mocked me when I told you I was a painter like my father. What do you know of him?

LUCIA. I told you: I hate art. But I've heard Orazio Gentileschi is quite good.

ARTEMISIA. He is, but I am better.

LUCIA. You seek a name for yourself then. Do you foolishly believe that being involved in a trial of this nature will bring you respect as an artist?

ARTEMISIA. People will wonder who I am, and then they will turn to my work. Let them decide for themselves. I am an optimist. I intend to get something out of my misfortune, Signorina Baldassare.

LUCIA. Lucia. (*Beat.*) What subjects do you paint, Artemisia?

ARTEMISIA. The work that is closest to my heart is my "Judith Slaying Holofernes." Judith is cutting Holofernes' head off with a huge sword. Her face is determined. There's blood everywhere.

LUCIA. So there's great serenity to your work.

ARTEMISIA. Will you consider this case? (*LUCIA paces around the office. She turns to ARTEMISIA.*)

LUCIA. Everything in me says no, but there's something else that says yes. It must be madness slowly seeping into my bones. (*Beat.*) You would have to tell me everything that happened. Then I will ask others about you.

ARTEMISIA. An investigation into my character?

LUCIA. The first of what will be many. I'd be a fool not to. (*Beat.*) I can make no promises to you. The odds do not favor me. Nor you.

ARTEMISIA. But...

LUCIA. I do not wish to mislead you.

ARTEMISIA. I will take the chance. (*ARTEMISIA gets up and helps LUCIA with the packing.*)

LUCIA. Thank you. (*Beat.*) Begin your story.

* * * * *

ORAZIO's studio. ARTEMISIA is at an easel, painting. ORAZIO watches carefully over her shoulder for a few moments. In another area of the studio stands another easel with a painting on it.

ORAZIO. Splendid, daughter. The contrast of the flesh tones is exceptional. And your control of light is, as far as I am concerned, unparalleled.

ARTEMISIA. Am I really that good, father? I could not bear it if you were merely flattering me out of love.

ORAZIO. Daughter, I believed the meal you prepared last evening to be a rabbit cruelly charred beyond recognition. Your brothers were divided between a bludgeoned, unplucked chicken or a mysterious over-peppered squash grown too close to a dung heap. So much for flattery. *(Beat.)* What was it, by the way?

ARTEMISIA. Broth. *(Beat.)* Father?

ORAZIO. Yes?

ARTEMISIA. On the morrow, it shall be my birthday.

ORAZIO. As you have been reminding me these last six months. *(ORAZIO moves to the other easel. He takes up his paintbrush and starts to work. Father and daughter move about their work with ease.)* Is there something on your mind?

ARTEMISIA. How old were you when you broke free of your teachers?

ORAZIO. Seventeen.

ARTEMISIA. And I shall be eighteen.

ORAZIO. Yes.

ARTEMISIA. And you were getting commissions when?

ORAZIO. At seventeen.

ARTEMISIA. I see.

ORAZIO. You're sure there's nothing on your mind?

ARTEMISIA. Why? Are you coming to some conclusions?

(*Beat.*) I've run out of the sienna. Do you have some?

ORAZIO. Sienna doesn't belong in your study.

ARTEMISIA. I want to use sienna.

ORAZIO. It will clash.

ARTEMISIA. That's exactly my point.

ORAZIO. You'll ruin the painting.

ARTEMISIA. Or make it immeasurably better. That is always the risk, isn't it? Or do you not know about such things?

ORAZIO. I know very well about risks. You're here, aren't you? (*Beat.*) Are you unhappy?

ARTEMISIA. No, it's not that. I am very happy. Grateful to you in so many ways. But I feel I have done enough copying of your style. I shall go mad if I have to paint another insufferable Annunciation.

ORAZIO. Suddenly my style isn't good enough for you.

ARTEMISIA. As a guide, it is instructive. But I feel I'm ready to find out what my own is. I want to view the world, understand it, capture it in my own way, and that means without a single overfed cherub, long-suffering Madonna, or earnest young Jesus to be found.

ORAZIO. You will find your own style in time.

ARTEMISIA. The time is now, father.

ORAZIO. Artemisia, there's no rush. You will reach the destination you seek, but I do not feel you are ready yet.

ARTEMISIA. Father...

ORAZIO. Finish the painting, daughter.

