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Dramatic Publishing



The Sugar Bean Sisters

A Play
by
NATHAN SANDERS



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(THE SUGAR BEAN SISTERS)

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To the memory of
Paula Hurst Sanders

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The Sugar Bean Sisters was originally produced by the WPA Theatre, New York City, 1995, with the following artistic team:

Faye Clementine Nettles Margo Martindale
Willie Mae Nettles Beth Dixon
Miss Videllia Sparks Annie Golden
The Bishop Crumley David Lee Smith
The Reptile Woman Sheila Harper Linnette

Artistic director Kyle Renick
By special arrangement with. Annette Niemtzow and
Harlene Freezer
Directed by Evan Yionoulis

The Sugar Bean Sisters was subsequently produced by the Hippodrome State Theatre, Gainesville, Fla., in the spring of 1995, under the direction of Mary Hausch, artistic director. This production featured an alternate ending not seen in the original WPA production.

This published version of the script includes changes made in the play by the author during rehearsals for a 10th anniversary production of *The Sugar Bean Sisters* at Florida Repertory Theatre in Ft. Myers, Fla. The production was directed by Bari Newport and opened on May 27, 2005.

THE SUGAR BEAN SISTERS

A Play in Two Acts
For 1 Man and 4 women

CHARACTERS:

FAYE CLEMENTINE NETTLES (40s-60s): The spinster daughter of the infamous Papa Fate Nettles, Sugar Bean's long-dead mass murderer. Having witnessed the landing of an alien spacecraft some twenty years prior in her daddy's sugarcane field, Faye awaits the return of her celestial visitors on this night, the very anniversary of that fateful day. With the surety of a Southern Cassandra, Faye hatches a diabolical plot to ensure the "space people's" return and her escape from Sugar Bean forever. Earthy, inappropriate and unconventional, Faye is the "enfant terrible" of Sugar Bean.

WILLIE MAE NETTLES (40s-60s): Faye's exacting older sister. A deeply devout, bald-headed Mormon woman who suffers "spells" and fears the creature that lurks beneath the bed. Willie longs to leave for Salt Lake City, Utah, in the hopes of finding a "good Mormon husband." Severe, humorless and dictatorial, Willie is the quintessential Southern spinster.

MISS VIDELLIA SPARKS (40s-50s): A strange, meretricious woman from New Orleans who arrives at the Nettles home in the middle of Buster Swamp on the night of the expected "landing." Half bird-woman, half sideshow carnival performer, Miss Sparks has a peculiar habit of

making up her own words. Freakish, eccentric and bizarre, Videllia Sparks is the mysterious stranger who comes to town.

The BISHOP CRUMLEY (30s-40s): A Mormon bishop from Salt Lake City, Utah, now living in Sugar Bean, Fla. The Bishop Crumley is a gentle, strikingly handsome man and the object of Willie Mae's unrequited love and affection.

*The REPTILE WOMAN (40s-70s): The snake and "gator" lady of Sugar Bean, Fla. The Reptile Woman, an eccentric swamp mystic, is summoned to the Nettles home on the night of the "landing."

*(Non-traditional casting encouraged: African-American, Native-American, Caribbean, Cajun, etc.)

TIME: A Saturday night.

PLACE: The Nettles home and surrounding swampland in fictitious Sugar Bean, Fla.; several miles from Disney World.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE: Please feel free to substitute some of the more colorful expressions in the play with less "earthy" language, i.e., "witch" instead of "bitch," outhouse" instead of "shithouse," etc.

SEE END OF PLAY for more extensive playwright's notes and notes on the set.

ACT ONE

AT RISE: *The Nettles home in Sugar Bean, Fla., is revealed.*

MISS VIDELLIA SPARKS enters from the sugarcane field. She wears a dress that appears half bird-woman, half-Mardi Gras. Feathers seem to be an identifying trademark for her. Far more freakish than sexy, her appearance is both flamboyant and bizarre. Her make-up is exaggerated, especially around the eyes, giving her the look of a surprised owl. Her outlandish appearance suggests the look of one who recently escaped from a psychiatric hospital or home for the criminally insane.

VIDELLIA climbs the steps of the porch. She holds a flashlight in one hand and a feather-covered overnight case in the other. She swats at the mosquitoes as they bite her arms and face, then knocks on the outside of the screen door.

VIDELLIA. Yoo-hoo! Anybody home? *(She opens the screen and knocks on the front door.)* Anybody inside? *(She peers through the window on the porch.)* Yoo-hoo!

