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Best Student One Acts

Volume 4

Winners of the 1998
KENNEDY CENTER AMERICAN COLLEGE THEATER FESTIVAL
One-Act Play Competition



The Kennedy Center

THE JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
WASHINGTON, DC 20566-0001

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Introduction

The publication of volume 4 of *Best Student One Acts* by Dramatic Publishing marks a new beginning for this series. The three previous editions were published under the auspices of the Kennedy Center and the American College Theatre Festival. The plays in these four volumes are all winners in regional competitions sponsored by the American College Theatre Festival. Prior to the publication of this series, the winning one-act plays received very little recognition unless they were selected for performance at the Kennedy Center.

The Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival's Michael Kanin Playwriting Awards Program began in 1974. The list of national winners contains a number of notable playwrights including Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel who won the 1977 national competition with *Meg*; Lee Blessing with *The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid*; and James Leonard Jr., with *The Diviners*. These names are now associated with the vibrant and divergent world of contemporary theatre.

Whereas the national winners have received considerable attention, the regional winners were largely ignored for many years. As a result, many significant works were unavailable for additional exposure. Maybe the most glaring example of a play which won a regional award but not the national is George C. Wolfe's *Up for Grabs*. The publication of volume 1 in this series of *Best Student One Acts* altered the landscape for the students who won their regional competitions. The initial vision for these antholo-

gies came from Jeffery Scott Elwell, who also edited the first volume, with the endorsement and support from the Michael Kanin Playwriting Awards Committee. This anthology series then emerged from the efforts of Harlene Marley, chair of that committee, to put the vision into action. Dramatic Publishing's release of this and future editions marks a significant departure from the previous volumes. The publishing idea that germinated a number of years ago has now reached full maturity with the assistance of a major publishing house.

The publication of this series is one small effort to bring new works to the attention of interested directors, actors, playwrights and scholars. The variety of institutions represented in the series is significant in a national publication. The 32 playwrights represent 24 different schools located in 21 states. This anthology is in fact the only nationwide publication for student playwrights because it includes plays from the eight national regions within the American College Theatre Festival. The size and nature of the theatre program varies greatly. Some of the authors are undergraduate students from colleges in small-town America while others are pursuing graduate degrees at large, urban universities.

Geography alone is not the only means by which difference can be observed. The sense of a national portraiture is also reflected in the diversity of subject matter. These plays explore themes from a variety of ethnic, religious and social perspectives. Included are history plays, autobiographical explorations, poetic worlds and styles that include an example from nearly every age in theatre history. There are overtones of tragedy, surrealism, comedy, farce, epic and so forth. The value of each work is not limited to

its command of form and style. Instead, each play opens another window on American identity from the perspective of a student playwright. Some playwrights open that window to a tragic landscape, while others show us humor, absurdity, or pathos that is rooted in careful observation. Each work reflects a desire to participate in the process of creating a work of art that is an expression to a unique voice. Some of those voices shout from housetops, whereas others explore the hidden chambers of the soul. The assortment of themes, styles and values reflected in these works serves as a mirror to the diversity of America's academic institutions and society itself.

Each play represents a personal journey from the blank page to the stage while also symbolically representing a narrative larger than the play itself. Actors, directors, designers, classmates and supportive faculty from many institutions have guided these playwrights to this stage of development. These collaborative teams deserve commendation and gratitude for their willingness to work with original plays.

This volume represents one dimension of the Kennedy Center's multifaceted initiative for student playwrights. The Michael Kanin Playwriting Awards Program sponsors a variety of national student playwriting awards. Some include publication for the winning playwright and an opportunity for the playwright to participate in play development workshops. The Jean Kennedy Smith Award is given for the best play on the theme of disability. For the best play on World Peace and Disarmament, the Fourth Freedom Foundation provides first- and second-place awards. Anchorage Press offers the Theatre for Youth Playwriting Award. Dramatic Publishing will continue to publish the

Lorraine Hansberry Award for the best play that explores African or African-American themes, and will be publishing several awards recently established, including: The David Mark Cohen Playwriting Award, open to all playwrights; the National AIDS Fund/CFDA-Vogue Initiative Award for the best play that deals with AIDS/HIV; The Mark Twain Comedy Playwriting Award; and the Sí TV Playwriting Award, created to stimulate the voices of young Latino playwrights in America. The John Cauble Award is given for the best student short play. The Musical Theatre Award is available to student lyricists, composers or book authors. The workshop opportunities for the winning playwrights include Sundance Theatre Laboratory, the Bay Area Playwrights Festival, and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

