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**American Association of  
Community Theatre AACT  
NewPlayFest Winning Plays:  
Volume 5 (2022)**

*Escaping the Labyrinth* by  
THOMAS HISCHAK

*Unpacking Mother* by  
KAREN SCHAEFFER

*MLM Is for Murder (or, Your Side Hustle Is Killing Us)* by  
JOHN BAVOSO

*The Café Mocha Murders* by  
DEANNA STRASSE

*Of Men and Cars* by  
JIM GEOGHAN

*Launch Day (Love Stories From the Year 2108)* by  
MICHAEL HIGGINS

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# Unpacking Mother

By  
KAREN SCHAEFFER

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(UNPACKING MOTHER)

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*Unpacking Mother* received its world premier production at Market House Theatre in Paducah, Ky., on Feb. 10, 2022.

CAST:

CASSIE ..... Anna Tamaoka  
KATHRYN.....Amber Dawn

PRODUCTION:

Artistic Director .....Michael Cochran  
Director ..... Kathy Pingel  
Assistant Director/Stage Manager ..... Denise Bristol  
Scenic Designer ..... Tom Hansen  
Technical Director..... Jerome Viet  
Costume Designer.....Davin Belt  
Lighting Designer .....Michael Cochran  
Original Music ..... Mark Toeppen  
Dramaturgs..... Kathy Pingel, Brian Johnson,  
Dr. Caitlin Powell

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“*Unpacking Mother* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Market House Theatre in Paducah, Ky.”

# Unpacking Mother

## CHARACTERS

CASSIE: 32 years old. KATHRYN's little sister. Single. She's spent the last 10 years caring for her mother who has recently passed. Her father's suicide and mother's MS and OCD combined with hoarding tendencies have shaped her.

KATHRYN: 37 years old. Has been married to her wife, Atotcha, for 10 years. They have recently purchased a house and are using a surrogate to have a child. The last time she was home was for her father's funeral. Over the last 10 years, she's only spoken briefly with CASSIE. KATHRYN is exhibiting some of her mother's OCD tendencies, and it scares her.

TIME: Late afternoon into the evening hours and early the next day.

PLACE: The main living room of a modest, ranch-style, middle-class home.

## SET DESCRIPTION

The set is a hoarder's house. There is a front door and an archway into an unseen kitchen. There is also a hallway that leads to the bedrooms. Everywhere there are stacks of magazines, books, newspapers and other hodgepodge collections. Some piles make sense like clothing, unopened appliances, seasonal decorations, etc. Some piles do not make as much sense like diaper boxes, a bag of soccer balls, etc. This is a hoarder who has kept things with the idea she will use them all someday. The room is not marked by garbage or squalor but an inability to let go of possessions and a compulsion to shop and add to the various collections. There have been essential pathways carved out of the piles that lead to the front door, kitchen and hallway. The entrance to the hallway is stacked with bags and unopened boxes to



suggest the back rooms have been filled and are spilling into the main room. Still, it is possible to get past, but not without edging through.

CASSIE and KATHRYN will unpack boxes and bags when they cannot see the contents. The remainder of the hoard is in see-through containers or piles out in the open. The contents of the boxes will go into a common pile that will be “set on fire” at the end of the play. A hidden fog machine can be used to create “smoke.”

Next to the front door are several years of coats hanging on the pegs. One peg is empty. Beneath the coats is a pile of shoes where people have kicked them off and left them.

In the living room, there is a couch, a well-worn recliner and an overstuffed chair. The overstuffed chair is piled with mail, old phone books, etc. There is an empty space on the floor where it’s clear someone has been sorting through the stuff. Between the chair and couch there is a side table and lamp. There is nothing on the side table. The emptiness of the peg and the side table stands out in stark contrast to the rest of the room. There is another side table next to the recliner covered with glasses and coffee mugs. A floor lamp sits behind the recliner. There is an old lampshade on the floor next to the floor lamp. Next to the recliner there is unfinished knitting sticking out of a reusable grocery bag filled with yarn and knitting supplies. There is a television underneath so many other things that it is unrecognizable as a television.

There is a picture window by the front door covered by a plastic garbage bag taped in place.

This is the house CASSIE and her mother have shared for the last 10 years. Her mother was the hoarder with a stranglehold on her right to keep anything and everything she wanted.

If there is a curtain that reveals the space, CASSIE should wait a couple of beats before entering to allow the audience to fully absorb the stage.