(There is a strange disturbance in the swamp. She screams, then quickly opens the screen door and attempts to enter the house. Discovering that the inside door is locked, she turns and faces the dark swamp. Pointing her flashlight in the direction of the sugarcane field, she slowly descends the steps of the porch. Suddenly, she is attacked by an aggressive swarm of menacing mosquitoes. Her arms flail about wildly as she attempts to defend herself from the stinging pests. She slaps at her arms, legs and face, creating a peculiar, comical dance in the process. In a frantic attempt to escape her tormentors, she runs back up the porch steps and crosses to an open window. She lifts the hanging screen and begins to climb through the window into the house. Losing her balance on the windowsill, she falls awkwardly to the floor. Once inside, she stands up and reaches through the window, pulling her overnight case and flashlight in behind her. The screen falls back into place. She then crosses to the door that leads to the back part of the house. She knocks on the door, then opens it slightly. Calling offstage.)

Yoo-hoo! (After a pause.) Anybody hiding back there? (She turns on the light behind the door and exits offstage for a moment to investigate the back part of the house. She quickly returns, leaving the light on and the door slightly ajar. To herself.) Ain't a soul inside this house.

(VIDELLIA turns on the light in the main room and begins rummaging through the house. Her search is purposeful and she appears to be looking for something in particular. She checks beneath the sofa cushions and

armchair, then feels the underside of the coffee table. Finding nothing, she crosses to the kitchen and begins opening various cookie jars and cabinets. After rummaging through the refrigerator, she makes her way to the other side of the room. Opening the hope chest, she looks inside yet finds nothing of interest. Sitting down on a stool at the antique vanity table, she opens one of its drawers. After searching through the contents of the drawer, she closes it. Noticing her reflection in the vanity mirror, she touches the feathers on her bizarre homemade headdress. Sitting at the vanity, VIDELLIA opens her small feather-covered overnight case and removes a tube of red lipstick. She reapplies her make-up, then turns her attention to her hair. She picks up an antique hairbrush and attempts to tame a few rebellious strands piled on top of her head. A wig head sitting at the edge of the attic suddenly falls to the floor below. Startled, she screams. After recovering from her scare, she picks the wig head up from off the floor and returns it to its proper place in the attic. She opens her overnight case and removes a bottle of Jack Daniels. She unscrews the cap and takes a swig, then places the bottle back inside the case. Leaving the overnight case at the vanity table, she crosses to the bed and feels under the mattress with her hands. Finding nothing, she gets down on her knees and looks beneath the bed. In an apparent attempt to elevate the mattress higher from the floor, extensions have been fastened to the legs of the bed frame. A small, homemade stepladder sits on the floor beside the bed. The sound of a car is heard as it makes its way through the swamp toward the house. VIDELLIA runs to the window and sees headlights coming through the sugarcane

field. She turns off the light in the main living area of the house and races to the door. Realizing that she left her overnight case on the other side of the room, she crosses back to the vanity area to retrieve it. Grabbing her case, she races back to the front screen door. Hearing the slamming of a car door, she stops dead in her tracks. She stands for a moment with her ear pressed to the inside of the front door. A second car door slams closed and she hears the sound of footsteps approaching the house. Hoping to escape through the back, she runs to the back kitchen door. She turns the lock but is unable to open it. She pulls frantically on the doorknob, trying to escape. The lock is jammed. The intruder begins to panic. She puts her flashlight down on the table and crosses to a small window in the kitchen. She opens the window and attempts to climb through, only to discover that her body is too big to fit through such a narrow space. In a mad rush to escape, she runs back and forth, frantically searching for another way out of the house. Hearing the sound of footsteps on the porch, she runs to the other side of the room. Not knowing what else to do, she puts her overnight case on the floor and slides her body underneath the bed. Forgetting to pull the overnight case in behind her, she leaves her feather-covered bag in plain sight on the floor just a few feet away from the bed.

FAYE and WILLIE MAE NETTLES enter from the sugarcane field. FAYE is dressed in vintage male work clothes and carries several Disney World shopping bags. Wearing a pair of souvenir Mickey Mouse ears on the top of her head, she climbs the steps of the front porch.

