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Family Plays

THE HAUNTED CAROUSEL

Drama by
Ruth Angell Purkey



THE HAUNTED CAROUSEL

A whirligig through time and space by Ruth Angell Purkey, *The Haunted Carousel* won the John Gassner Memorial Playwriting Award in 1981.

Drama. By *Ruth Angell Purkey*. Cast: 6m., 8w. Perhaps there are dimensions in time, mysterious and unexplored, where the past moves into the present and back again, revolving like the spinning of a carousel. This is the theme of Ruth Angell Purkey's drama, which centers on the polar bear of a carousel where a woman left her little boy in the 1890s. He disappeared and she has spent her entire life looking for him. The scene shifts to the early 1920s, with the carousel music indicating the time. A young, intellectual couple discusses the man's obsession with the haunted memory of the merry-go-round polar bear. The music of the carousel indicates a change to the 1950s as a young hippie couple argue. Why is he, too, haunted by the polar bear and the loss of his mother? Suddenly the carousel music changes to a futuristic dissonance—the music of “tomorrow.” A sophisticated, young couple are on their way to a space scientists' ball when they stop off at the merry-go-round. They puzzle over his obsession with the memory of a polar bear, and another tragedy from the past. At the end we hear the eerie voice of the original mother of the 1890s calling for her lost son. An exciting contest play and experimental theatre work. *Bare stage except for a large circle representing the carousel and six chairs. Suggested music in production notes. Costumes: typical of each period. Approximate running time: 30 minutes. Code: HD2.*

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The Haunted Carousel

The Haunted Carousel

A Whirligig Through Time and Space

In One Act

by

RUTH ANGELL PURKEY

*From a wild, weird clime that lieth, sublime,
Out of space—out of time.*

—“Dreamland,” Edgar Allan Poe (1845)

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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RUTH ANGELL PURKEY

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THE HAUNTED CAROUSEL

Cast

Voice of the Carousel Barker, any age; haunting voice

The Scholarly Man, any age; no lines; dressed in 1890's suit

Middle-Aged Woman, about 40; 1890 suit; eerie voice

1st Young Man, studious, prissy, wears glasses; 1920's collegiate clothes

1st Young Woman, intellectual; glasses; 1920's collegiate outfit

German Woman, broken English; grandmotherly type; 1890's dress

Artist Woman, sensitive, appealing, rather fey; 1890's dress

2nd Young Man, hippie type with beard, etc., 1950's style

2nd Young Woman, hippie also, weird dress, 1950's style

Brooklyn Woman, about thirty; strident; cheaply dressed, 1930's style

Harry, small-time hoodlum type, flashily dressed, 1930's style

3rd Young Man, sophisticated, brainy scientist; evening dress, future time

3rd Young Woman, very intelligent and sensitive; beautiful evening gown, future time

Mother Woman, tastefully dressed society woman; poised; 1979 style

Father Man, insanely jealous, dominating; 1979 suit

TIME: The play revolves around many time sequences from the 1890's to the future.

SCENE: Merry-Go-Round of Memory

PRODUCTION NOTES

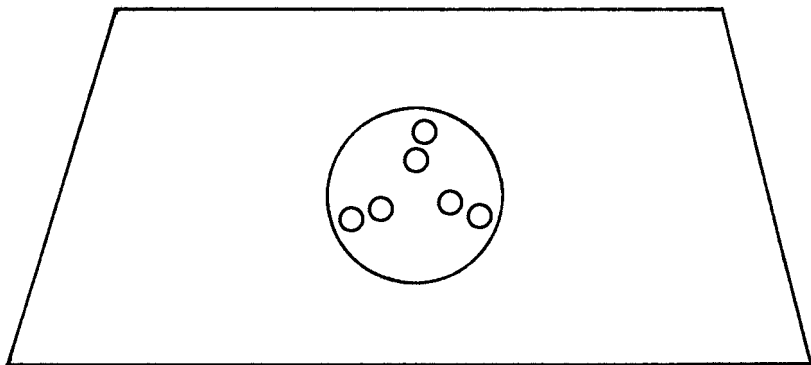
Properties

Small leather-bound book of poems—Scholarly Man
 Cane—Scholarly Man
 Cigarette in long holder—1st Young Woman
 Paint brush, artist's palette—Artist Woman
 Walking stick—German Woman
 Pipe—2nd Young Woman
 Cigarette—Brooklyn Woman
 Hand gun—Father Man

Costumes and Music

The changing periods in this play are indicated by a coordination of costume and music. For the 1890's segment, typical carousel organ music like "The Skater's Waltz" would set the tone and flavor of the play. Or a Sousa march might be used. The 1920's segment features typical collegiate clothes of the period, and the author suggests "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" as the music. For the 1950's, an early Elvis Presley tune, like "You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog" would immediately tell the audience the date. The music is reinforced by the hippie (or, perhaps more exactly, the beatnik) costumes of the '50's. "The Saint Louis Blues" would be readily recognizable as 1930's blues music. For the futuristic scene, recognizable theme music from a futuristic movie like *Star Wars* or *2001: A Space Odyssey* would set the time. Any popular song from the late 1970's will do for that segment (the author suggests "music in a minor key suggestive of the discordant 1970's"). The tunes named here are merely suggestions, of course. There are many other possibilities.

