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Eating Blackberries

By
PAM HARBAUGH

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(EATING BLACKBERRIES)

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Eating Blackberries was premiered by the Hickory Community Theatre (Hickory, N.C.) on April 5, 2024.

CAST:

ELIZABETH Holley A. Dagenhardt
JACKSON..... Hudson Ackerman
PAUL Paul Sapp
SOFÍALisa Aquino

PRODUCTION:

Director Eric Seale
Dramaturg David VanCleave
Scenic/Lighting Designer/Technical Director..... Duane Pagano
Costume designer..... Emma Lee Kurts
Sound design..... Eric Seale
Stage manager Bethany Spears

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), 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:

“*Eating Blackberries* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Hickory Community Theatre in Hickory, N.C.”

Eating Blackberries

CHARACTERS

ELIZABETH ASHCROFT: 40. An earthy, artsy type. A former literature professor, she is now a writer with a growing number of rejections. A kind and generous person, she has a solid relationship with her son, Jackson. She struggles over her feelings for her ex.

JACKSON ASHCROFT: On the cusp of 18. He is strong, funny, a smart-ass and a thinker. Protective over his mother, he is easily angered by his father and blames him for all that is wrong. He works as a lifeguard and has a swimming scholarship.

PAUL ASHCROFT: 40. Elizabeth's ex-husband and Jackson's father, now married to Sofia. He made a fortune in the real estate market. A painful mix of narcissism and guilt, he wants everyone to be happy, especially himself. He agonizes over Jackson's antipathy.

SOFÍA ASHCROFT: 24. Married to Paul, pregnant with their first child. Latina, former real estate agent in Paul's office, she now teaches yoga and has big dreams. She looks great in yoga pants, even while pregnant. She grew up poor and has more strength and determination than her uptalk and Valleyspeak suggest.

TIME: May to August, 2022

PLACE: The Ashcroft home in Orinda, California, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

PRODUCTION NOTES

TECH: The sound design is a fifth character here. It should impart the outside threats of fires, fierce nature and low rumbles, cracks and thuds of earthquakes. Further, for the earthquakes, show your cast being thrown off balance and props falling.

INTIMACY: Depending on your cast and how far you want to go for your typical audience, you may want to employ an intimacy coach in two scenes.

PROFANITY: The director has permission to soften the profanity if they deem it prudent for their company and its typical audience.

“Nature is about balance. All the world comes in pairs—yin and yang, right and wrong, men and women; what’s pleasure without pain?”

—Angelina Jolie

Eating Blackberries

ACT I

(Lights up on an open area family room. A counter divides the space from the kitchen. Moving boxes are scattered about. There are three exits—one to the front door, a patio door to the outdoors and one to the hallway leading to the bedrooms. There is a fireplace. Distant siren gets louder, then returns into far distance. JACKSON enters through the patio door. He carries two pails of blackberries, which he puts onto the counter. He pops a couple in his mouth. He crosses to turn off the AC, sees a large kingsnake behind a moving box and tenderly picks it up.)

JACKSON. Nope. Henry. You don't belong in here.

(He exits through the patio door with the snake. Wind chimes sound. ELIZABETH enters from the front door with mail, a bottle of wine in a paper bag and an urn. She tosses her keys onto the counter along with the bag and mail. She turns on a nearby speaker, fiddles with her phone. The "Lacrimosa" from Mozart's Requiem plays. We hear the sound of JACKSON urinating into the pool. It's a strong, youthful stream followed by a little plop. He re-enters, zipping up.)

JACKSON *(cont'd, sees urn, stops short)*. Noooooo ...

ELIZABETH. Yes ... I murdered all my darlings. Poof! "The Last of Paul" now lives in the fiery underground with all its siblings, snug in this urn of failures ...

JACKSON. What? Mom, you need to make it work.

(He turns the music to something more lighthearted, eats more blackberries.)

ELIZABETH. I'm fine.

JACKSON. Not with all those bills you aren't.

ELIZABETH. I'm fine. Don't worry about it. Everything's gonna be OK.

(JACKSON looks at her unconvinced.)

