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Family Plays

ARTIE

by
WIL DENSON



ARTIE

A poignant, significant, timely drama for junior high to adult actors and audiences.

Judge's commentary in awarding *Artie* first place in the Council of Wisconsin Writers Award notes that the events in this play are an "effective metaphor for the rite of passage" and subtly focus "on the characters' need to establish their identities as people ... Lee is learning that life isn't fair ... Bring together a group of kids with these kinds of things on their minds and literally anything can happen. That makes for good drama. The theme of this play is human development ... the play is not about Artie himself, but about Artie as an important experience in these kids' growing-up process." "My final word to Wil Denson is 'congratulations' on his excellent work."

Drama. By Wil Denson. Cast: 3m., 3w. Growing up is painful. Whoever said school days are the best days of your life must have had a horrible adulthood. Lee Singer is 13 years old today. She has planned a party for herself and her best friend, Artie. Artie is 17, but he's more like 7. Lee is the brightest thing in his life. She teases him, big-sisters him and teaches him how to have fun. But now Lee is 13. A teenager. A young adult. Her peers remind her it's time to put away childish things. Including Artie. It's time for her to grow up. But what about Artie? He'll never grow up... Although this play is perfectly suitable for junior-high students to perform, university students played all the roles in the premiere at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire. *Virtually bare stage—perfect for touring. Simple ext. set. Costumes: modern. Approximate running time: 60 to 75 minutes. Code: AH8.*

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Title

Artie



A Play

by

WIL DENSON

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60998

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WILL DENSON

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(ARTIE)

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ARTIE

Cast

[3 men, 3 women. Adults can play all the roles]

PAUL “MONKEY” STRAYHORN, a 13-year-old troublemaker
KURT RUTLEDGE, 14, in the 8th grade. An athlete and a leader
MISSY STONER, 13, entering junior high, but mature and attractive
GAIL HELLER, 13, unattractive, unpleasant
ARTIE, 17, gentle, and mentally retarded
LEE SINGER, Artie’s friend; it is her 13th birthday

Δ

*The action takes place in a city park.
It is about four in the afternoon of a late-August day.*

Originally produced by the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, with university theatre students in the cast.

ABOUT THE PLAY

Although this play is perfectly suitable for junior high students to perform, it is designed for performance by adults. University students played all the roles in the premiere. "Artie" is intended for audiences of all ages, and—with its virtually bare stage—it can be performed anywhere.

A videotape of the university production is available. The script used in the premiere is a shorter version (about 30 minutes) entitled "A Friend Like Artie," with four characters (the roles of Monkey and Gail are not included). The actor playing the role of Artie does a masterful job of portraying the retarded boy; it's hard to believe he's a university student. For this reason alone the tape is an excellent lesson in acting.

Both the tape and the four-character version (in manuscript) are available from I. E. Clark, Inc.

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Growing up is painful. Whoever said school days are the best days of your life must have had a horrible adulthood.

Lee Singer is 13 years old today. She has planned a party for herself and her best friend, Artie. Artie is 17, but he's more like seven. Lee is the brightest thing in his life. She teases him, big-sisters him, teaches him how to have fun.

But now Lee is 13. A teen-ager. A young adult. Her peers remind her that it's time to put away childish things. Including Artie. It's time for her to grow up.

But what about Artie? He'll never grow up . . .

PRODUCTION NOTES

Properties

Trumpet case, containing trumpet, a cloth, spray cans—Monkey
 Spray-paint cans—one green, one red—(the actual spray may be hair spray or deodorant; or it may be mimed)—Monkey
 Trash—in trash barrel
 Kleenex tissues—Missy, Lee
 Hacky-sack or small super ball—Kurt
 Handkerchief—Kurt
 Ten-speed bike with carrier basket—Monkey
 Coke, junk food—Gail
 Dead squirrel—in trash barrel
 Ballpoint pens, slogan buttons, battered baseball glove—Artie
 Plastic (leaf/garbage) bag, worn-out household broom—Artie
 White tissue-wrapped gift (containing "used" cap)—in leaf bag
 Camping cooler (ice chest) containing cans of Coke, assorted bags of chips/snacks—Lee, Artie
 Volley ball—Lee
 7 bottle openers—Artie

Costumes

Modern junior high level clothes are suggested. **Monkey** tends to look sloppy even in expensive apparel: his shirt is half-untucked, his shoes untied, and his khakis too large. **Kurt** and **Missy** are both well-dressed, with **Kurt** leaning a bit to the athletic style. **Gail** is overweight, unpopular, and unattractive. Her clothes reflect this; she also wears glasses. Over-large pants with wide cuffs and a tightly cinched belt, a shirt buttoned incorrectly, and a worn baseball cap are part of **Artie's** attire. He seems to be a walking collection of slogan buttons and ballpoint pens, and one shoe is untied. **Lee** is somewhat of a tomboy. She wears levis, sneakers, and a sweatshirt.