FAYE's mannish attire is in sharp contrast to WILLIE's more feminine sense of style. WILLIE wears an old dress with antique lace. The hem of the dress falls a couple of inches below her knees. Her black shoes are rather plain and appear to date back to the 1940s or earlier. Some might call them "clodhoppers" or even "granny shoes." WILLIE's wig is neither fashionable nor attractive. This is her "spare wig," not her prized "Eva Gabor wig." Pressing her "Book of Mormon" against her bosom, WILLIE MAE follows her sister onto the porch. FAYE searches her purse for the house key as WILLIE stands watching over her shoulder.)

FAYE. Dad gummitt!

WILLIE (*sharply*). What, did you go and lose the house key again?

FAYE. No, ma'am, I did not.

WILLIE. You went and lost that little ticket that said we parked in Goofy. On account of you—we wound up spending half the night in that awful little tram circling the parking lot huntin' the Buick.

FAYE (*after a pause*). I got one nerve left and you are danglin' from it. (*FAYE finds the key in her shirt pocket.*) Here it is! (*FAYE removes the key and shakes it in the air in front of WILLIE.*) Here's my key!

WILLIE (*flatly*). If it'd been a snake, it would've bit you.

FAYE. Well, then...good thing for me it weren't.

(FAYE puts the key inside the lock and opens the door. She turns on the light in the front part of the house and enters. WILLIE follows FAYE inside and crosses to the vanity. The screen door slams shut behind her. FAYE re-

moves her Mickey Mouse ears and hangs them from a nail on the wall. WILLIE MAE sits at her vanity. VIDELLIA SPARKS peeks out from under the bed. She spots her overnight case sitting on the floor in the middle of the room and attempts to grab it with her hand. Unable to reach it, VIDELLIA slides her body closer to the overnight case. FAYE begins walking toward the bedroom area. VIDELLIA quickly slides back under the bed, hiding herself from view. FAYE crosses to the bed and places the shopping bags on the floor. She does not notice the overnight case sitting on the opposite side of the bed. FAYE looks at her sister's reflection in the mirror. WILLIE is silent and brooding.)

FAYE (*cont'd*). You ain't fixin' to pout the rest of the night, are you? (*WILLIE remains silent.*) Well, then suit yourself. I ain't got time to be fooling with you nohow. (*FAYE crosses to the back door and unlocks the dead bolt. She opens the door for cross ventilation, then un-hooks the latch on the outer screen.*)

WILLIE. Where do you think you're heading?

FAYE. Out to the burnt circle. I need to check on things for tomorrow. (*She crosses to the table and picks up her flashlight.*)

WILLIE (*firmly*). I don't want no strange Martians tracking swamp mud through our lovely home.

FAYE. The space people ain't coming in the house. I'm setting all the samiches out in the cane field.

WILLIE (*glaring at FAYE*). You just had to get me on that awful, terrible ride.

FAYE. I told you to hold onto your wig.

WILLIE (*softly touches her wig*). I couldn't let go of the handlebar! If I had let go of the handlebar—I'd'a gone flying out of that awful deathtrap right alongside my Eva Gabor wig. (*After a pause.*) All the little children at Disney World were laughing at my bald head.

FAYE. You had you a spare wig in the trunk of the Buick. I don't know why you got to keep going on and on about it.

WILLIE. What, you think Eva Gabor wigs grow on trees? Do you know how much a wig like that costs these days? (*Sadly.*) Eva Gabor outdid herself on that one, Faye. I bet you there's not another one like it in the entire world.

FAYE (*noticing something amiss*). Shush a minute. (*Looking around the house.*) Ain't something funny in here?

WILLIE (*brushing her wig*). What you mean?

(Assuming she's been spotted hiding beneath the bed, VIDELLIA's eyes become as big as saucers. FAYE notices that the door to the back part of the house is open and that the light is on.)

FAYE. Papa Fate's door... Did you flip that light back on this morning after I flipped it off?

WILLIE (*dryly*). What, and let Florida Power and Light get rich off my grapefruit fortune? No, ma'am, I did not.

FAYE. Willie! Somebody's been in the house! (*FAYE grabs a knife from the kitchen counter and crosses to the back bedroom door.*)

WILLIE (*praying*). Lord...help us and bind us...tie our feet and hands behind us... Throw us in the Watchalahoochee where the Devil can't find us.

(FAYE exits through the back bedroom door. The sound of loud banging is heard from offstage. It sounds as if FAYE is fighting off an intruder. WILLIE backs away from the door, afraid. FAYE reenters from the back with the knife and places it back on the counter in the kitchen.)

FAYE. You left the light on and Papa Fate's door ajar is what you done.