These anthologies could not exist without the untold hours that regional playwriting committee chairs have devoted to developing original plays within each region. Regional chairs Kate Snodgrass, Gary Garrison, Steve Sarra-tore, Jim Epperson, Clyde Ruffin, Ray Paolino, Bryan Willis and Judith Royer have assisted with the development and implementation of this volume while also serving as a guide and advocate for the other playwriting awards. I also wish to express my gratitude to Jeffery Scott Elwell for his initial vision for the series, to Harlene Marley for unwavering advocacy for student playwrights, to Kenneth Robbins for his commitment to award and publication venues for student plays, to Jeff Koep for his support in sustaining and developing the programs within the Playwriting Award Committee, to Derek Gordon and his innovative leadership at the Kennedy Center, to John Lion and his discerning eye for new plays and playwriting op-

portunities, and to Susan Shaffer and her effective management of American College Theatre Festival. Finally, I want to thank my colleagues at the University of Michigan-Flint for their assistance and encouragement. The theatre department, under the guidance of Carolyn Gillespie, has demonstrated an exceptional level of commitment to student playwriting and creative theatrical ventures.

I am grateful for the opportunity to serve as editor of this volume.

UPRIGHT

**James Hilburn
University of Kansas**

CHARACTERS

PAINT: A homeless man in his early 50s.

PELF: A homeless man in his early 20s.

LOPEZ: A tough-looking man in his late 20s. Racial makeup should be of no importance.

UPRIGHT was first produced by the University of Kansas English Alternative Theater on October 9, 1997 in Lawrence, Kan., with the following cast:

Paint KARL RAMBERG
Pelf MATT CHAPMAN
Lopez..... AVI SEAVER

Directed by Jeremy Auman; Michelle Dowdy assistant directed, stage managed, and inspired; set design was by Phillip John Schroeder; lighting design was by Michael Senften; props were by Barb Downing, Judith Scheff, and Sandy Clanton; Michelle Dowdy, Laura Graham, Dan Kulmala, Gavan Laessig, Michael Murphy, Kim Wada, and Ed White crewed and assisted.

This play would not have existed without the direction and guidance of Paul Stephen Lim.

The playwright would like to thank: Brent Puglisi (for all of the stories); David Ryan, Rick Watts, Carson Elrod, Hypothetical 7, Ron and Ann Marie Adams; my brothers: Matt, Ryan, and Andrew; Blair Bitters, Portland, Pat Hilburn, and everyone at the Bourgeois Pig.

UPRIGHT

AT RISE: *Five a.m. Beneath an overpass. PAINTE enters DR. He is dressed warmly and is pushing a grocery cart filled with items. When he reaches C, he pulls out a coffee can and Sterno from the cart and sets it up to make coffee. PELF enters DR, but cannot be seen by PAINTE. He is dressed in a worn leather jacket and jeans, and at the beginning of the play, he should have a damaged hand. He pulls a dark-colored ski mask from his jacket pocket and puts it on. He watches as PAINTE pulls items from his cart and sets up camp. As PAINTE fishes something out of the cart, PELF steps into the open. He growls like a dog and then barks.*

PELF. *Rrrrrroof. Roof. Roof.*

PAINTE. *What the hell? (PELF tackles PAINTE. They wrestle briefly until PAINTE grabs a weapon from the cart and stands over PELF.)*

PELF. *Wait, wait. Don't hit. It's me, Pelf. (PAINTE un-masks him.) See?*

PAINTE. *Hold on a second. (He pulls a pair of glasses out of his coat pocket.) Well, Goddamn. I thought I got away from all of you crazy people.*

PELF (laughs). *It's me. Nothing to worry about. Yay! Ha ha. You made it. The cops didn't get you. Wow, they tried to put me in the shelter, but you know what? I got away. Yeah, I ran fast. Can I have some coffee?*

PAINTE. *It's kind of old, but it's warm. (He pours himself a cup and then fishes an extra one for PELF.)*

PELF. Thanks. Yeah, I ran real fast, you should've seen me...

PAINT (*pointing to PELF's wounded hand*). Looks like something bit you.

PELF. Oh, yeah. That's from Sweetie, that guy who works for Lopez. Me and him got into it right before the cops came.