ELIZABETH (*cont'd*). My editor wants more “contemporary context,” more “honesty.”

(JACKSON continues to look at her, then, audible sigh)

ELIZABETH (*cont'd*). I don’t want my book to hurt anyone ... I’m talking about your / father.

JACKSON. I know!

ELIZABETH. Don’t think I want him back, because I don’t want him back.

JACKSON. I hope not.

ELIZABETH. I don’t.

JACKSON. Good. So get fierce. Be a truth teller!

ELIZABETH (*changing the subject*). Why is it so hot in here? I can’t breathe it’s so hot.

(ELIZABETH opens the fridge, hangs onto its door. The power goes out.)

ELIZABETH (*cont'd*). Noooo ...

(Cellphones ping.)

JACKSON (*reading his cellphone*). PG&E’s working on the grid.

(Power returns. A speaker says “Ready to Connect” repeatedly.)

JACKSON (*cont'd*). Ugh. This speaker has been doing this all day, whenever the power goes out and comes back on. *(He turns off the speaker.)*

ELIZABETH. Connection is an illusion. Did you know that, Jackson? It’s nature’s magic trick. You can’t truly touch anyone, or anything ... there’s this tiny space between you and ... whoever it is you are trying to touch. The molecules in your skin ... the atoms in those molecules ... with an army of electrons protecting their nucleus keeping you away—

JACKSON. Touching and connecting are two different things.

(JACKSON goes back to packing. ELIZABETH adds items to the box.)

JACKSON *(cont'd)*. Mom! You're dripping all over me.

ELIZABETH. Did you turn off the AC?

JACKSON. Of course I turned it off.

ELIZABETH *(resetting the AC)*. Just for today ... OK?

JACKSON. Worsening drought ... then the wind—

ELIZABETH. There's not even a breeze / out there.

JACKSON. The wind snaps all the dried-up twigs off the trees and they blow onto power lines ... sizzle, pop ... and they catch fire and the hill over there burns up ... we are an invasive species and have brought ecologic and economic harm to our world ... now we're all endangered, Mom ... at risk of vanishing. All because we're "hot."

ELIZABETH *(off his preachiness)*. "Let thunder rumble. Let lightning spit fire!"

(JACKSON doesn't respond.)

ELIZABETH *(cont'd)*. What? No King Lear?

(Cellphones ping.)

JACKSON *(reading text message)*. Winds are supposed to pick up later.

ELIZABETH *(opening a bill)*. What's this? What the ... hey ... hey! ... Here's the cherry on top of moving day! Your father goes on a vacation and my name's on the bill. Oh! He's traveling already? No one really knows if it's safe yet to ... *(To herself, worried, sudden tears.)* That's too soon, Paul Ashcroft! You're not invincible. You ... dick! They went to Puerto Vallarta!

JACKSON. So?

ELIZABETH. He's high risk—

JACKSON. No he isn't. And the vaccines work.

ELIZABETH. His low blood pressure—

JACKSON. When's the last time he fainted?

ELIZABETH. She wouldn't know the first thing to do. I hate him so much.

(JACKSON is silent, then another audible sigh.)

ELIZABETH *(cont'd, still crying)*. I do. I hate him.

JACKSON. You should.

ELIZABETH. Why didn't he use one of his own credit cards? Did you know they were going on a trip?

JACKSON. All we do is grab burgers and sit there and eat and check our cellphones. He asks me how my grades are and if I'm still on the swim team and if I'm still doing laps in "his" pool. Then he drops me off at BART. That's it.

(Cellphones ping.)

JACKSON *(cont'd, checks cellphone, worrying)*. The fire's in Danville now. We are an invasive species, and we're being exterminated.

(ELIZABETH wants to hug him, but she's so sweaty. They look at each other, a sea of understanding.)

JACKSON *(cont'd)*. I bet their stupid baby will get my room ... This is our home. Our backyard is so righteous ... *(Looking outdoors.)* My fort, I built that! ... The deer by the creek—

ELIZABETH. Eating my roses—

JACKSON. The fog coming in—

(Sound of a bear and cubs tromping through bushes.)