If real spray paint is used, be sure it's water-base paint, and wash the costumes immediately. We advise using hairspray, spray deodorant, or some other harmless, non-staining spray. In any case, **do not spray anyone's eyes**. The safest procedure is to mime the spraying with an empty can.

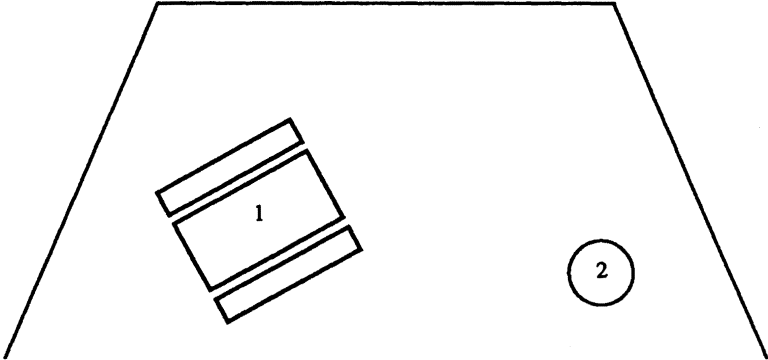
Sound

Subdued park noises—children playing, traffic, birds—at the opening will help set the scene. Monkey's trumpet blasts can be made by the actor, even if he can't play a trumpet. The "Happy Birthday" tune at the end is also best made live—it doesn't have to be well done.

The Set

The scene is a city park. A picnic table with benches and a large trash barrel are all that is required. Other park equipment—swings, see-saws, slides, etc.—may be added, along with trees. **Please see the suggested Floor Plan on next page.**

Floor Plan



- 1—Picnic table with benches
- 2—Trash barrel

ARTIE

[A city park. Late summer. Distant park NOISES—games, birds, muted traffic. A battered picnic table with benches, a large trash barrel. There may be other “park” pieces—a swing set, teeter-totters, trees—but they aren’t required. A seeming late afternoon peacefulness.]

AT RISE: the stage is deserted. PAUL “MONKEY” STRAY-HORN enters quickly. He checks to make sure he is alone. Monkey is 13. Thin. Angular. There is a slyness about him. A quickness. He has a constant, thin, mirthless smile; Monkey’s defence against life is his unamused grin. Somehow he manages to look sloppy even in expensive clothes; his shirt is half-untucked, his shoes untied, he constantly hitches at his seemingly too-large khakis. He carries a scuffed but expensive trumpet case which is clearly a burden to him. Monkey is mean.

He crosses quickly to the picnic table, looks around to make sure he is unobserved, and opens his trumpet case to remove a can of spray paint closely matching the color of the picnic table. He shakes the paint vigorously and sprays one of the benches liberally. He hears someone coming and looks about quickly for a hiding place. He crosses to the trash barrel, tosses in the trumpet case, and climbs in after it.

KURT RUTLEDGE and MISSY STONER enter in time to see Monkey disappear into the barrel. They exchange a glance. KURT crosses quietly to the barrel, smiling. He gives it a violent push sending it—and Monkey—rolling. The barrel comes to a stop. Monkey emerges slowly, warily, grinning his mirthless grin. KURT and MISSY watch as he crawls forth]

MONKEY. *[Emerging]* Dropped my horn. Had to get it out.

KURT. Yeah, right.

MONKEY. *[Grinning]* Really. Put it on the edge and it fell in.

KURT. And you fell in after it.

MONKEY. *[Knowing nobody believes any of this]* Right. Slipped. Terrible accident.

KURT. Yeah.

MONKEY. Could have been seriously killed.

KURT. Right. Would have been too bad.

MONKEY. For sure. Well. I gotta go. Got a lesson. I'll see you guys. Maybe catch you later at the mall or some place. *[A grinning, hedging exit]* Watch it around that barrel. Tricky. *[And he is gone. MISSY trails him to the exit, looking off after him]*

[KURT crosses and rights the barrel; he picks up some, but not all, of the trash that got scattered when it went over. KURT RUTLEDGE is 14 and in the 8th grade—a year ahead of the others. He's tall, good looking, cool. An athlete. Things come easily to him; people like him. MISSY STONER is about to enter junior high. She is 13 but physically mature for her age. She is attractive, well-dressed]

MISSY. He's so weird I don't believe it.

KURT. *[Working around the barrel]* Believe it.

MISSY. He was probably in there eating flies.

KURT. *[Picking up a sodden piece of litter]* Nice talk.

MISSY. Well, what was he doing? He must have been in there for some reason.