WILLIE. I did not! You're trying to trick me...trying to confuse me again...

(VIDELLIA seizes the opportunity to grab her overnight case. She pushes her body forward on the floor a short distance, then reaches for the handle. Grabbing it with her hand, VIDELLIA pulls the overnight case under the bed to safety. FAYE crosses to the back screen door.)

FAYE. I'll be out in the cane.

WILLIE. Faye!

FAYE (*flustered*). What?

WILLIE. Don't leave me here all by myself. You got me thinking all kinds of terrible things. (*Softly, almost a whisper.*) Check under the bed.

FAYE. What for?

WILLIE. Raw eyes and bloody bones. 'Fore you go nighty-night...look good 'neath your bed...for raw eyes and bloody bones'll kill you dead.

FAYE (*crosses to the bed*). You're a prize, you know that, Willie? One of these days I'm gonna take you to the fair and let somebody win you bobbing for apples.

WILLIE (*seriously*). Can't let a night go without peeking or you'll never live to see morning.

(FAYE kneels on the floor beside the bed. Without looking, she lifts the bedskirt up and reaches her arm underneath the frame. She begins waving her hand back and forth under the mattress. In an attempt not to scream, VIDELLIA quickly shoves the palm of her hand against her mouth. FAYE releases the bedskirt.)

FAYE. See? Nothing. Not a soul living or dead under there.

WILLIE (*sincerely, with great affection*). You are such a sweet sister. Such a special spirit. I don't know what I'd do without you, Faye.

(FAYE takes the flashlight and crosses to the back screen door. A thought suddenly comes to her. She stops at the door and looks back at WILLIE sitting at the vanity table.)

FAYE. Ain't you gonna plug in that cute Santa Claus of yours?

WILLIE. Oh, it's a good thing you reminded me. We can't have Santa sitting all dark and lonesome, now can we?

(WILLIE reaches down and plugs in her large plastic Santa display. It lights up a bright red. WILLIE starts humming "Joy to the World" as she brushes one of the

wigs in her collection. FAYE crosses to the sink and pours a tall glass of water. Sneaking up behind WILLIE at the vanity, she quietly begins pouring small puddles of water on the floor, paying special attention to the area around the electrical outlet. WILLIE catches FAYE pouring the water out of the corner of her eye.)

WILLIE (*cont'd*). What on earth are you doing?!

FAYE (*innocently*). Nothing. (*Quickly moving away from the vanity, FAYE begins drinking the glass of water.*)

WILLIE. Yes, you was, Faye! You was pouring little puddles of water on the floor again, weren't you?

FAYE (*matter-of-factly*). I weren't doing no such of a thing.

(WILLIE rises from the vanity and crosses to the kitchen.)

WILLIE. Don't you lie to me, Faye Clementine Nettles. You can go to outer darkness for lying the same as you can for stealing or fornicating or playing cards or drinking Coca-Cola. (*WILLIE picks up a dishrag from the kitchen counter and crosses back to the vanity. Kneeling on the floor, she begins soaking up the spilled water with the rag. VIDELLIA SPARKS quickly pokes her head back under the bed before WILLIE has a chance to see her.*) The Relief Society Sisters are very concerned about you, Faye. Sister Fanny Alridge Barkley says you're fixing to wind up in the Hoo-Hoo Hotel if you don't pull your lose ends together.

FAYE. Yeah...well...Sister Fanny Alridge Barkley can kiss my tailhole—!

End of excerpt, following are some notes from the playwright.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

The Nettles sisters are written in such a way as to allow a wide range of casting possibilities. The youngest possible age-range would be to cast three women in their mid- to late forties. The script states that it has been twenty-five years since Robinelle was eaten alive by the “gators” in the swamp and twenty years since Faye’s “space people” first landed in the Nettles’ sugarcane field. If Robinelle had not met her terrible fate in the swamp at the age of sixteen, she would be in her early forties today.

The “space people” made contact with Faye five years after the “Robinelle tragedy” took place. As a result, the time frame is important and needs to be adjusted depending on the age-range of the actors portraying the sisters. If the Nettles sisters are cast with older women, simply add increments of ten years to all twenty-five or twenty-year references in the script. For example, if the sisters are cast with mature women who are in their sixties, simply change all twenty-five-year references in the script to forty-five years, etc.

