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Dramatic Publishing



fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life



Drama
by
Sarah Gubbins

"Gubbins ... has captured the high-school lingo and attitudes ideally, often to fine comic effect, with the element of adolescent sexual confusion, as well as certainty, deftly suggested here."

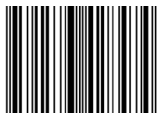
—Hedy Weiss, *Chicago Sun-Times*

fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life

Drama. By Sarah Gubbins. Cast: 2m., 3w. It's Jo's junior year of high school in LaGrange, Illinois, which can only be described as "fml." She is busy fending off suburban boredom and navigating an ambiguous relationship with Emma, the new transfer student, when a new English teacher assigns Carson McCullers' famed novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, to Jo's English class. As she reads, Jo begins to feel akin to McCullers' central character: forever the listener, definitively the outsider and perpetually misunderstood. Thanks in large part to the encouragement of her best friend, Mickey, Jo begins to turn her mindless doodles into an autobiographical graphic novel. But the confidence Jo has always had in her sexuality becomes shaken when she is the victim of a gay bashing. The event forces those close to Jo to question their own responsibility in the attack and find a voice of advocacy for those persecuted simply for being different. A story about isolation, fitting in and finding oneself, *fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life* is a play about surviving high school and how literature still has the power to transform the way we see the world. Area staging. Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: FE5.

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in the Steppenwolf Theatre Company production, Chicago.
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by

SARAH GUBBINS



Dramatic Publishing Company

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(FML: HOW CARSON MCCULLERS SAVED MY LIFE)

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In addition all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life was originally commissioned and originally premiered at Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago, Ill., Martha Lavey, artistic director, and David Hawkanson, executive director.”

“Excerpts from *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers were used with generous permission from the McCullers’ estate.”

Venue: Steppenwolf Theater, Chicago

Date: February 28, 2012

Original Cast:

Jo	Fiona Robert
Emma	Zoe Levin
Mickey.....	Ian Daniel McLaren
Reed.....	Bradley Grant Smith
Ms. Delaney	Lily Mojekwu

Artistic Director.....	Martha Lavey
Executive Director.....	David Hawkanson
Artistic and Educational Director, Steppenwolf for Young Adults	Hallie Gordon
Production Director	Joanie Schultz
Scenic Design	Chelsea Warren
Costume Design	David Hyman
Lighting Design.....	Lee Keenan
Sound Design	Thomas Dixon
Projection Design	Mike Tutaj
Violence Choreography	Matt Engle
Comics Artist.....	Lydia Conklin
Casting.....	Erica Daniels
Dramaturg.....	Aaron Carter
Stage Manager.....	Cassie Wolgamott

fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life

CHARACTERS

JO: A high-school junior. Has wicked basketball skills. Also a graphic artist. A lesbian.

EMMA: A transfer student. Also a junior. Divides her time between the popular kids and the not so.

MICKEY: A high-school junior. Best friends with Jo. Also gay, he's over the entire high-school thing.

REED: Jo's older brother. Mid-twenties. College drop-out who spends his days pretending to be a DJ.

MS. DELANEY: The new English teacher. Mid to late thirties. She carries a sorrow so deep it's calming.

SETTING

LaGrange, Illinois. Present day.

PROJECTIONS

All the panels, chapter titles and text messages called for are panels from Jo's graphic novel, *fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life*. As such, they should all have the unified look of a single artist's hand. All projected text and images appear in bold in stage directions.

fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life

Scene:

AT RISE: In the black the echoing sound of a package dropping to the stage floor. A shaft of tight light finds a manila envelope. MS. DELANEY steps on stage. The package is addressed to her. She rips open the envelope and finds a graphic novel inside.

MS. DELANEY (reading the cover). fml: how Carson McCullers saved my life (flips more pages and reads for a beat.)

(Blackout. Sound of thousands of pages flipping. Projected in black and white the scrawled letters:

fml:

Then:

how Carson McCullers saved my life

Then: The piercing whistle of an oncoming commuter train. Followed by the rumbling rush of the train passing. The words are engulfed in the blaring white light of an oncoming train.

Chapter 1

Projection of the exterior of a high school.

In the whiteout we hear a cacophony of slamming lockers, hallway din and finally the period bell.

“In the school”)

Scene: English Class

(Room 415

JO, EMMA and MICKEY all sit on chairs. A number of empty chairs give the impression of a classroom full of students. It's a Catholic school. The seats are in tight, orderly rows. MS. DELANEY stands before the class. She has a sheaf of papers. She begins her stroll through the aisles.)

MS. DELANEY. My apologies to those of you who completed all the summer reading ... *(Soft groans as she distributes a new reading list.)* ... but I've made some changes to Mr. Knox's list.