PAINT. Here, let me see it. (*Puts his glasses on and looks at it. He fetches a piece of cloth from the cart and begins to dress it.*)

PELF. Those cops sure cleaned up Oldtown. They even got Lopez. Yeah, I saw it. Lopez was... OUCH!

PAINT. Hold still.

PELF. Lopez was fighting one of them, but the cop wouldn't take it. He just, SMACK, right in his face, knocked him down. I saw it. But I bet Lopez won't go to jail. He wasn't really fighting that hard, and I saw him drop his stuff. Those cops won't find it. Yeah, but I got away. This one cop grabbed me and I was right near Lopez, and then I pretended to be good and helpful. And when Lopez got hit, he let go of me, and I ran.

PAINT. And here you are.

PELF. Yeah, here I am. I heard you went this way, and here I am.

PAINT (*finishing PELF's hand*). And there you go.

PELF. Thanks. Feels better.

PAINT. You should stay away from Lopez and his buddies, you could get yourself killed.

PELF. Yeah, yeah I know. Hey, how did you get your cart all the way up here from Oldtown?

PAINT. A real pain in the ass, but I pulled it.

PELF. You get it from the Safeway on Foster Road?

PAINT. Somewhere near there.

PELF. Wow, you lucked out. You got a good cart. Look, the wheels all work and there's no big holes in it.

PAINT. Wait a minute. Who told you I came out this way?

PELF. Huh?

PAINT. Who told you I came out here? Because I left early in the morning, and I didn't talk to anybody.

PELF. Oh you know. Uh, that one lady.

PAINT. What lady?

PELF. The lady who sleeps out in front of the Buick dealership.

PAINT. You followed me out here.

PELF. Come on...

PAINT. What in the hell do you want?

PELF. I...I was just scared, and I saw the tracks from your cart. And I wanted to see how you were.

PAINT. Pelf, I don't have anything for you. No money. No booze. I don't have anything, so whatever it is you want, the answer is no.

PELF. Look, I brought you something. (*Reaches into his pants pocket.*) Here, look at this. (*PAINT pulls out his glasses and inspects it.*) See. It's Lopez's front tooth. The cop knocked it out of his mouth when he hit him. Yeah, and then after all of the trouble, I went back and Lopez was gone and this was on the ground where he fell. Here, take it. It's good luck. It means that you have his power. You have something up on him. (*He pulls a piece of colorful wrapping paper from PAINT's cart, wraps the tooth, and places it in the cart.*) Here, put it in your cart.

PAINT. I don't know, Pelf.

PELF. Just leave it in the cart. Keep it in there.

PAINT. I don't have anything to trade you for this.

PELF. My present to you. You gave me coffee and fixed my hand.

PAINT. What happens when Lopez comes back and finds out that you gave me his tooth?

PELF. You can't tell him.

PAINT. I don't want to get involved in your mess with Lopez. Seems like everyone he talks to winds up beaten into the ground or dead. And all I need is Mr. Lopez coming out here to talk to me about his missing tooth.

PELF. He won't come here. You found a real nice place.

PAINT. Yeah, this is a nice place. But you've got to be careful. I can't stay here long, because it looks like the kind of neighborhood where people call the police. This is the good part of town. Look, there's even a little park over there. (*Points offstage.*)

PELF. I won't stay here too long. I just need one thing... Oh, come on...I just need your cart.

PAINT. No.

PELF. But your cart is from the Safeway on Foster Road. If I turn it in, I get fifty dollars. You could go steal it back again in a few days.

PAINT. Who would give you fifty dollars for a cart?

PELF. The man at Safeway says he will give me two dollars for every missing cart I bring back. And if I bring back twenty-five carts, I get fifty dollars.

PAINT. You're not getting my cart. The wheels don't wobble and it's real sturdy.

PELF. Paint, I need the fifty dollars. You are the last Safeway cart I can find.

PAINT. Do you know how hard it was pulling it up here?

PELF. Come on, I'm your friend...

PAINT. This is *my* cart, you understand that?

PELF. Don't make me get mean! I gave you something really cool.

PAINT. You gave me some crazy killer guy's tooth.

PELF. Damn it. You're making me mad.

PAINT. What are you going to do? Fight me?