JACKSON *(cont'd)*. Whoa! They're back! Look! The bear and her cubs ... they're heading for the blackberries again. The heat made 'em ripe early. I got a whole bunch this morning. Here, taste.

(JACKSON hands bowl of blackberries to ELIZABETH. They watch bears and eat blackberries, surprised at the taste.)

ELIZABETH. Mmm. So sweet! All those thorny thickets ... taking over the ravine, climbing ...

JACKSON. Up to the edge of the house ... *(Playfully, taking bowl back.)* Don't eat all of them!

(Sound of bears lapping water.)

JACKSON (*cont'd*). No, no ... the bears are drinking from the pool.
Shoo! Hey ... get outta there.

(*JACKSON steps outdoors, waving hands, shouting "shoo!"*
ELIZABETH pulls him back inside and closes the door.)

ELIZABETH. Let 'em drink. It's hot and they're thirsty.

JACKSON (*suddenly, almost in tears*). But I pissed in the pool.

ELIZABETH. I know.

JACKSON (*crying*). Why did I do that? I pissed in the pool.

ELIZABETH. Everything is everything, baby. Bears and piss.
Blackberries and thorns. Your father and ... her. "The air is full
of our cries."

JACKSON. Too easy. Beckett. "Godot."

ELIZABETH. You are right, sir!

(*Sound of bears leaving.*)

JACKSON. They're leaving ... I'm gonna miss this.

ELIZABETH (*forced upbeat, fighting tears*). We'll find new
thickets ... maybe I'll get a cat ... or a dog ... no, a cat ... I'll ...
we'll ... um ... uh ... when you're gone at school, I'll have ... I
dunno ... time to ... um ...

JACKSON. I fucking hate him for hurting you.

ELIZABETH (*kissing his cheek*). You're too smart to settle for that
word.

(*Beat. JACKSON waits for ELIZABETH to get back to work so
she does not see him wipe her sweat off his cheek. The emotionally
wounded mother and son take good care of each other.*)

(*Cellphones ping. They look at their phones. ELIZABETH goes
back to bills. JACKSON picks up a box and exits through front
door. ELIZABETH watches him leave, delighting in what she
sees. Wind chimes slowly sound, softly.*)

ELIZABETH (*cont'd, to herself*). Nothing will be the same. It's no
fair. Paul gets a brand new life, and I get pried out of my home
... *Spasibo*, Natasha. (*Cellphone pings. She reads the message.*)
There are no winds! It's not time.

(Wind chimes slowly stop. JACKSON re-enters, eats a couple more blackberries.)

JACKSON. I'm hungry ... did you pack up all the food?

ELIZABETH. Look in the fridge.

(JACKSON fills a saucepan with cereal and milk. Grabs a serving spoon, sits on the counter and eats.)

JACKSON. Dad should give you his credit card. *(Beat.)* It's freezing in here.

(ELIZABETH takes the bottle of wine from the paper bag, tries to open its twist top but can't. JACKSON opens it for her and exits to his room. She fills a glass.)

ELIZABETH *(calling after JACKSON)*. What will I do when you're at college?

JACKSON *(offstage)*. Chico's only a couple hours away.

ELIZABETH *(raising her glass, calling)*. "He had not time to say 'alack,' before the bear was on his back."

JACKSON *(offstage)*. It's California. No one has read *The Three Sisters*.

ELIZABETH. You have.

JACKSON. 'Cause you made me read it. When I was like, thirteen. *(Imitating his mother.)* "It's a comedy. You'll love it."

(JACKSON enters from his bedroom, wearing a furry looking jacket and putting on a hat. He has fun with this. Makes bear noises. Eats blackberries.)

ELIZABETH *(seeing what he's wearing)*. Oh my ... what are you ... you little ...

(ELIZABETH playfully yanks hat off, swipes at him with it. He dodges. She chases.)

Sound of a car door closing. Power goes out, then on. The speaker says "Ready to connect" repeatedly. The game continues as PAUL enters. He holds a box marked "Elizabeth & Paul." The speaker is still going.

