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Dramatic Publishing

WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU

A One-Act Comedy
by
DAVID C. DAHEIM



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU was one of four finalists in the 1998 national contest DramaRama sponsored by the Playwrights' Center of San Francisco. The play was given a staged reading by professional actors at the center's theatre in San Francisco, September 25, 1998. Directed by Laura Ellen Smith, it included the following players:

Putzi Essex-Schmidt SABRINA PORTERFIELD
Jeremy Hawkins DAVID GARRETT

The play was also a semi-finalist in the 1998 Mill Mountain Theatre New Play Competition.

WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU

A One-act Comedy
For 1 Man and 1 Woman

CHARACTERS

JEREMY HAWKINS: A man in his thirties, Jeremy is a dropout from a doctoral program in literature who has been writing a novel for the past ten years. He is currently stalled on page 137 while he attempts to compose an original metaphor suggesting not actual despair, but something very much like it that would also be amusing.

PUTZI ESSEX-SCHMIDT: A woman in her early thirties who graduated from the Yale School of Drama where she hoped to meet interesting, exciting people, and did.

SETTING:

Office of the literary department at a professional repertory theatre.

TIME:

The present.

One interior set.

Running time: Approximately 30 minutes.

WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU

SETTING: *We are in the small office of a professional repertory theatre literary department. The office has one window, two desks, three chairs, several tables and floor-to-ceiling bookcases covering two walls. Tables and bookcases are filled with play manuscripts. A not-quite-finished pyramid of scripts can be seen on the floor downstage.*

AT RISE: *Upstage, JEREMY HAWKINS, lean and poorly dressed, stands over a boiling tea kettle on a hot-plate steaming stamps off self-addressed manila envelopes which have been sent to this department along with manuscripts by hopeful playwrights. The door opens and PUTZI ESSEX-SCHMIDT enters, a large tote bag over one shoulder, a purse over the other. She carries two cups of espresso in a small, cardboard carrier. Her clothes are expensive, yet conservative. Intent on his "work," JEREMY does not turn toward her as she enters.*

PUTZI. Stop doing that, it's embarrassing.

JEREMY. Poverty is always embarrassing for the rich.

PUTZI. I imagined poor people with great dignity, darkly handsome, authentic, raging against social injustice like

Henry Fonda in *The Grapes of Wrath*, or John Garfield in, in that sort of thing.

JEREMY. I see myself striking back at the system, in a small way.

PUTZI. Stealing stamps off those return envelopes?

(PUTZI, who has dropped the bags on her desk, now holds one cup of espresso aloft as she sips out of the other. Recognizing this as his cue, JEREMY kneels in front of PUTZI and begs like a dog.)

JEREMY. Arf, arf.

PUTZI. The business manager complained again about the money we're spending on return postage for manuscripts we've rejected.

JEREMY. Arf.

PUTZI. He knows playwrights send us self-addressed stamped envelopes along with their manuscripts and that you are stealing those stamps.

(PUTZI gives JEREMY the cup of espresso. He takes a thirsty gulp then gets to his feet and resumes his work.)

JEREMY. I've been thinking about changing our rejection notice for playwrights.

PUTZI. Every theatre uses the same rejection notice.

JEREMY. Yes, and it's far too encouraging. That's why they keep sending us so many of these wretched manuscripts.

PUTZI. If they didn't, you wouldn't have a job.

JEREMY. We can at least try to slow them down.

PUTZI. What's encouraging about, "We regret to inform you that your script does not suit our needs"?

JEREMY. It implies that if their script did meet our needs, we might give it serious consideration. Anyways, I need a creative outlet.

(PUTZI dials a number on her telephone.)

PUTZI *(to JEREMY)*. Aren't you still writing that silly book, or whatever?

JEREMY. I'm serious, Putzi. How do you like this: "We are pleased to inform you," or even better, "We take great pleasure in announcing that the manuscript you have so rashly submitted to this theatre is being returned to you..."

PUTZI *(on phone)*. Jane? Putzi. Lunch ideas, a Mondayish kind of place.

JEREMY. Another approach, we use famous lines from literature or film.

PUTZI *(on phone)*. Ethnic on a Monday?

JEREMY. "Frankly, my dear, we don't give a damn."

PUTZI *(on phone)*. Oneish, 'bye.

(When PUTZI hangs up, the phone immediately begins ringing. Although the phone is on her desk, she waits until JEREMY answers it.)

JEREMY. Literary department, Jeremy Hawkins speaking. *(Pause.)* Just a moment, please. *(To PUTZI.)* Do you want to speak to a reporter?

PUTZI. Not a reporter, a journalist who wants to interview me. *(She takes the phone.)* This is Putzi Essex-Schmidt,

literary manager. Your call is right on time. How should we begin this?

(While PUTZI talks on the phone, JEREMY begins to clown. He balances a manuscript on his head and walks around the desk.)

PUTZI (*cont'd*). I've been on this job almost three years, and before that I was an executive in the publishing business.

(JEREMY tries to balance several scripts on his head and one on each shoulder. He fails at this.)

If there's another Tennessee Williams out there, it's my job to find him. I think that puts it quite well.