The Set



The text calls for a charcoal circle at Stage Center. If the stage floor is dark, a chalk circle may be used. The six stools may be arranged as shown here. The six young men and women are seated on the stools throughout the play except when acting their segments.

Lighting

The text suggests area lighting, with Stage Center devoted to the carousel, and the Stage Right and Left areas used for the period scenes. Other lighting arrangements are possible. If the play is staged in a space where area lighting is impossible, the three couples on the carousel may stay frozen when not participating in the action. The other characters may enter and exit as necessary (the Artist Woman may bring her easel and bench or stool with her).

ABOUT THE PLAY

Do some places retain certain vibrations of tragedy from the past? These haunted places may have the power to create new sorrow or new violence as an echo of long-ago madness or despair. Perhaps there are dimensions in time, mysterious and unexplored, where the past moves into the present and back again, revolving and revolving like the spinning of a carousel.

A woman in the 1890's loses a child when he rides a merry-go-round. The scene shifts to the early 1920's, with the carousel music indicating the time. A young intellectual couple discuss the man's obsession with the haunted memory of the merry-go-round polar bear. What does it mean?

And then the music of the carousel indicates a change to the 1950's as a young hippie couple argue. Why is he, too, haunted by the polar bear and the loss of his mother? Suddenly the carousel music changes to a futuristic dissonance—the music of Tomorrow. A sophisticated young couple are on their way to a Space Scientists' Ball when they stop off at the merry-go-round. They puzzle over his obsession with the memory of a polar bear, and another tragedy from the past.

At the end we hear the eerie voice of the original mother of the 1890's calling for her lost son.

*

THE HAUNTED CAROUSEL emerged as the winner over more than 200 other entries in the 1981 John Gassner Memorial Playwriting Award contest sponsored by the New England Theatre Conference. Judges' comments, as reported by contest chairman Donald H. Intendre of Assumption College, Worcester, Mass.:

"The play provoked a lot of discussion—as script, as opportunity for an imaginative director and skillful actors, and as a challenge to a technical staff. All in all, it was a really theatrical experience."

"Suggested mystery in its title and lived up to the title."

"Capitalizes on suspense, anticipation, mystery, surprise."

"It underscores pathos and anguish."

"It appeals to the audience's imagination."

"Allows a director all kinds of possibilities for staging—from simple to complex—depending on cast, facilities, and budget."

THE HAUNTED CAROUSEL

[The house lights dim and in the darkness we hear the haunting music of a carousel playing some popular tunes of the 1890's. As the curtain rises, the bare stage is still dark, but a small light begins to glow on the Downstage Right area. A man's deep voice is heard in the background]

CAROUSEL BARKER. Hurr-y, hurr-y, hurr-y,
Get your tickets here!
Chateau en Espagne,
Passport to Eden,
Open Sesame to Fata Morgana!
Come ride with us on the carousel!

[The music continues softly in the background as a MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN walks into the lighted area Down Right, evidently searching for something. She is dressed in the mode of the 1890's. A MAN, dressed in a walking suit of the period, strolls on from the left and comes into the spot of light. He is a scholarly type, carrying a small volume of poetry, which he gazes at, not noticing the woman. Over one arm is hooked a cane. The WOMAN plants herself in front of him]

MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN. Have you seen Willie? *[The MAN continues reading, not looking up]* He's only a little boy. He has light blonde hair and he's wearing a dark blue overcoat with a light leather belt. On his legs are gaiters, laced at the sides, and on his head a dark blue Tam O'Shanter cap. On his hands he's wearing light leather gloves to match the belt and the gaiters. *[Trying to look into the man's eyes]* Have you seen my Willie? *[The MAN continues to read but tries to pass her, shaking his head "No"]* He's lost. He wanted a ride on the carousel. But I can't ride on carousels. They make me dizzy. So there was this sweet old lady, and she said, "Oh, come, let him ride with me. Every little boy has to ride on the merry-go-round." And I let Willie go. He waved to me from the polar bear. He was laughing. *[The MAN again attempts to push his way past the woman]* Are you sure you haven't seen him? Something very strange has happened. When I turned away to get a drink of water from the fountain . . . something strange. When I looked back . . . Willie was gone. The sweet old lady was still there, but Willie was gone. *[The MAN tries to put the woman forcibly out of his way, but*