(New groans. EMMA takes the list.)

MS. DELANEY *(cont'd)*. Most notably the first book we will be reading this year will not be *All Quiet on the Western Front*. As excellent a book as that is, I'm replacing it with another.

(MS. DELANEY hands JO a list. JO takes it without looking up.)

MS. DELANEY *(cont'd)*. Young lady, your name please?

(All turn to face JO, who is quietly scanning the list. PING. A text appears on screen:

TYLER: *who she calling lady?*

EMMA surreptitious texts back: PING.

EMMA: *lol)*

MS. DELANEY *(cont'd, consulting class roster in her hand)*. Excuse me—Josephine is it?

JO *(startled)*. Oh, Jo. Just call me Jo. I go by Jo.

(PING.

TYLER: *cuz im a dude*

PING.

EMMA: *smh. u bad)*

MS. DELANEY. Right. Jo. Can you read aloud tomorrow's assignment.

JO *(buried in the paper)*. "Pages one to fifty-three of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*."

MS. DELANEY. Thank you. We will, as always, have a short reading comprehension quiz on the day your reading is due.

(Soft groans.)

MS. DELANEY *(cont'd)*. Really? Shall I just take it on faith that you all will be prepared to discuss the reading?

(MICKEY's hand shoots up.)

MS. DELANEY (*cont'd*). Uh, Malachi?

MICKEY. I go by Mickey.

MS. DELANEY. Mickey.

(*PING.*

TYLER: *dude looks like a lady*

EMMA shoots back a text.

EMMA: *putting away my phone u so bad*

EMMA reaches for her bag and drops in her phone. She glares playfully at an unseen student behind her.)

MICKEY. Is that the reading we're supposed to have done by tomorrow?

MS. DELANEY. Exactly.

MICKEY. But that's like a week's worth of reading in twenty-four hours.

MS. DELANEY. Well, we can't discuss a book until you've read it.

MICKEY. Right, I mean, I know you're new and everything, but usually we don't have that much reading overnight.

MS. DELANEY. I see. Well Mr. Knox and I have different teaching styles. Any further questions?

(*Silence. MICKEY reads the syllabus then shoots his hand up.*)

MS. DELANEY (*cont'd, consulting her roster*). Mr. Windlap. Something else?

MICKEY. Does that mean we have another forty pages due the following day?

MS. DELANEY. Brilliant. Your math skills are excellent too.

(Audible groans. PING. EMMA reaches for her phone and reads the text.)

TYLER: this blows)

MS. DELANEY. So, since there seems to be a bit of preoccupation with the reading load in our *AP* English class, I'm going to show some clemency and give you a jump start on homework by reading aloud some of the book. Clemency? Anyone want to define that? *(Sees EMMA with her phone.)* Miss—Rogers?

EMMA. Emma.

MS. DELANEY. Cell phones are not permitted in class. *(Holds her hand out.)*

EMMA. Oh, I'm new here, but I thought we could have them, just not use them. You know, for security and all. My mom wants me to have one.

MS. DELANEY. You appeared to be using yours.

EMMA. No, I was just looking up what clemency meant.

MS. DELANEY. Right. You were using your phone. But I shall show you some clemency this once. Meaning?

EMMA. Uh?

JO. Show compassion?

MS. DELANEY. OK, compassion is good. Or to show leniency. *(To EMMA.)* Next time I keep the phone. *(Back to class.)* I want to start today's class by asking you to think about beginnings. The first line of any story or novel is the author's chance to welcome you into his or her world. "I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice." Anyone recognize that from the reading list? *(Looks around the classroom for a response.)* *A Prayer for Owen Meany.* How about: "The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida." *(Waits.)* No? *(Waits.)* I could have sworn *A*

Good Man is Hard to Find was on your sophomore literature syllabus, isn't that correct, Mr. Windlap?

MICKEY. Yeah, we totally read that.

MS. DELANEY. Good to hear. So in those two very distinct opening sentences you have two very different welcomes. The first sentence of any story is the moment the author begins his or her relationship with you—the reader. Some writers will coax a reader, some will shock, some will quietly entreat you to join them. Some will be embarrassed and reticent to talk to you. But no matter their tactic that opening sentence defines the kind of relationship the two of you will have. 'Cause that's what reading is, right? A relationship between you and an author.

(JO draws in the margins of her notebook.)

The face of MS. DELANEY is projected on the screen behind her.)

MS. DELANEY (*cont'd*). Let's see what path Carson McCullers chooses in her novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.

(JO continues to draw.)

The face of MS. DELANEY evolves into a complete figure holding the book, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.)

MS. DELANEY (*cont'd, reading*). "In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together."