PELF. For fifty dollars? ... Yeah! (*He goes for the cart.*)

PAINT (*grabbing the cart and pulling it from the other side*). You're getting silly. Don't make me have to teach you a lesson. (*PELF tips the cart over.*) Look what you did... (*PAINT goes for PELF.*)

PELF. Wait... I didn't mean... (*A police siren is heard.*) Oh shit! (*They stop fighting and run for cover.*) What the hell's going on?

PAINT. Shut up.

PELF (*walks out from hiding*). Nothing. He didn't see us.

PAINT. Get back here, idiot.

PELF. I think he caught a guy speeding.

PAINT. He's going to see you.

PELF. No. He's looking the other way. (*PELF flips the policeman off.*) ASSHOLE!

PAINT. Good, I don't need that shit. OK, now take your scrawny ass and get out of here. Trying to take my cart.

PELF. I like it here. (*He pulls out a pack of cigarettes, takes one, lights it and sits down. PAINT lifts the cart back up and puts the things back in that have fallen out.*)

PAINT. Maybe you didn't hear what I said. You had better take off, because I seriously don't need the kind of shit you bring. So, go! Get out of here.

PELF. OK. OK. (*He moves across the stage, removes his coat, and sits on it.*)

PAINT. What are you doing?

PELF. This is my spot. I claim it for me.

PAINT. This is my bridge.

PELF. Bullshit. You can't have your own bridge. Nobody has their own bridge in Oldtown. Everybody shares.

PAINT. Get the hell out of here. (*PELF remains seated.*) Now. (*PELF blows cigarette smoke at him.*) Why are you doing this? You want me to come over and mess you up, don't you?

PELF. Paint, you aren't going to mess me up. You love the attention. Admit it. You're just a lonely old guy sitting up in his cave waiting for trouble to come out and pay him a visit.

PAINT. Stupid shit. What are you going to do with the fifty dollars?

PELF. I'm saving up for something.

PAINT. More drugs.

PELF. I don't need drugs right now.

PAINT. Liar.

PELF. I don't need drugs, because of Lopez. (*He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a cloth bag.*) When he heard the cop sirens, Lopez ditched his stash. And I saw where he did. And I came back, and just before I got his tooth, I got his bag. Yay!

PAINT. You are so dead.

PELF. He won't find me, because I will be gone.

PAINT. With just fifty dollars?

PELF. I can buy a bus ticket to Wyoming.

PAINT. Oh. And live off what? Drugs?

PELF. I don't know. Wait a minute, I know what I'll do...

Remember that guy from Atlanta? The short guy with real long red hair? Yeah. He stole a lady's credit card one time, and bought two tickets to Hawaii. Remember? And he took his buddy to Hawaii. I could do that. I could live on the beach in Hawaii, and I'd take you with me.

PAINT. Once Lopez gets out of the lockup, he's gonna know that someone took his stuff. And I know how you shoot your mouth off. You're as good as dead.

PELF. That's why I'm crashing here with you. Come on... just think about it, Hawaii...

PAINT. Hawaii.

PELF. And a plane ride, and free food on the plane. We can scam drinks. All we need is to find some old lady. But don't worry. I'll mug her, you just watch out for...

PAINT. Cut it out.

PELF. Or a jogger. A jogger will be better. A rich jogger will have more money. You push him over and I'll take the cash.

PAINT. That's crazy. Now, you're not going to stay here if I hear any more of this bullshit about Hawaii, or stealing from old ladies, or stealing grocery carts. I don't need trouble.

PELF. OK, OK, you're right. I won't stay here long. I just need to chill out for a minute. It's still hairy in Oldtown and I don't want to go back just yet. Let me smoke one more cigarette and I swear I'll go. (*He lights another cigarette.*) I wouldn't mind hitting a jogger. Who's chasing them? Why are they running? I think I'll chase one someday just to give them a reason for running.

PAINT. You'll find a lot of joggers over there. Joggers are always running through that park.

PELF. I should dress up like a jogger.

PAINT. Like a jogger?

PELF. Yeah, so that I could rob somebody. And then I could run away and nobody would be suspicious of me. Joggers are always running. I could get a pair of sweat-pants, easy.

PAINT. Are you stupid? Nobody wears sweatpants anymore when they jog. That would totally give you away. You'd have to get a pair of those tight little running shorts.

PELF. It's still a good idea, though.

PAINT. Knowing you, you'd probably try to mug some really strong guy and he'd kick your ass.

PELF. Or an old lady and she'd hit me with her purse.

PAINT. It would serve you right, you bastard.