(JEREMY bends over faking hysterical laughter.)

I and my assistant search the country for plays written by new and exciting talent, plays that have something to say about the issues of our time. (*Pause.*) Racism, sexism, you know, the issues.

(JEREMY has printed "my name" in large letters on a piece of paper which he waves in front of PUTZI. She ignores him.)

I didn't mean we literally search the country, this is a non-profit professional theatre, our budget is limited to necessities. Most of the manuscripts are mailed to us by unproduced playwrights or in some cases their agents.

PUTZI (*cont'd*). We give each play a careful reading. After all, playwrights are sensitive artists who need encouragement—we give each one of them the respect they deserve.

(JEREMY picks up a manuscript, holds it to his forehead as if divining its merit, then throws it over his shoulder. Meanwhile, the telephone interview has apparently taken a nasty turn.)

What do you mean, “What do we do with them after that?” We get rid of—we mail them back to the playwrights, of course.

(JEREMY kneels by the almost-finished pyramid of manuscripts and tries to complete it. PUTZI becomes defensive with the interviewer.)

Yes, from time to time we do find a nice play, a very nice play. (*Pause.*) That’s not true, we have taken big chances. Just last year we produced Neil Simon’s latest work, and on our main stage, too. We are not just pretending to do our job only to get grant money. Just because we haven’t found a significant new playwright doesn’t mean we never will.

(JEREMY’S attention has returned to the telephone conversation which he is enjoying.)

You are being very rude. I took precious time from a busy schedule for this interview. Goodbye. (*She hangs up the phone.*)

JEREMY. It wouldn't have killed you to mention my name. What did they say?

PUTZI. Snotty reporter, wanted to know why this theatre has never produced a new play that hasn't already been done someplace else. What's the big deal about new plays? We're not selling cars, so what if they're used. I don't need this job.

JEREMY. Why can't everybody accept the fact that contemporary American playwrights have nothing to say.

PUTZI. Don't be so damned literary. People out there have no idea what we go through in this job. That crazy man who threatened to jump off his roof last week unless we read his script—

JEREMY. You called his bluff.

PUTZI. He only broke one leg. And all those crooks— Shakespeare rip-offs, imitation O'Neill, unsold movie scripts clumsily rewritten as stage plays. No wonder we hardly ever read these things anymore.

(JEREMY seizes the moment to startle PUTZI. Glancing up at the ceiling he shouts:)

JEREMY. He's up there.

(Alarmed, PUTZI jumps to her feet.)

PUTZI. The artistic director?

JEREMY. He was already in his office when I arrived, on time, at eight. Connie says he's been making phone calls constantly for the last two hours.

PUTZI. You idiot, why didn't you call, it takes me fifteen minutes to get here.

JEREMY (*mimicking her*). “Never call me unless it’s an emergency, Jeremy.”

PUTZI. Shut up, the artistic director never gets here until noon when the season is running—this is an emergency.

JEREMY. I’m not paid to think, I am merely your humble assistant.

PUTZI. You’re a back-stabbing little twit who wants my job. Has he stamped on the floor for anybody?

JEREMY. Only because I need the money. No.

PUTZI. Maybe we’re overreacting.

JEREMY. Maybe you’re underreacting.

PUTZI. Get to work, you’re being unusually irritating.

JEREMY. What work?

PUTZI. Spring cleaning. I want every manuscript bagged and out of here by Friday.

JEREMY. I can’t do all of this by myself.

PUTZI. The box office is holding comp tickets for me. Ta, ta.

(As PUTZI opens the door to leave, a tremendous thump is heard on the ceiling; the artistic director is stamping on the floor directly above their office. PUTZI slams the door and braces herself against it. While she looks apprehensively toward the ceiling, JEREMY watches her with amusement. Each thump is separated from the next by a long pause. After the third thump—their signal—PUTZI is at the breaking point. Then comes the fourth thump; for the moment she is safe, some other staff member is being summoned.)

He wants the business manager.

(Heard offstage is the sound of a door being opened, then slammed shut, followed by footsteps racing down the hall and up the stairs.)

JEREMY. That's what the business manager gets for slandering me.

PUTZI. That didn't sound like the artistic director's ordinary stamping.

JEREMY. You think he's being sadistically playful again?

PUTZI. No, it wasn't his Spanish dancing.

JEREMY. Just a bit more urgent than usual? *(Awkwardly, he tries to dance in the Spanish manner.)*

PUTZI. Stop that, he might hear you.

JEREMY. I don't see why I have to do all the bagging by myself.

PUTZI. You're being impertinent with a superior. Stop that dancing, I said.

JEREMY. I want to be treated with respect like a normal human being.

PUTZI. Normal human beings aren't treated with respect.

JEREMY *(stops his dancing)*. Taking care of your dry-cleaning was not part of my job description, nor was getting your car washed.

PUTZI. The artistic director arrives early, then he starts stamping, now you're acting rebellious. You've heard something, tell, tell, tell. *(She starts shaking him.)*

JEREMY. You're the one with all the political connections.

PUTZI. What have you heard?

(JEREMY pulls free, an act that offends PUTZI.)

You touched me, you actually touched my person.