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*Dramatic Publishing*

# The Gift Horse



Drama with humor by Lydia R. Diamond

# The Gift Horse

***Drama with humor. By Lydia R. Diamond. Cast: 4m., 2w.*** A soulful cello solo played by a beautiful young African-American woman sets *The Gift Horse* in motion. As the mysterious cellist departs, the audience meets Ruth, a warm, attractive African-American woman with an easy laugh and a sharp sense of humor. While Ruth remembers her college days, the audience returns there with her, reliving times when life trajectories were set and bonds with friends and lovers were forged. Ruth takes the audience on her tumultuous journey from then to now, moving back and forth in time, while on another track, the mysterious cellist spools her story as well. At the conclusion these stories converge and resolve in a theatrically and thematically satisfying way. *The Gift Horse* explores the complexities of human interaction in love, commitment and tragedy and celebrates the resilience of the soul. *Bare stage with props. Approximate running time: 2 hours.*

*Front cover artwork: The Goodman Theatre, Chicago, featuring Lynn M. House and Tim Edward Rhoze. Photo: Chuck Osgood.*

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# THE GIFT HORSE

By  
LYDIA R. DIAMOND



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“*The Gift Horse* was developed in part at Chicago Dramatists. The first production of the work was at Columbia College, Chicago. It was the winner of the Theodore Ward Prize for Playwriting 2000. *The Gift Horse* was produced by The Goodman Theatre, Chicago, Illinois, on February 11, 2002, Robert Falls, Artistic Director, Roche Schulfer, Executive Director.”

*The Gift Horse* received its world premiere at the Goodman Theatre, Chicago, on February 11, 2002, Robert Falls, artistic director, Roche Schulfer, executive director. The production was directed by Chuck Smith with set design by Felix E. Cochren, costume design by Birgit Rattenborg Wise, lighting design by Robert Christen and sound design by Ray Nardelli. The production stage manager was Kimberly Osgood and the stage manager was Ellen Hay. The cast was:

Ruth . . . . . Lynn M. House\*  
Jordan . . . . . Yvonne Huff\*  
Noah . . . . . Alfred Kemp  
Bill . . . . . Christian Kohn\*  
Ernesto . . . . . Andrew Navarro\*  
Brian . . . . . Tim Edward Rhoze\*

\*Denotes member of Actors' Equity Association, the union for professional actors and stage managers in the United States.

# THE GIFT HORSE

A Play in Two Acts

## CHARACTERS:

**RUTH:** 26-30 African American woman. Personable, charming, if somewhat neurotic. She has a great sense of humor and laughs easily.

**BRIAN:** 40-50 African American man. Handsome, serious, warm, caring.

**ERNESTO:** 27-30 Latino man. Barely detectable Spanish accent, if at all. Intelligent, warm, charismatic, sexy.

**BILL:** 30-45 white man. Dangerously attractive and engaging.

**NOAH:** 27-30 Latino man. Ernesto's eventual soul mate. Gentle, warm, loving and intelligent.

**JORDAN:** 23-27 African American woman. Young, pretty, personable. Somewhat more centered than Ruth. Though charming and engaging. Must relate to audience with ease and warmth. (Plays the cello.)

**SETTING:** Contemporary urban interior setting with references to late eighties campus life.



# Act I

## Scene i

*(Stage is black. Cello is heard. A special rises on JORDAN playing, she acknowledges audience and continues. RUTH enters. JORDAN stops. They share a brief look. JORDAN resumes.)*

RUTH *(begins making a list)*. Holy Mary, Mother of Jesus. Mother Courage, Mother Teresa, Mother Goose... There must be some rap star with mother... Little Ma Ma Boodie Boodie or something... Mother, mother... I'm a bad motha...

JORDAN *(stops playing)*. Shut yo' mouth...

RUTH. I'm talking 'bout Shaft.

JORDAN. I got it. *(Beat.)* Go on, please. You were listing mothers?