The Nettles sisters should be played as real people, not caricatures or cartoons. Although they are somewhat uneducated and the authentic product of their eccentric upbringing, they are NOT to be portrayed as “The Beverly Hillbillies.” Please DO NOT exaggerate the Florida accents. The rural Florida dialect is closer to that of Texas than Tennessee. The Bishop Crumley is from Salt Lake City, Utah, and, as a result, does not have a Southern accent.

Depending upon the needs of each production, the actor portraying Willie Mae may use a bald-cap so that, at the

discretion of the director, the wig may be removed during certain key moments on stage. On the other hand, the wig may remain on Willie's head at all times, leaving the true nature of her baldness a mystery to the audience.

A real snake may be used for the Reptile Woman's entrance in Act Two. However, if the use of a live snake is not possible, please attempt to use the most realistic-looking fake snake possible. The only other fake snake on stage should be Medusa who is quietly sleeping in her cage on a bed of twigs and grass.

Miss Videllia Sparks performs in a "fetish" bar in New Orleans. As a result, an older woman could, in fact, work in such an establishment. The Evil People Lounge in New Orleans is NOT a "strip bar" in the usual sense of the word. It caters to a clientele with the most bizarre erotic fantasies imaginable.

The landing of the alien spacecraft at the end of the play may be accomplished by a simple use of lighting and sound effects. Some productions have used a ramp, others have actually flown Faye up into the sky to the spacecraft via a professional rigging device. The final scene in the play can be staged in any number of imaginative and creative ways, depending on the specific needs of each theatre. Magical lighting and sound can be just as exciting to the audience as a more elaborate, complicated staging.

It is HIGHLY recommended that all productions of *The Sugar Bean Sisters* use "Also Sprach Zarathustra" by Richard Strauss (the theme from *2001: Space Odyssey*) as indicated in the script for the landing of the UFO.

The Sugar Bean Sisters is a folk legend, a tall tale, a swamp fantasy. The play has been presented in both realistic and non-realistic productions.

THE SETTING

The Nettles home in Sugar Bean, Fla., settles deep within the ancient, mystical world of Buster Swamp in Watchalahoochee County, east of the great Watchalahoochee River.

The house itself is very old and rustic, even primitive. The main living area of the Nettles homestead is open and flowing and consists of a sofa, coffee table and armchair. A small table where meals are consumed, an antique refrigerator, stove and sink make up the kitchen area of the old swamp dwelling. At one end of the room is an antique vanity, a hope chest and a brass bed. A large, imposing rocking chair inhabits its proper place downstage. Mama's venerable rocker is the very heart of the decaying old house.

A back screen door near the kitchen leads offstage in the direction of the Nettles family sugarcane field. A front screen door opens onto a rickety old porch. The rotting planks of wood are beginning to sag and one complete small section of the front porch has already fallen to the ground. On closer inspection, one might observe that the left side of the house is actually lower than the right. Over time, the impenetrable old swamp shack has begun to sink into the boggy mire.

When the sisters are home, both doors remain open so that a refreshing breeze might flow through the outer screen doors. Although several antique fans have been strategically positioned throughout the house in an attempt to create cross-ventilation, torn lace curtains hang motionless in the hot stillness.

A large open attic space runs the full length of the house. A crudely fashioned wood ladder is mounted to the upstage wall for easy access to the storage area above. The attic area is filled with old junk: packinghouse crates, toys, broken-down kitchen appliances, window fans, personal keepsakes and most importantly, an old suitcase from the early 1960s.

The house is brightly decorated in typical Southern Christmas fashion. Blinking lights, various-sized manger scenes and plastic Santas clutter the large open rooms. A door UR leads to the home's only real bedroom. There is a bathroom lean-to there as well, though the audience never actually sees this part of the house.

A neglected sugarcane field surrounds the house like a fortress. The wood that forms the interior walls of the house appear to have been fashioned from various road signs and store fronts, i.e. "R.C. COLA," "SUGAR BEAN FEED AND GRAIN," "HOME COOKING," "LAST CHANCE TEXACO," etc.

The old shack is dark except for the numerous strings of Christmas lights that outline the roof of the house, the front

porch and the interior attic space. Colorful lights frame the interior of the windows of the house as well.

An old tin outhouse with a half-moon carved in the door stands at the edge of the sugarcane field. The Nettles family graveyard sits on a small plot of land just beyond the antiquated privy. Five primitive tombstones mark the location of the Nettles family burial ground. The graves are crowded together and overgrown with swamp brush. One of the headstones seems dangerously close to toppling completely over.