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Plays on Principle: Ten 10-Minute Plays

By

PAT MONTLEY

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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Plays on Principle (which originally included seven of the ten plays here) was premiered at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore in 2019 as part of a bicentennial celebration. The production was funded by a Creativity Grant awarded to the playwright by the Maryland State Arts Council.

CAST:

Christine Demuth	Michelle Lee
Chris Edwards	Richard Peck
Flinn Leigh Eng	Vernon Rey
Melissa Feliciano	Molly Ruhlman
Layla Hodge	Owen Sahnnow
Timothy Johnson	Sally Wall

PRODUCTION:

Director	Pat Montley
Set, Sound & Lighting Designer	Daryl Beard
Stage Managers	Naomi Berkenbilt, Javier Jaramillo
Set Crew	Jim Houston, Scott Macleod, Richard Peck, Owen Sahnnow

For Sally
my best critic
and dearest

Rachel Carson Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

CHARACTERS

RACHEL: 51; failing health, but happily at home at the edge of the sea. As a mother, she is patient but not indulgent; as a temptee, she is intense, quick-witted, controlled but vulnerable.

BOY: 6; a handful.

MAN: Ageless; with just a hint of the sinister, he is a man of the world who enjoys an intellectual challenge.

TIME: Summer 1960.

PLACE: A rocky coast at low tide.

Question: What would you sacrifice to save the earth?

(At lights up, we hear sea sounds for a moment. RACHEL is sitting on a rock, studying with her hand lens the periwinkles attached to the side of an adjacent rock. A metal bucket is on the ground. She sits up, puts down the glass and rubs her neck as one who has been at it for a good while. She slowly stands, lightly shaking out the stiffness in her body, closes her eyes and begins a “wakame” exercise—pretending her limp body is seaweed being gently moved about by the sea. Then music. The image of a mermaid swimming is projected

onto her and onto the backdrop behind her. She is taken up into this reverie. After a few moments, BOY enters. He wears swimming trunks and goggles pushed up on his head like horns. He throws [imaginary] stones at the ground around RACHEL's feet. RACHEL opens her eyes, and the mermaid music and projection disappear abruptly.)

RACHEL (*not looking at BOY*). You don't have to throw stones at me to get my attention.

BOY. Aunt Rachel, I want some ice cream. I'm hot.

RACHEL. Go for a swim in the big tide pool.

BOY. I don't like swimming.

RACHEL. You do.

(She sits back down on her rock.)

BOY. I don't like swimming as much as eating.

RACHEL (*resumes studying the periwinkles*). In a little while, I'll come in and fix you and Gran some lunch.

BOY. I want some ice cream.

RACHEL. After lunch.

BOY. Gran wants ice cream too.

RACHEL (*turns to him*). Did she say that?

BOY (*turns away, throws a stone in the other direction, then turns back*). What are you doing?

RACHEL. Watching the periwinkles. Come look.

BOY (*crossing to her*). It's boring. They don't DO anything.

RACHEL. Oh but they *do*! They break through their egg capsule! They search out a safe home on a slimy rock. They scrape off the slime with their long tongues that have thirty-five hundred sharp little teeth. They grow big and strong till finally they spawn. Then the adventure begins again!

BOY. It's boring.

RACHEL. Or ... they get washed out to sea and eaten by little crabs, who get eaten by little fish, who get eaten by big fish, who get eaten by little boys who get—

BOY (*interrupting*). I don't like this story.

RACHEL. Get Gran to read you one you like better.

BOY. Which?

RACHEL. *Hansel and Gretel*.

BOY. It's dumb.

RACHEL. Why?

BOY. There's no such thing as witches.

RACHEL. Ah ... the woods are full of them!

BOY. You're just saying that to scare me.

RACHEL. Are you scared?

BOY. No.

RACHEL. *The Little Mermaid*, then.

BOY. I don't believe in mermaids.

RACHEL. The sea is full of them.

BOY. Well, I don't see them.

RACHEL. Do you see fish?

BOY. Everybody sees fish.

RACHEL. Then ask Gran to read you the one about the fisherman's three wishes.

BOY. You just want to get rid of me.

(*No response.*)

BOY (*cont'd*). Well, if I had a wish, I'd wish ... I'd wish I was with my *real* mother ... I'd wish I was dead.

(He storms off. RACHEL looks after him, distressed, then resumes her study. Sound of water—someone swimming to shore. A MAN in black approaches through the audience.)

MAN. Well ... do you wish he were dead?

RACHEL *(looking up)*. I wish he were ... more curious.

MAN. That's one.

RACHEL. I ... I wasn't expecting you so soon.

MAN. You thought you'd have more time?

RACHEL. A little.

MAN. You could, you know. A lot.

RACHEL. How?

MAN. Wish for it.

RACHEL. You think I'd waste my second wish on that?

MAN. What then? No—don't. Let me guess. *(Considers for a moment.)* Your research acclaimed! Your theories vindicated! Your book *Silent Spring* a wild success—the beginning of an ecological movement!

RACHEL. You think I need you for that?

MAN. Something more up my alley then? To see the producers of DDT suffer like the innocent little birds they've killed ... *(Demonstrating with comic exaggeration.)* bills gaping wide ... claws splayed and stiff, drawn up to their breasts in agony.

RACHEL. Oh, you underestimate me.

MAN. You imagine you're above vengeance only because you don't think vengeance is possible. But I can make it happen.

RACHEL *(incensed)*. I am not a sadist.

MAN. All right, don't get overheated—you'll steam your winkles. *(Trying a new tact.)* A more orthodox pleasure, then. *(Brightly.)* So who do you want?

RACHEL. I beg your pardon?

MAN. Come on—name your man. (*She gives him a look.*)
Your woman? (*She gives him another look.*) Hey—the flesh
was good enough for Faust.

RACHEL. Too late for that.

MAN. Doesn't have to be. I can give you the health to enjoy it.

RACHEL. The cancer ... ?

MAN. Eliminated— (*Snaps fingers.*) like that.

RACHEL (*interested*). Just how much disease can you
eliminate— (*Snaps fingers.*) like that?

MAN. Make your wish.

RACHEL (*thinking*). That the earth be healed of all the
damage done by human beings.

MAN. You strike a hard bargain.

RACHEL. I told you—you underestimate me.

MAN. It's a deal. Provided, of course, you agree to hand over
your soul.

RACHEL. What will you do with it?

MAN. Bury it under the sea, down, down in the deepest fiery
core of the earth, watch it burn, then eat the ashes. You'll be
part of me forever.

RACHEL. Part of ... you?

MAN. Your searing intellect, your clever insights, your passions
... all at my disposal, to use as I wish, to do whatever I—

RACHEL. Stop! It's not fair.

MAN. Exactly.

RACHEL. To let you use me like that ... would be a betrayal
of ... all I hold sacred.

MAN (*saying the last words with her*). All you hold sacred.
Yes. That's the way it works when you ask for so much.