# Unpacking Mother

## ACT I

*(CASSIE enters a darkened room. When she opens the door, the afternoon light floods in until she shuts the door.)*

*She is dressed neatly. She removes her sensible, black, dated coat and hangs it on the one empty peg. Beneath her coat, she is wearing a plain black dress and sensible black pumps, again, dated.*

*She passes through the living room, ignoring the mess as she has done day after day. She continues to the kitchen and exits to pour a cup of coffee. Then, she re-enters with the cup in her hand.*

*She stands, looking at the mess, sipping her coffee. It is unexpectedly bitter. She has forgotten to put cream in. She sighs, sets the coffee on the nearest free spot and returns to the kitchen.*

*From the front door, KATHRYN backs into the room, rolling her suitcase and wearing business/funeral garb, which includes a jacket.)*

KATHRYN *(with her back to the room)*. You know, you have trees growing out of the gutter.

*(KATHRYN shuts the front door and turns to see an outline of the mess. She tries to take it in. To get a better look, she tears down the plastic bag covering the window just as CASSIE re-enters with cream.)*

KATHRYN *(cont'd)*. Holy fuck.

*(Pause.)*

CASSIE. It's been so long I forgot.

*(CASSIE looks over to KATHRYN, who is still stunned.)*

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. Kathryn.

KATHRYN. Cassie.

CASSIE. Hi.

KATHRYN. Hello.

*(CASSIE breaks ... smiles ... crosses to KATHRYN and awkwardly hugs her. KATHRYN awkwardly returns the hug.)*

CASSIE *(showing KATHRYN the bottle of cream)*. I forgot the cream. *(Pause.)* I didn't think you would really come.

KATHRYN. To our mother's funeral?

CASSIE. Yes.

KATHRYN. I said I would. Besides *(Indicating the boxes.)* ... this.

CASSIE. Yes. This.

KATHRYN. I wish you hadn't scared away that cleaning group I sent.

CASSIE. Mom scared them away, not me.

KATHRYN. They specialize in hoarding.

CASSIE. They just made things worse.

KATHRYN. How is that possible?

CASSIE. You didn't tell me. They showed up while I was working.

She totally freaked. She called me at work. I had to rush home.

Mom was a mess. I couldn't leave her side for days. Thank God my job is understanding.

KATHRYN. I'm sorry ... I didn't mean to make things worse.

CASSIE. At least you tried. Of course, if you had read one of the articles I sent ... listened to a podcast ... joined a group.

KATHRYN. I get it. I messed up.

*(Pause.)*

CASSIE. Well ... *(Pours cream into her coffee and goes back into the kitchen. Talks from offstage.)* There's coffee ... want some?

KATHRYN *(quietly, surveying the room)*. Sure.

CASSIE *(offstage)*. Was that a ...

KATHRYN. Hmm?

CASSIE *(sticking her head back in)*. What did you say?

KATHRYN. What did you say?

CASSIE. When?

KATHRYN. Just now.

CASSIE. What did you say?

KATHRYN. That's what I'm asking.

CASSIE. That's what I'm asking.

KATHRYN. Are you mimicking me?

*(CASSIE takes a breath. Smiles.)*

CASSIE. Do you want some coffee?

KATHRYN. I said "sure."

CASSIE. I didn't hear you.

KATHRYN. You know what ... it's too much trouble ... forget it.

CASSIE. It's no trouble.

KATHRYN. It seems to be.

CASSIE. It's not.

KATHRYN. Well, it seems to be.

CASSIE. Well, it's not.

*(They look at each other for a moment.)*

KATHRYN. Then, sure.

CASSIE. OK.

*(Silence.)*

*CASSIE turns and goes back into the kitchen.*

*KATHRYN goes back to surveying the piles of junk.*

*CASSIE returns with a cup of coffee and hands it to KATHRYN.*

*CASSIE looks around and realizes there's nowhere to sit. She sets KATHRYN's coffee on a side table, picks up a stack of magazines from the recliner, looks for a place to set them and then just drops them on the floor. She picks up another stack from the couch and drops them on the floor. This creates two free places to sit.)*

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. Sit ... sit.

*(KATHRYN sits.)*

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. First thing I'm doing is buying one of those Keurig things.

KATHRYN. We have one.

CASSIE. Do you like it?

KATHRYN. Love it.

CASSIE. Mom would never ... I'm still using the percolator we had when we were kids.

KATHRYN. Really?

CASSIE. Really.

KATHRYN. You'd think it would have died by now.

CASSIE. You'd think.

KATHRYN. That's gotta be what ... ?

CASSIE. I think Mom and Dad got it as a wedding present.

KATHRYN. So thirty-eight years.

CASSIE. Thirty-eight years.

KATHRYN. Thirty-eight years.

CASSIE. Thirty-eight years.

KATHRYN. Huh.

CASSIE. Yep.

KATHRYN (*looking at her coffee*). Cream's in the fridge, right?