she clings to him in desperation] I screamed and they stopped the carousel. And the sweet old woman said, "I don't know what she's talking about. I have never seen her little boy. No one was riding with me." *[The MAN finally disengages himself from the woman and walks toward the Right]* Haven't you seen my Willie anywhere? *[The MAN disregards her and exits, still reading his book. The WOMAN's voice rises in panic]* I don't know what's happening. Little boys don't just vanish! *[Calling after the man]* If you see him will you please tell him . . . will you please tell him . . . *[Her voice breaks off on a note of hysteria as she wanders over Left, calling into the darkness]* Willie! Willie! Where are you Willie? *[She exits Left. The lights dim and in the semi-darkness we again hear the voice of the Carousel Barker]*

CAROUSEL BARKER. Ten cents, ladies and gentlemen!
Only the tenth part of a dollar in trade for Utopia, Atlantis . . .
A ride on the carousel!

[As the voice fades a dim light seems to grow at Center Stage where a large circle has been drawn with charcoal. Within the circle have been placed six white stools at intervals. The stools are paired together, two in each spot, side by side. On the stools in each designated position are seated a boy and girl of about twenty. As the lights hit them they are all posed like statues. The carousel music has changed from the 1890 songs to something like "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby," from the 1920's. It comes up loud and full for a few moments and then fades until it is barely perceptible. The light fades on the background and only one couple is spotlighted now, as they slowly come to life. They are a studious pair, both dressed in the collegiate style of the 1920's, and both wearing glasses. She is holding a cigarette in a long cigarette holder, and looking very intense]

1st YOUNG MAN. I suppose you think it's rather odd.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. Freudian, perhaps.

1st YOUNG MAN. Because I always choose the polar bear?

1st YOUNG WOMAN. Fixation? Obsession? Infantile regression?

1st YOUNG MAN. It's a compulsion.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. All the animals on the carousel are the same to me. Lions, elephants, zebras. The only reason I'm riding the giraffe is . . . the giraffe is next to the polar bear.

1st YOUNG MAN. You have a very logical mind, Edwina.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. Thank you.

1st YOUNG MAN. Ther ear emany kinds of compulsions. For in-
st anceyour add ict iont ocigarettes.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. Oh, I don' hav et smok e. It' on ly a symbol
of r ebellion. [*Lowering her voice, confidentially*] Besides, this isn' ta
r eakigar et t kt. ' s@ubeb.

1st YOUNG MAN. I t hough t det ecteda st r angedor.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. I c anbe an emancipat edwoman and soothe
my hay fever at t hesame t ime.

1s tYOUNG MAN. Congr at ul at ions.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. Fr eudhas quit a lot t say about the obses-
sional neurosis. He discov eredt hatEmile Zola was a v ictimall his life.

1s tYOUNG MAN. You don' say! I' lwager he didn' go in for polar
bear s.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. I dar esaynot. You are uniq ue.

1st YOUNG MAN. I come here ev er Thrusday.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. And ride on the carousel.

1st YOUNG MAN. On t hepolar bear.

1 stYOUNG WOMAN. Why on Thursd ay?

1 stYOUNG MAN. I d on ' kt now.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. Why a carouse l?Why that particular ani mal ?

1st YOUNG MAN. Exactly.

1 s tYOUNG WOMAN. [*Looking at him very seriously*] Alfred, I ' m
afr aidyou hav esome deep, subt erraneanpassages in your mind.

1st YOUNG MAN. I' mafir aidtoo. That' swhy I didn' tell you before.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. Hav en' you the remotest idea wh atbring s
you here?

VOICE OF MIDDLE- AGEDWOMAN. [*Calling eerily from offstage.
The name is drawn out in a ghostly, almost musical, minor key*] Wi ll ..
ie! Will . . . ie! Where are you, Willie? [*1st YOUNG MAN is suddenly
frozen, listening intently*] Will . . . ie! Will . . . i eWill . . . ie! [*The voice
fades into a kind of echo chamber effect*]

1st YOUNG MAN. [*As one in a dream*] Sometimes there seems to
be a voice calling.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. Wh atki n of a v oice?

1st YOUNG MAN. I don' kt now.It sounds sad.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. What d oesit say?

1st YOUNG MAN. I' mnot sure. I tmak esme feel all alone and lost.

1st YOUNG WOMAN. Can' you remember?