PELF. I just need to get away from this town and all of these problems. Hey, can I have some more coffee?

PAINT. I only have a little. So, you get half of a little.

PELF. That's OK. Hey, the big scarf.

PAINT. What?

PELF. I was just looking at your big scarf.

PAINT. What about it?

PELF. I was just looking at it. It looks warm. Comfortable. Can I have it?

PAINT. No.

PELF. I mean, can I look at it? (*PAINT hands him the scarf.*) Did you get it from the clothes dumpster? It's a good find if you did.

PAINT. Somebody gave it to me.

PELF. Tell me the story. C'mon, you tell great stories. I hope someday that you'll put me in one of your stories. I think that would be the best thing in the world. Even better than being famous, because you make people sound important.

PAINT. Shit. OK, I got the scarf a few years back. I was working at this sandwich shop in Oldtown, just cleaning up every once in a while. The guy who owned it ran it himself for about fifty years. He was this tough old World War II bastard. Then one day he decides he's gonna retire and close down the shop. So he gets this idea to sell all of his stock at half price and give away free hot dogs. He gets all of the employees together, including me, and we gathered up everything: food, magazines, beer. We marked everything for half price. And people came. They didn't care that this store was closing down. They just wanted stuff for cheap. It was a busy day, and I must have handed out a million hot dogs. After five o'clock, business dies down. People are all going home from work. So me and this guy are sweeping up. The old man is behind the register counting the money we made, when the door busts open and two guys wearing ski masks run in and yell, "Give us the money." The old man yells back, "Fuck you." So one of the robbers shoots the guy I'm working with. I'm thinking that we're all gonna die, but the old man just looks at them real cool and all and says, "Go ahead and kill them, I don't give a shit. Just means I don't have to pay them tomorrow." One of the crooks turns his gun on me, and I just close my eyes. I was pretty sure I was gonna die. Then I hear this loud "Wham," and the old guy starts swearing. When I fi-

nally open my eyes, I see a dead robber in front of me and blood everywhere. The old man had pulled out a gun and shot him, but the other one got away. He told me he couldn't pay me because the guy who escaped took the cash register. So instead, I got a bunch of left-over hot dogs, some beer, and this scarf. It's real nice and comfortable, but you know what?

PELF. What?

PAINT. He told me later that he pulled it off that dead guy. Is that some fucked-up shit or what?

PELF. Really? (*PAINT pulls out a bottle of whiskey and takes a swig.*) Bullshit!

PAINT (*laughing*). Grandmother.

PELF. Awww man.

PAINT. Christmas.

PELF. I need to get me a scarf like yours.

PAINT. Yeah, you should.

PELF. So, when you die, can I have your scarf?

PAINT. Sure.

PELF. Can I have your cart? I'm your friend. I come out to see you. Nobody else does. But I do, right? You should give me the cart too.

PAINT. You're not getting the cart.

PELF. Why not? You can't keep it if you're dead, and you wouldn't want it to go to just anybody.

PAINT. I'm taking it with me. The cart goes wherever I go. Besides, if I give it to you, Lopez will just take it away.

PELF. Lopez.

PAINT. I'm not going to get rid of you, am I?

PELF. Nope.

PAINT. So then, give me a smoke. (*PELF gives him one. PAINT lights it and sits next to PELF.*)

PELF. How's that?

PAINT. It's a smoke. A smoke's a smoke.

PELF. A smoke's a smoke.

PAINT. You know, most of the time you can be a real pain in the ass.

PELF. I know.

PAINT. Watch out for yourself. I mean really. I think you've put yourself into a bad situation here with Lopez.

PELF. You gonna help me?

PAINT. I'll do what I can. I'm an old man, can't do too much.

PELF. You could give me the cart.

PAINT. OK, Mr. Pain-in-the-ass. I give you the cart, you sell it and get fifty dollars. Now what do you do?

PELF. Buy a bus ticket to Wyoming.

PAINT. Where in Wyoming?

PELF. The cheapest place I can find. I don't have a specific town in mind.

PAINT. That's good, because if you knew where you were going, it would be easier for Lopez to find you.

PELF. So, I guess I'm doing fine.

PAINT. What will you do in Wyoming?

PELF. I'll do what I do here.

PAINT. Nothing.

PELF. Are you trying to bring me down?

PAINT. I'm trying to be practical. You have to think about your life and what you're going to do. Otherwise you just float.