RUTH. Right. Mother Goose, Mother Hubbard, Ma Kettle, Ma Rainey. *(Pause.)*

JORDAN. Don't forget the Greek ones. Gaea, mother of Uranus. Rhea, mother of Zeus; Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis; Maia, mother of Hermes; Dione, mother of Aphrodite; Thetis...

RUTH. OK, OK. Thank you. So, this is my list. Of mothers. Famous mothers. Some day I will join their ranks. Foggy as pieces of my childhood are, the parts I do remember are dreamlike sepia-toned or kodachromed

romps through dandelion-covered fields and across pebbled streams. I was Laura Ingalls, from the book, not the TV. Jo, from the book, not the movie. And at the height of my ongoing identity issues, Anne of Green Gables. So my mom was hard-pressed to find young black literary heroines. She made up for it by supplying me with a steady steam of caramel- to cocoa-colored dolls. I only remember one blue-eyed baby. The Christmas Black-Baby Alive was on backorder. She had the prettiest curly hair and all the white moms bought her...which is truly amazing, considering the toy companies hadn't even started making black Kens. I think they were afraid Barbie would start dating Kenjufu...or Ken-dall Jackson, get it. Anyway, dolls were little people to be treated with care and respect. At least until that great day when I'd have to put aside the things of childhood and reign as kick-ass numero uno mother supreme of the century. (*Beat—to JORDAN.*) So. I really was trying to say something.

JORDAN. I'm sure.

RUTH. I always knew I'd be a great mom. (*JORDAN begins to play.*) I don't know what happened, but I think I know where. Somewhere around the edges of a pre-mid-life-crisis. Really it started years before that, in my first week of college, where I met the only man I've ever really trusted with my heart and soul.

(*Establish college area. [RUTH and ERNESTO are college age.]\* ERNESTO enters.*)

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\* Brackets throughout denote shift in time.

ERNESTO. *Buenas noches.*

RUTH. *Bien, merci, et vous?*

ERNESTO. That's not Spanish.

RUTH. I know. *(Pause.)* I don't speak Spanish.

ERNESTO. *Oui, um, bonjour, mademoiselle, comment allez-vous?*

RUTH. All right then. I don't speak French either. But I'm single.

ERNESTO. Is that what you thought? That I was picking you up?

RUTH. Would that be impossible?

ERNESTO. Well, yeah.

RUTH. So what's with this coming up to a strange woman and speaking in Spanish, if not to ingratiate yourself?

ERNESTO. *Lo decia solo por educacion.* Um...I was trying to ingratiate myself. I might even have been flirting. Maybe, but, to no end.

RUTH. OK. *(Beat.)* Well, I'll be seeing you around.

ERNESTO. Probably, we're neighbors.

RUTH. All right then.

ERNESTO. All right.

RUTH *(to audience)*. Thank God for co-ed.

*(ERNESTO fades into the background as RUTH steps downstage and into her light.)*

RUTH. We saw each other, coming and going, and our conversations got longer and longer... But never as long as I'd have liked.

ERNESTO *(to audience)*. I really wanted to make friends, but I was so careful then. What with all the wasps and

frat-boys, and frat-boy wasps, I'd learned to be private as a means of self-preservation.

*(Previous lighting.)*

RUTH. Hey,

ERNESTO. Hey.

RUTH. Ready for finals?

ERNESTO. About as ready as I'm gonna be.

RUTH. Do you want to get coffee or something?

ERNESTO. Well, I really should get back to my...

RUTH. Studying.

ERNESTO. Yeah.

RUTH. What happened to "I know as much as I'm going to"?

ERNESTO. But I'm in denial. I keep thinking that if I study harder I'll get smarter.

RUTH. You're psych, right?

ERNESTO. Yeah. *(Pause.)* I can tell from the way you dress that you're something artistic.

RUTH. Mom said to do something more practical than painting, so I majored in theater. But she said she'd cut me off if I didn't reconsider the word practical. So I'm an education major, art minor. *(Long moment of silence, turning into awkwardness.)* You should join me. Interfacing with real people can only help you in your psychological pursuits, I mean you want to be a good psychiatrist...