ELIZABETH and JACKSON see him and stop their “game.”)

ELIZABETH (*cont’d*). Paul!

(JACKSON turns off the speaker, retreats, takes off coat, etc.)

ELIZABETH (*cont’d, caught off-guard*). Hi ... oh ... oh ...

PAUL. The door was open.

ELIZABETH. So you can’t knock? It’s not your place until tomorrow.

PAUL. Actually, it is ... as of three months ago.

(Silence.)

ELIZABETH (*to JACKSON*). Say hi to your father.

(Silence.)

PAUL. I, uh, wanted to get this back to you.

(JACKSON approaches PAUL.)

JACKSON. I’ll take it.

(ELIZABETH refills her glass and enjoys the following confrontation.)

PAUL. Man ... you’re getting tall.

(JACKSON does not respond.)

PAUL (*cont’d*). Hope you’re takin’ care of numero uno, right? (*Raising his finger.*) Always gotta take care of yourself first, right? Numero uno ...

JACKSON. Box. (*Taking the box from PAUL.*) That’s it then, no more? Surprise visits ... here, or at the apartment?

PAUL. No. No more surprise ... and if I do drop by, I ... uh ... I guess I’ll call first, which of course means it wouldn’t be a surprise visit.

(Silence. Awkward pause. PAUL lets out uncomfortable laugh.)

PAUL (*cont'd, to ELIZABETH*). Uh ... you're almost all moved out ... I mean ... ready to move into ... into your new ... uhhhh ...

JACKSON. Apartment ... Dad, our little apartment. With one bedroom and a crappy little community pool. (*Raising finger, imitating his father.*) Not exactly “numero uno.”

(*JACKSON stares down his father. No one wants PAUL there.*)

PAUL. Damn it's cold in here.

ELIZABETH. I'm hot.

PAUL. It's gorgeous outside—

JACKSON. Mom needs money.

PAUL. You got the AC on? You should open some windows—

JACKSON. Mom needs money.

PAUL. What for now?

JACKSON. Food. Those bills.

PAUL. You should be set, at least for the next few months ... the office sent a check on Monday. They'll send another next month. I just got you the apartment. Had your furniture moved ... you're getting that advance from your editor.

(*JACKSON points to the urn.*)

PAUL (*cont'd*). Oh ... no, no, no ... I thought you had a contract.

ELIZABETH. My editor wants “more.” So I ... need more ... from ... you.

(*PAUL hauls out a wad of cash.*)

JACKSON. You should get Mom a credit card in her own name, Dad.

(*Sound of another car door. JACKSON crosses to the window and looks out.*)

JACKSON (*cont'd*). Oh good. A party.

(*JACKSON crosses to door, opens it to reveal SOFÍA, in yoga pants, very pregnant, holding a peace lily and keys. SOFÍA enters.*)

ELIZABETH. You!

PAUL. No ... no, Sofia, no, no ...

SOFÍA. A little drop in before yoga. And, Paul, like duh, you forgot her housewarming present. You can tuck this into your moving van, right? It's called a peace lily? I'm pretty sure it needs literally buckets of water.

JACKSON (*refilling the cereal bowl*). Really? It's like a freakin' drought out there!

(*SOFÍA sets the plant down next to the urn, which startles her.*)

ELIZABETH (*raising a glass in another toast to the urn*). My latest victim.

PAUL. Elizabeth's rejected manuscripts. She likes the symbolism.

ELIZABETH. The most recently deceased is "The Last of Paul."

SOFÍA (*to PAUL*). So it's not getting published? She's not getting the advance?

ELIZABETH. Dirt to dirt. Ashcrofts to ashes. Photos. Marriage certificate. Letters. *Ciao!*

(*ELIZABETH finishes her glass, pours more.*)

SOFÍA. That is like literally the weirdest thing ... anyway, Elizabeth, your leasing office sent the extra set of keys to the wrong Mrs. Ashcroft! I guess they automatically deliver them to the billing address.

JACKSON. I'll take those.

PAUL. You should be resting, Sofia.