1st YOUNG MAN. There' sanot herv oice.I t stro ng erIt' sfar, far

back in the past, but it's stronger. It's warm and sweet and it wraps me up like a blanket. *[The voice of the ARTIST WOMAN is heard coming from nowhere and everywhere, joyfully repeating the same phrase]*

VOICE OF ARTIST WOMAN. Hello there, little boy! Hello there, little boy! Helloooooooo! *[The lights fade on the young couple and shift to Stage Right where a woman of about thirty-five sits painting at an easel set up before a park bench. She is a sweet, sensitive person dressed in a pretty, summery frock, 1890's style. Another woman walks lamely into the lighted area. She is an old GERMAN WOMAN with white hair, old-fashioned in dress and leaning on a cane. She looks over the artist's shoulder, adjusting her glasses, and speaking with a strong accent]*

GERMAN WOMAN. Dere vas somet'ing wrong mit his eyes.

ARTIST WOMAN. *[Sweetly, looking up]* I beg your pardon.

GERMAN WOMAN. De eyes. In your picture.

ARTIST WOMAN. Oh.

GERMAN WOMAN. For a liddle boy dey vas too sad.

ARTIST WOMAN. Oh, but that's the way I see him.

GERMAN WOMAN. He vas your liddle boy . . . yah?

ARTIST WOMAN. Oh, no. I haven't any little boy. But I'll find him someday. Somewhere in the world he's looking for me. And that's why his eyes are sad. He hasn't found me yet.

GERMAN WOMAN. *[Puzzled]* Vot is?

ARTIST WOMAN. You look tired. Why don't you sit down?

GERMAN WOMAN. You vas kind to an old voman. *[She sits on one end of bench]*

ARTIST WOMAN. No. Just lonely. I come to the park to paint because there are people here. And there's always a chance he'll find me.

GERMAN WOMAN. Who?

ARTIST WOMAN. The little boy I've been ordering.

GERMAN WOMAN. *[Utterly confused]* Yah? Am I a dummkopf or somet'ing? Vot you mean?

ARTIST WOMAN. *[Staring into space, not answering]* Then I won't be lonely any more. *[In a lighter vein]* Oh, I have two cats in my little house. And cats *are* company. You can even have a sort of communication. *[Laughing]* The conversations I ve had with Beaumont and Fletcher.

GERMAN WOMAN. *[Completely mystified]* Beaumont und . . .

ARTIST WOMAN. Fletcher. They're very clever. *[Laughing]* Why, that's almost a rhyme, isn't it?

GERMAN WOMAN. I had a cat vunce. He ate cucumbers.

ARTIST WOMAN. There seems to be an agreement that cats and dogs and other animals don't have souls. Do you believe that?

GERMAN WOMAN. [*Bewildered by the hop-scotch conversation*] Vot is?

ARTIST WOMAN. No immortality. But I'm not so sure. Have you ever seen the paw prints of a dog in cement? Sometimes when you're out for a stroll, you happen to look down at the sidewalk . . . and there they are. Paw prints made long ago when the cement was freshly laid. A puppy perhaps . . . gamboling over the wet sidewalk? What kind of a dog was he? . . . Perhaps you pause for a moment . . . one little moment in time . . . to wonder what breed of animal passed this way many years ago and left his signature. A German shepherd . . . a Boston bull . . . a French poodle? [*Pause, looking into space*] This is a *kind* of immortality. Even for a dog.

GERMAN WOMAN. [*Completely lost*] Yah?

ARTIST WOMAN. Can I be sure of as much? If I had a child, perhaps. For a child is the print of his parents, left for all the world to see. [*In mounting desperation*] But I have no child. And though I shout at God, "Here I am! Look at me! Look at me! Don't allow me to vanish! Give me a child for my autograph!"—will He listen? [*Sighing*] Or will I burn out like a candle . . . and leave no trace?

GERMAN WOMAN. [*Proudly*] I have many kinder. Und grandchildren. So many it is hard to count. There is Freda . . . und Gretchen . . . und Hendrick . . . und . . .

ARTIST WOMAN. [*Gazing out into space*] But sometime . . . somewhere . . .

GERMAN WOMAN. Today already is Saturday. Und Saturday afternoon my oldest daughter is always having me over for coffee. Mit apple-strudel yet. So . . . [*She starts to move away. The ARTIST WOMAN's face suddenly brightens as she looks into the shadows*]

ARTIST WOMAN. Oh, look over there . . .

GERMAN WOMAN. [*Trying to peer into the gloom*] Yah?

ARTIST WOMAN. There's a little boy! There by the carousel!

GERMAN WOMAN. Yah? I am not seeing so good any more. My old eyes . . .

ARTIST WOMAN. [*Waving to invisible child*] Hello there, little boy! Hello!

GERMAN WOMAN. Vell, I must be going. Hulda don't like it if I'm late for the coffee. Und who am I to keep an apple-strudel waiting? [*Moving slowly away*]