ERNESTO. Psychologist.

RUTH. Sorry, my dad's a psychiatrist. Fine, psychologist. Same beast, no drugs. Let's get coffee.

ERNESTO. No really.

RUTH. Lunch? You have to eat.

ERNESTO. *Niña, déjama quieto!!!* Please.

RUTH. OK, look. We've been speaking to each other like this for a while now. It's like you don't find me attractive, and I just, I can't wrap my mind around that.

ERNESTO. Is it your humility that turns men on so?

RUTH. Ow. (*RUTH begins to walk away. ERNESTO stops her.*)

ERNESTO. Ruth. (*Beat.*) I'm gay.

RUTH. Oh. Yeah, and I'm thirsty. (*Beat.*) Oh, were you thinking coffee was like an invitation to sex?

ERNESTO. You come on a little hard.

RUTH. Only because I knew you were gay. (*Beat.*) I did.

ERNESTO. Here, let me help you with those bags. So, the world is your testosterone oyster, ey?

*(Light fades on ERNESTO and RUTH, up on JORDAN, playing scales on her cello.)*

JORDAN (*to audience*). I never liked practicing. (*Beat.*) I hate practicing! I was made for an audience, and without one it just seemed pointless. I mean the art happens here (*indicating space between audience and stage with her bow*), right here in between you and me is where the art happens. It's not music without you. When it's just me and my instrument, it's not making love, it's more like brushing and flossing before making love. Maybe putting goo on the diaphragm... But when you join the mix—that's where I live. That's the only place where I know how to... That's where it all happens. (*JORDAN plays.*) Now see, this is music.

*(JORDAN's music continues, light rises on RUTH. JORDAN's light fades gradually through RUTH's monologue. JORDAN plays a Mozart minuet that becomes more stylized and jazzy, fading during the monologue.)*

RUTH. Understand, Ernesto was not my first love. He is not the only man I have loved; just the only one who does not make me feel...off balance. But what we share is special and if you think that's hard to understand, try explaining it to your husband.

*([Many years after college.] Phone rings in living area where BRIAN lounges with a morning paper and coffee. He answers the phone as RUTH snuggles in.)*

BRIAN. Morning, Brennans. *(Beat—BRIAN displays thinly veiled annoyance.)* Oh. Hey. Yeah, she's right here. No, she can talk, hold on.

*(BRIAN hands RUTH the phone as light comes up on ERNESTO.)*

ERNESTO. Jane Fonda. *Klute.*

RUTH. You're right. *(To BRIAN.)* Ernie's helping me with my list.

BRIAN. Stupid Bush quotes or rappers turned actors?

RUTH. No, those got too long. Hollywood hoes. *(To ERNESTO.)* So, that gives us, *Pretty Woman, Leaving Las Vegas, Irma la Douce, The Owl and the Pussycat...*

ERNESTO. Double ho for Barbra...crazy ho in *Nuts*, *(Beat.) Breakfast at Tiffany's.*

*(BRIAN makes a big fuss, searching for some unseen paper section.)*

BRIAN. *Breakfast at Tiffany's.*

RUTH. I know, Ernie said it.

RUTH *(to ERNESTO)*. Holly Golightly wasn't a prostitute.

BRIAN & ERNESTO. She was.

BRIAN. Baby...can you count hoes later? *(BRIAN reaches for phone.)*

RUTH. Oh, honey, I have to go. Brian needs some stroking.

ERNESTO. Yeah, well when duty calls...

*(RUTH hangs up.)*

RUTH. You're mad.

BRIAN. I'm hungry.

RUTH. Ernesto says hi.

BRIAN. Um.

*(RUTH gropes to make it better.)*

RUTH. I was thinking I'd make you dinner.

BRIAN. Really?

RUTH. You pick. Steak, potatoes, and a nice salad. Or eggs and a blow job.