SOFÍA. I'm fine ... other than yoga there's literally nothing to do. And we're all packed. We're heading to Ventana in Big Sur for our babymoon tomorrow? They've just reopened after months and months of quarantine. So it'll be super clean.

JACKSON. That's gotta cost—

SOFÍA (*ignoring JACKSON*). Aaaand there's literally going to be a full moon tomorrow night?

JACKSON. Full moon's tonight.

SOFÍA. Whatever ... *una luna llena*. Right, Paulie? Go on, say it. Go on ... like I taught you.

PAUL & SOFÍA. *Una luna llena.*

SOFÍA. We'll be there for all of next week while the contractors and all their workers fix up that bedroom for Eduardo. This place literally needs a ton of work ...

ELIZABETH. Business must be very good indeed, Paulie.

JACKSON (*to ELIZABETH*). Told ya.

SOFÍA. Can you believe it, even with all these fires people are still moving out of the cities ... this house is in a good spot.

JACKSON (*eating blackberries*). Not so sure about that. Never know when an invasive species is going to move in ... millions of years ago, this was all under water and there were whales and starfish swimming all around. Probably right here! Then mastodons and hyenas.

PAUL. Evolution, Jackson. It happens.

JACKSON. Invasion you mean. Indigenous people, who came from somewhere else themselves ... conquistadors, pilgrims, the English, the Germans, / the Irish—

PAUL. Manifest Destiny! We're adventurous ...

JACKSON. Invaders pushing people out of their homes ... did you know there's a giant First Nations' burial ground on the eleventh hole at the Orinda Country Club? Like, what happened there?!

PAUL. Ha! No, son ... that's myth.

JACKSON. It's not—

PAUL (*pretends to tee off*). It's called the graveyard hole because it swallows so many golf balls. Ha!

JACKSON. That's the myth!

(Cellphones ping. All look at their phones.)

SOFÍA. "Impacted areas have been updated?" Ohmygod. If the power thing goes all the way down to Big Sur I'm going to be sooo upset.

PAUL. The winds are going to / pick up later.

ELIZABETH. We all know about the winds. (*Opening the front door.*) I beg you. Both. Please. We got the box ... the plant ... the keys ... Jackson and I have work to do. Boxes, bills ...

SOFÍA (*to PAUL*). Have you?

PAUL (*to SOFÍA*). Not yet.

SOFÍA (to PAUL). Of course not ...

ELIZABETH (still holding the door open). Maybe even rewrites.

SOFÍA. You're going to make that apartment so adorable. I knew the minute I found it that it would be amazing for you and Jackson.

(Beat.)

PAUL. No, no ... no ... no ... JACKSON. Three, two, one ...

ELIZABETH (closing door). Wait wait wait ... I'm going to be living in a place YOU found? For my son and me?

SOFÍA. And it's gonna be like literally / perfect, right?

ELIZABETH (to PAUL, exploding). What ... *scheisse* is / all this?

JACKSON. And we have lift off.

SOFÍA (babytalk to her belly). Ooooo ... I bet I know what that means. Eduardo really doesn't like that nasty word, does he?

JACKSON. Approaching main engine / cut off ...

ELIZABETH. Jackson, don't move one more box. We're staying here.

JACKSON. MECO and / separation ...

PAUL (to SOFÍA). She's not serious.

(SOFÍA has her own little explosion, moves around the home, JACKSON follows her, acting like he's in zero gravity.)

SOFÍA (to PAUL). She can't ... we've got workers ... they're coming tomorrow!

PAUL (to ELIZABETH). You're not serious.

(SOFÍA stops, takes a "cleansing" breath. She crosses to ELIZABETH and, using armchair psychology, tries to explain.)

SOFÍA. I hear that you're, like ... uncomfortable. This is all, like, the "new normal?" ... And we're all, like, finding our new paths?

JACKSON. And we have ignition of the second stage.

ELIZABETH. Is it getting hotter in here? It feels hotter. Did anyone touch that AC?

PAUL. Sofia saw the listing in the rentals. It was in Spanish so we were lucky, you were lucky ... she's the only one in our office who can—