KURT. *[Shrugging]* Who knows. He's so tipped over he probably sleeps in there. Probably keeps a garbage can in his bedroom so he feels more at home. *[Finished with as much of the trash as he intends to deal with]* You got a Kleenex or something?

MISSY. *[Sarcastic]* Right. Ten of them. "Monkey." What a name.

KURT. *[Wiping his hands on his own handkerchief]* Yeah.

MISSY. *[Looking around]* Well, she's not here. What do we do now?

KURT. *[He shrugs]* Wait. This is where she's supposed to be.

MISSY. Just "wait"? *[KURT takes out a hacky-sack or small super ball to pass the time; he's good at whatever he does]*

KURT. What else? This is where her mom said she'd be. She's meeting that Artie. They should be here any minute.

MISSY. Artie? Is he going to be here?

KURT. No. She's meeting him here, but he's going to be some place else.

MISSY. I didn't know he was going to be here. I wouldn't have come.

KURT. You don't have to marry him. I just have to talk to Lee and then we can go. I told Coach I'd find her and have her call him.

MISSY. I wouldn't have come. I'm not going to the mall with that Artie.

KURT. Okay.

MISSY. I'm *not*.

KURT. [*Playful*] Okay. I think I got it. Nobody's asking you to. I just have to tell Lee to call Coach, then we can go.

MISSY. [*Moving away, sulking slightly*] Well, why not just tell her mom to have her call? I don't see why we have to run all over looking for her. Why us?

KURT. [*Shrugging; still toying with his prop*] We're superior beings. Who knows. Coach just wants me to find her.

MISSY. What's the big rush anyway, practice doesn't start till Monday.

KURT. Look, relax. It's only four-thirty. We've got over an hour before we're supposed to meet those guys. This'll take about two-point-six minutes. Don't get so uptight about everything. Sit down.

MISSY. Well, I'm not going to the mall with that Artie.

KURT. Nobody's asking you to. Just sit down.

MISSY. You think it's funny that—

KURT. [*Playfully aggressive*] Sit! [*They have crossed to the picnic table and KURT gives her a slight push down onto the bench. It is the bench that Monkey just spray painted*]

MISSY. [*Springing up; paint on her clothes and her hands*] Oh!! Son-of-a—!! Kurt, you—!! Wet paint!! All over my—!! Kurt, you—!! [*nearly crying*] It's not funny!

KURT. [*Wiping it with his handkerchief*] I'm not laughing.

MISSY. I just got this for school! It's brand new! It's not funny!

KURT. I'm not laughing. Look, I'm sorry. I didn't do it. I didn't know it was wet, okay? I'm sorry. I wouldn't have pushed you into wet paint, you know.

MISSY. Monkey. That Monkey. He did it. That's what he was doing here. That dirty—! I'm telling my dad about this. [*Starting off*] I'm going.

KURT. [*Following her*] Listen, I'm sorry, okay? I didn't know it was wet. There wasn't any sign or anything.

MISSY. It's brand new. It's not funny.

KURT. I *know* it's not funny. I *told* you, *nobody's laughing*.

[They are gone. The stage is empty for a moment. Then MONKEY enters and looks about furtively, ready to run in an instant. He crosses warily to check the bench, smiles to find his joke has worked, and quickly crosses back offstage to get something. He reappears in an instant carrying his trumpet and wheeling a ten-speed bike. Monkey is followed by GAIL HELLER. Gail is 13, overweight, out of breath, bad complexioned. She wears glasses. She habitually carries a Coke and some sort of junk food. Gail hasn't gotten any breaks from life; she's unattractive, unpleasant, unpopular. She is becoming a shrill complainer, a self-pitier]

GAIL. *[Slightly out of breath]* Well just wait up. You can wait up, can't you. You don't have to just run every place. People do walk, you know. *[MONKEY pays absolutely no attention to her; she is of no importance to him right now. He moves quickly to the trash barrel, discards his trumpet in order to free one hand, and tips the barrel to peer inside]* You're always in such a hurry. I don't know why we had to come here in the first place. *[MONKEY spots what he is looking for in the barrel. He needs both hands free and dumps the bike over on its side as he reaches deep into the barrel to dig. GAIL hurries to pick up the bike]* Well don't just drop it! I just got it you know. It's brand new. If you scratched it . . .