BRIAN. You know you're only half as cute as you think you are. *(Beat.)* Scrambled?

*([Early stages of RUTH and BRIAN's relationship.] BRIAN nuzzles her neck while RUTH narrates. JORDAN's music plays softly in background.)*

RUTH. I really thought I was,

BRIAN. cute...

RUTH. Youth's wonderful. That time when you still smell young,

*(BRIAN stands behind her running his hands down her sides.)*

BRIAN. and taste young

RUTH. and your breasts are

BRIAN. perky

RUTH. firm. And you feel the power, or maybe it's not power, it's a little more spiritual than that, I don't know what it is, Oh, that's nice,

*(This is a very stylized love scene; while RUTH continues to narrate, BRIAN picks her up, still she maintains her concentration and speaks to audience.)*

RUTH *(cont'd)*. heady stuff. I don't think the downstairs neighbors liked us much. They couldn't believe that a mattress could make that much noise,

BRIAN. for that long

RUTH. ...at any time of day.

BRIAN. Several times a day.

RUTH. It was powerful. A spiritual, intellectual, and sensual gift from Brian. He taught me to enjoy my body and his, helped me not be ashamed, made the bad thoughts go away and replaced them with... Now it's not power so much as it's, oh, I don't know what it is, but I've never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth.



*(Lights fade as RUTH kneels in front of BRIAN. Lights up on JORDAN, still playing—notices RUTH and BRIAN.)*

JORDAN. Oh my. Over here. Hi. *(Beat, smile.)* I started playing when I was six. They make little cellos, but I always had a big one. I was tall. I almost stopped taking lessons because I thought I'd die if I had to play any more variations of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

RUTH *(to ERNESTO)*. You know those stories where the woman wanders around, hopeless and sad and pathetic until the prince comes and rescues her and then she's happy.

JORDAN. But just when I'm about to quit, Uncle Noah gives me this book of Mozart pieces and explains that Mozart was just a kid too when he wrote them. Didn't matter that cello wasn't his instrument. His mistake. It was on! Mozart became not my ally or inspiration, but the competition.

RUTH. Well they never show the princess being happy, you just know that she is, because the prince is kissing her, or carrying her, or kissing and carrying her off on a big white horse. Actually, usually they're all white, but somehow that doesn't keep little girls like me from identifying with the princess. You have to identify with somebody, right? Clearly I didn't think I looked like Cinderella or Snow White, but who else did I have?

*(RUTH moves downstage where a [college-age] ERNESTO is drawing figures on a notepad. RUTH completes monologue as she settles, ERNESTO folds a piece*

*of the paper and hands it to RUTH who holds it to her head—Karnack the Magnificent-style.)*

ERNESTO. That's awful. Last one.

RUTH. You said that fifteen minutes ago, do you want me to graduate or not? *(Beat.)* It's a house.

ERNESTO. How are you doing that?

RUTH. Insomnia induced clairvoyance.

ERNESTO. But you didn't even see it. *(Beat.)* I'm sorry. You're still not sleeping?

RUTH. It's worse than not sleeping. It's like not being able to breathe. As soon as I get in the bed I just, I just... I don't know, I feel...for as long as I can remember. And now it follows me around all day this feeling. It lurks. So I watch television for women all night.

ERNESTO. That can't be good.

RUTH. I can't help it. I can't stop. It's like one middle-American housewife getting her ass whipped after another. And I'm crying and telling myself I'll turn it off and go to sleep right after the next commercial...but all I can do is lay there and wait for Meredith Baxter Birney to fight for her child or Connie Selleca to get her head bashed in.

ERNESTO. OK, night owl, bet you can't do this one.

RUTH. The point isn't to mess me up. *(ERNESTO closes his eyes again, concentrating.)* I can't play, I have to study or I'll flunk psych.

ERNESTO. I'll take it for you if you'll write my English Lit.

RUTH. Not Fuentes again? And how can they call that English?

ERNESTO. It's translated. They're diversifying.