CASSIE. Oh ... sorry. Let me get it for you.

KATHRYN. I can get it.

CASSIE. No ...

KATHRYN. I can get my own cream.

*(KATHRYN crosses to the entrance to the kitchen and stops.)*

CASSIE (*rising and going toward the kitchen*). I'll get it for you.

*(KATHRYN returns to her seat and sets her coffee on the table next to her.)*

KATHRYN. I'll just drink it black.

CASSIE. Are you sure?

KATHRYN. Yes! Yes. You know what ... I think I've had enough coffee.

CASSIE. Oh.

KATHRYN. I'm shaking.

*(CASSIE looks at her.)*

CASSIE. I get like that sometimes. You want some water?

KATHRYN. No.

CASSIE. It helps me.

KATHRYN. I'm fine.

CASSIE. You sure?

KATHRYN. I'M FINE.

*(CASSIE takes KATHRYN's coffee cup and exits into the kitchen.)*

CASSIE *(offstage)*. You still drink?

KATHRYN. Sometimes.

CASSIE *(entering holding a bottle of wine)*. Is this one of those times?

KATHRYN. Sure.

*(CASSIE finds a red Solo cup from the stack of stuff in the living room, hands it to KATHRYN and fills the cup with wine. KATHRYN takes a drink.)*

KATHRYN *(cont'd, taking another drink)*. Ahhhhhh. That's the good stuff.

*(CASSIE sets the bottle next to KATHRYN, picks up her coffee cup and puts it in the kitchen. She returns with another bottle of wine and drinks directly from the bottle. CASSIE sits as she continues taking drinks from the bottle. KATHRYN watches her, shakes her head and takes a drink from her cup. CASSIE looks at her daring her to judge her. Awkwardly long pause.)*

CASSIE. So ... how's Atotcha? *(Pronounced A-tot-cha.)*

KATHRYN. Fine.

CASSIE. Last time I heard from you, you two were getting married.

KATHRYN. Hard to believe that was ten years ago.

CASSIE. Not hard for me. She didn't wanna come with you?

KATHRYN. She had a work thing.

CASSIE. She couldn't get out of it? Her mother-in-law died.

KATHRYN. It was an important work thing.

CASSIE. She's in marketing.

KATHRYN. Yeah, so?

CASSIE. So, how important could it be?

KATHRYN. What are you saying?

CASSIE. As your wife, she should've been here to support you.

KATHRYN. I don't need support.

*(CASSIE looks at KATHRYN until KATHRYN looks away.)*

CASSIE. Everything OK with you two?

KATHRYN. Why wouldn't it be?

CASSIE. Because you're answering questions with questions.

KATHRYN. Everything's fine.

CASSIE. Now I know something's wrong.

*(Another awkward pause.)*

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. OK ... well, if you need to talk ...

KATHRYN. I don't need to talk.

CASSIE. Gotcha.

*(Another awkward pause.)*

KATHRYN. We bought a house.

CASSIE. You're a homeowner! I thought you were solid apartment dwellers.

KATHRYN. I know. And we got a dog. Actually, that's why Atotcha didn't come.

CASSIE. Because of the dog?

KATHRYN. We're training it.

CASSIE. Couldn't you just have someone dog sit?

KATHRYN. She didn't want to leave it.

CASSIE. Why didn't you just say that?

KATHRYN. I thought you would think that ... that's dumb.

CASSIE. I do.

KATHRYN. Oh.

CASSIE. I thought you were more of a cat person.

KATHRYN. Atotcha is more of a dog person. It's a rescue.

CASSIE. At least there's that.

*(CASSIE looks at her.)*

KATHRYN. Atotcha thought it would be good for the baby.

CASSIE. Is Atotcha pregnant?

KATHRYN. Surrogate.

CASSIE. A house, a dog AND a baby? Look at you being all normal and stuff.

KATHRYN. What does that mean?

CASSIE. You know ... ahhhhhhh life.

KATHRYN. After ten years together, we should be gettin' on with our "ahhhhhh life."

*(Another awkward pause.)*

KATHRYN *(cont'd)*. How about you?

CASSIE. What about me?

KATHRYN. Life.

CASSIE. I met someone. It's relatively new.

KATHRYN. That's nice.

CASSIE. It is.

KATHRYN. Where'd you meet?

CASSIE. Hoarders' support group.

KATHRYN. I didn't know there were so many crazy people in this town.

CASSIE. Mentally ill.

KATHRYN. That's what I said.

CASSIE. You said "crazy."

KATHRYN. You know what I meant.

CASSIE. Yeah.

KATHRYN. Don't say it like that.

CASSIE. Whatever.

KATHRYN. Whatever ... does this guy have a name?