[MONKEY suddenly pulls a stiff dead squirrel out of the barrel and thrusts it directly into her face. Touching her face. GAIL stumbles back in panic, tripping over the bike, falling. MONKEY quickly pursues her, violently forcing the dead animal into her face, making her scramble madly on all fours to get away. Then, just as suddenly, he stops and stands over her, motionless, watching her reaction, smiling but unamused. The whole thing is over in an instant. But what makes the incident eerie is its silence; the entire event takes place almost noiselessly; there is a deadly quality. Monkey terrifies her, but not for the first time. And she accepts it. An electric, frozen instant as the two eye each other—crouched, poised, alert for whatever might happen next]

GAIL. *[Breathing hard; pure hatred]* You stupid geek. *[MONKEY feints with the squirrel causing GAIL to scramble again. Then, still holding the dead animal in one hand, he turns away to open the trumpet case]* Stupid geek. You're lucky I didn't break my glasses. You know

that? *[Standing and brushing at her clothes half-heartedly]* You never think about anybody. You knew it was in there all the time, didn't you. *[MONKEY ignores her. He takes out the spray paint and casually sprays the head of the dead animal]* You knew it was there. You put it there. *[He pays no attention]* You can get diseases from dead animals you know. You're so weird. *[Moving to him as MONKEY drops the dead squirrel in the bike's carrier basket]* Well, don't put it in my bike! You're crazy! You're crazy, you know that!

MONKEY. *[Suddenly turning on her]* You want it?

GAIL. *[Backing away quickly]* You're crazy. You put it in there, didn't you. That how you knew it was there. *[MONKEY moves away to get the trumpet, grinning]* I know you did. Did you kill it?

MONKEY. *[He drops the trumpet and with a drop-kick motion sends it skidding across the stage toward the picnic table]* No.

GAIL. Yes, you did. I know you did. You killed it, didn't you! Didn't you! *[MONKEY takes the bike to the table]* How? *[MONKEY merely grins his mirthless grin. Following him]* You're crazy. You know that? You're so crazy I don't even believe it. *[MONKEY dumps the bike behind the table]* Paul! I told you not to just push my bike over! You're going to scratch it! Paul! Can't you listen to anything!?

MONKEY. *[Moving back to the barrel; not much concerned about anything she says]* Don't call me that.

GAIL. *[She follows him about]* Call you what? It's your name. Paul. What am I supposed to call you. It's your name. *[MONKEY hurls the barrel onto its side and kick-scatters its contents]* What? "Monkey"? Is that what you want? "Monkey"? *[MONKEY goes back to the table to open the trumpet case. Still following him]* "Monkey." What a name. Who'd want to be called that. "Monkey." That's the weirdest—

MONKEY. *[Suddenly alert to something offstage]* Shut up.

GAIL. *[Looking about; hearing but not grasping]* What . . . ?

MONKEY. *[Listening hard]* Shut up.

GAIL. What?? Why? Why should I?

MONKEY. *[Moving quickly to conceal the bike and trumpet case behind the table]* Shut up.

GAIL. No. I won't. Is somebody coming?

MONKEY. Shut up.

GAIL. *[Insistent]* Is somebody coming??

MONKEY. *[Suddenly giving her his full attention; pushing her*

slightly] Shut . . . up. [MONKEY is grinning, but there is a very direct confrontation; he is unpredictable and Gail knows it. Slowly, both sink down behind the table. They are hardly invisible, but it's the best hiding place available]

[They are in hiding for only a moment before ARTIE enters. Artie is 17. But his chronological age means little. Small, thin, pop-eyed. Clean but untidy. His hair is a mass of cowlicks. His clothes are ludicrously large and are made wearable only by heroic pant cuffs and a tightly cinched belt. He wears a faded, worn-out baseball cap. He seems a walking collection of ballpoint pens and pinned-on slogan buttons. His shirt is buttoned incorrectly, one shoe is untied, a battered child's baseball glove dangles from his belt. His movements are awkward, uncertain. Artie is terribly, terribly gentle. He is mentally retarded.

For the most part, life is serious stuff for Artie. Right now he is doing his best to follow the "Keep this park clean" order he has learned somewhere. He dutifully carries a half-filled plastic leaf bag into which he places the scraps of litter he gathers. He also carries a totally worn-out household broom. Stopping frequently, awkwardly, to pick up scraps of paper, he does not immediately see the spilled barrel. He talks to himself quietly, worriedly giving himself directions and reminders understood only by him. He spots the barrel and crosses to it. He views it for an instant then clumsily rights it and begins to pick up the mess.

As Artie begins work, MONKEY, uncased trumpet in one hand, spray paint in the other, steals up behind him. Just as Artie bends for something, MONKEY blows a trumpet blast into Artie's ear causing him to stumble awkwardly against the barrel, falling. MONKEY stands over Artie, grinning. He aims a quick spurt of spray at Artie then blows the horn again, directly in his face]

MONKEY. [Turning to toss the trumpet in the direction of the open trumpet case] How'd you do that?

ARTIE. [His speech is hesitant, hard to listen to, every word an effort. Almost a stutterer's block] What?

MONKEY. [Snatching Artie's broom from him; indicating the stenciled message on the barrel] Dumping stuff's against the law.

ARTIE. I—didn't. I was just—