ARTEMISIA. I don't want to. I'm tired of it. It's Orazio's work, not mine.

ORAZIO. Artemisia, go back to the easel and continue work on the canvas. And keep your hands off that sienna.

ARTEMISIA. Stop treating me as if I am still your baby.

ORAZIO. And what a beautiful baby you were. Black curls, and eyelashes so long and thick that they would have made an exquisite paintbrush. And you were always watching me. Always you had the interest, the curiosity. No one else among your siblings...

ARTEMISIA. Oh, please. (*ARTEMISIA goes to a stack of paintings and gets one from the back. She takes away her father's painting from his easel and puts the canvas on it.*)

ORAZIO. What is this?

ARTEMISIA. Tell me what you think of it.

ORAZIO. I need to know more.

ARTEMISIA. You don't need to know anything other than what your two eyes and your heart tell you.

ORAZIO. Let me study it a minute. (*ARTEMISIA paces nervously behind him.*) I can't offer an opinion.

ARTEMISIA. Why not?

ORAZIO. Because I can't concentrate with you walking back and forth behind me. (*She sits down and taps her foot nervously.*) Your foot is making a most obtrusive noise. (*She stops tapping, then starts fidgeting and sighing.*) I can still hear you.

ARTEMISIA. Stop it, Father! Tell me what you think of the blasted painting!

ORAZIO. Daughter, I do not approve of swearing. You know that is not what I taught you.

ARTEMISIA. Father, please.

ORAZIO. A young woman filled with shame, wishing to keep the prying eyes of others away from her. She wants

nothing more than to hide away from the world. Obviously not a self-portrait. (*Beat.*) Is it “Susannah and the Elders”?

ARTEMISIA. Yes! What do you think?

ORAZIO. It...

ARTEMISIA. What?

ORAZIO. It holds interest.

ARTEMISIA. It holds interest? What does that mean? It holds interest? I am not here to hold interest.

ORAZIO. I have given you my opinion. Please return to your work.

ARTEMISIA. Father...

ORAZIO. You're not ready, Artemisia.

ARTEMISIA. Why?

ORAZIO. Because I am your father. I am your teacher. I am the best friend you will ever have. And I am telling you not to be rash.

ARTEMISIA. I think it's good. Better than good.

ORAZIO. It holds interest.

ARTEMISIA. You're jealous of it, aren't you?

ORAZIO. I will not dishonor myself by replying to your ridiculous notions.

ARTEMISIA. Father's jealous. The great Orazio Gentileschi is green with jealousy. Watch his black bile rise. See the red hue as it starts up his neck, crosses his jaw, ascends his cheeks and ends at his receding hairline.

ORAZIO. I don't like you when you behave this way, daughter. (*ARTEMISIA takes a knife to stab the painting. ORAZIO grabs her hand.*) No! Stop! (*He takes the knife away from her.*)

ARTEMISIA. Why stop me? What does it matter what happens to that childish painting?

ORAZIO. It's not childish, Artemisia. Sit down. *(Beat.)*

I've seen the painting. I knew you were working on it from the start. I knew where you hid it. When you slept at night, I came down and looked at it.

ARTEMISIA. And I saw you looking at it. And I heard you saying nothing. Why?

ORAZIO. What were you expecting me to say?

ARTEMISIA. I need to know if it is worthy. You've always been honest with me.

ORAZIO. I don't intend to stop now.

ARTEMISIA. It's bad. The work is bad.

ORAZIO. The work is good. Quite. Are you satisfied?

ARTEMISIA. There's something more. Tell me.

ORAZIO. You have surpassed me.

ARTEMISIA. Oh. I'm sorry.

ORAZIO. I felt a slight rage when I first saw it. Not because you were disobeying me, but because it is so much better than I was capable of at seventeen years, at eighteen years, at fifty years... And after the rage quieted, after I understood these feelings, realized the cowardice of them, then I felt fear.

ARTEMISIA. Why would you fear my work?

ORAZIO. Because I see, God help you, genius in it.

ARTEMISIA. I knew it. I'm a genius. I knew it. I'll show all those bastards.

ORAZIO. Artemisia...

ARTEMISIA. No one ever said genius had to be humble. And why is this something to fear and not celebrate?

ORAZIO. Can you live with the knowledge that your work may never be accepted or appreciated? That you may be overlooked?

ARTEMISIA. Why?