(JO steps away from her desk—she is lost in her own thoughts, MS. DELANEY continues to address the class.)

JO. In school there was one of my kind. I was always alone.

(Panel of JO standing alone.)

MS. DELANEY. “Early every morning they would come out from the house ... where they lived and walk arm in arm down the street to work.”

JO. I was dreading another year at St. Paul the Unbearable.

MS. DELANEY. “The two friends were very different ... ”

JO. And she was the new English teacher.

MS. DELANEY. “Every morning the two friends walked silently together”

JO. When I saw her, I knew this year was going to be different.

MS. DELANEY. “ ... until they reached the main street of town ... ”

JO. Before her, I would dread walking through the halls.

MS. DELANEY. “The thin mute, John Singer—”

JO. The silent laughter. The hateful eyes.

MS. DELANEY. “nearly always put his hand on his friend’s arm—”

JO. The way the girls would step at least a foot away when I walked past.

MS. DELANEY. “ ... put his hand on his friend’s arm ... ”

JO. Like accidentally touching my arm would give them some strange terrible disease.

MS. DELANEY. “ ... put his hand on his friend’s arm and looked for a second into his face before leaving him.”

JO. But now I had Room 415 to look forward to.

(JO’s drawing has grown, escaped the margin, taken over the full page. The figure of MS. DELANEY holding the book like a baton to JO crouching at her desk in fear.)

MS. DELANEY. "Each day was very much like any other day ..."

JO. Just get to Room 415. She will be there. She will be waiting for me.

MS. DELANEY. "In half-dreams he saw his friend very vividly,"

JO. I looked at the clock that first class with her. Only five minutes left!

MS. DELANEY. "and when he awakened a great aching loneliness would be in him."

JO. How could I miss someone so terribly I only just met?

MS. DELANEY. "And so the months passed"

JO. The seconds slipped by ...

MS. DELANEY. "in this empty, dreaming way."

(Bell rings, end of class.)

MS. DELANEY *(cont'd)*. We will pick this up tomorrow. And begin with that quiz you are all so excited about.

(MS. DELANEY leaves. EMMA turns to JO, a not-so-subtle flirtation.)

EMMA. We still on for Chem Lab?

JO *(returns to her desk, slams her notebook shut)*. What?

EMMA. Chem? Problem sets? It's like Swahili to me.

JO. Yeah.

EMMA. Cool. So you'll be early tomorrow?

JO. Not too early.

EMMA. I gotta run, Tyler's waiting, seven thirty?

JO. Yeah. Sure. Sounds good.

(EMMA is gone. MICKEY sits next to JO.)

MICKEY. What are you doing with that?

JO. With what?

MICKEY. That vapid disaster.

JO. She's all right.

MICKEY. She's dating a football player.

JO. She's nice.

MICKEY. Uh-huh.

JO. Once you get to know her. I'm sure she's nice.

MICKEY. Because you've spent all of forty minutes with her.

JO. What am I supposed to do? Hate on my lab partner? I'm stuck with her all quarter.

MICKEY. You think she's pretty.

JO. She's fine. She's totally fine. I didn't even notice.

MICKEY. These are lies. She's totally pretty. And that's why you're giving up your homework. So classic.

JO. I'm giving up my lab answers because she's lost, and Chem sucks, and she asked so nicely.

MICKEY. What, they didn't have science in California?

JO. Noted.

MICKEY. What?

JO. It's been noted. You think Emma's lame.

(MICKEY flips open JO's notebook.

The drawing of MS. DELANEY appears.)

JO (*cont'd*). Hey—don't mess with—

MICKEY (*sees her drawing*). Oh, wow, these are new. When did you start this?

JO. Just now. It's nothing. I was spacing out.

MICKEY. No, no, this is like the start of a whole new story line.

JO. They are just stupid drawings.

MICKEY. But you know what you need?

JO (*seizes it back from him*). My sketchbook back.

MICKEY. You need an alter ego. Like a superhero self.

JO. OK.

MICKEY. Some sort of arch-defender.

JO. Right.

MICKEY. Who thrashes the forces of evil out of our college preparatory experience.

JO. I'll get right on that.

MICKEY. All the while harboring a deep dark crush on the new English teacher.

JO. I do not have a crush on—

MICKEY. Of course you do—she's one of our tribe.

JO. C'mon, Mickey, she's not.

MICKEY. Are you kidding? As the day is long.

JO. You think?

MICKEY. Totally. Gay, gay, gay, gay-gay.

JO. I can't believe I missed that.

MICKEY. My work is never done. What are you doing after school? Can I come over?

JO. I got practice.

MICKEY. Fine. I'll be over after that. (*Takes off.*)