CASSIE. Norman.

KATHRYN. He sounds old.

CASSIE. Well, he's not.

KATHRYN. Well, he has an old name.

CASSIE. It's a family name.

KATHRYN. Was he the guy sitting next to you at the funeral?

CASSIE. I would've introduced you, but you slipped in right before we started.



KATHRYN. I didn't slip in.

CASSIE. What would you call it?

KATHRYN. My plane was late.

CASSIE. Uh-huh.

KATHRYN. Why isn't Norman here helping us?

CASSIE. It's not his mess. I asked him to wait for me at my apartment. I'll give him a call when we're done so he can meet us at the storage unit and help unload.

KATHRYN. You have an apartment now?

CASSIE. I couldn't stay here. I had to have somewhere to live. And before you ask, Norman is *not* living with me.

KATHRYN. I wasn't going to ask.

CASSIE. Yes, you were.

KATHRYN. So you're not sleeping with him?

CASSIE. Christ, Kat.

KATHRYN. You can tell me ... I'm your sister.

CASSIE (*under her breath*). Only when it's convenient.

KATHRYN. What was that?

CASSIE. Nothing.

*(Pause.)*

KATHRYN. You did a good job with the funeral.

*(CASSIE takes another drink.)*

CASSIE. Thank you.

KATHRYN. The flower arrangements were nice.

CASSIE. Nice ... I guess you would've done it better.

KATHRYN. I said they were nice.

CASSIE. I asked you if you wanted to help.

KATHRYN. You did fine.

CASSIE. So, now it's "fine"?

KATHRYN. I thought ...

CASSIE. What?

KATHRYN. Didn't Mom like daffodils?

CASSIE. Daffodils? Daffodils are a spring flower. It's fall. I asked for fall flowers.

KATHRYN. You didn't ask for a specific flower?

CASSIE. What would you suggest?

KATHRYN. I don't know ... something that didn't make it look like the homecoming dance.

CASSIE. Mom liked chrysanthemums.

KATHRYN. I never heard her say that.

CASSIE. She did. You weren't here.

*(CASSIE, noticing the room has grown darker, turns on the lights.)*

KATHRYN. Oh. *(Pause.)* The pictures ...

CASSIE. Hmmm?

KATHRYN. The picture ... at the funeral.

CASSIE. Yes?

KATHRYN. Mom and Dad looked so young ...

CASSIE. People don't take pictures anymore.

KATHRYN. Right. Well ... they do ... it's just ...

CASSIE. They use their phones. I guess it's nice ... you don't have to worry about carrying around a camera.

KATHRYN. But you don't get pictures like that with your phone. When was it taken?

CASSIE. Which one?

KATHRYN. The one in front of that old hotel.

CASSIE. The Howard Johnson?

KATHRYN. Is that what it was called?

CASSIE. Yep.

KATHRYN. Not many of those around anymore.

CASSIE. No.

KATHRYN. You sometimes see one driving through a small town.

CASSIE. There's always like one car in the parking lot.

KATHRYN. Right.

CASSIE. I like to imagine they're people like Mom and Dad trying to recapture the moment.

KATHRYN. What moment?

CASSIE. You know ... the moment in the picture.

KATHRYN. I don't.

CASSIE. You don't what?

KATHRYN. Imagine.

CASSIE. You don't.

KATHRYN. Nope.

CASSIE. Nothing.

KATHRYN. Not a thing.

CASSIE. Huh.

*(CASSIE looks at KATHRYN. KATHRYN shrugs. They both take a drink.)*

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. Sometime after they were married.

KATHRYN. What?

CASSIE. It was taken sometime after they were married.

*(KATHRYN looks at her like, "What are you talking about?")*

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. The picture ... at the funeral.

KATHRYN. Right.

CASSIE. They used to take day trips before we were born.

KATHRYN. That's right. Dad talked about those all the time.

CASSIE. I think he really missed those little trips.

KATHRYN. They looked so happy.

CASSIE. They did.

KATHRYN. There was another picture with two people in the picture with them ...

CASSIE. Harry and Betty ...

KATHRYN. I remember them.

CASSIE. Once a month, they came over and played cards.

KATHRYN. I don't remember them having many friends.

CASSIE. I only remember those two. He wore the same aftershave Dad did.

KATHRYN. Old Spice.

CASSIE. Is that what it was?

*(KATHRYN nods "yes.")*

KATHRYN. Oh my God, do you remember how loud they would get when they played cards?

CASSIE. I remember Mom and Dad arguing a lot.

KATHRYN. That's how they played.

CASSIE. All I remember is them screaming at each other, Dad stalking off to his office ... Mom to the bedroom and doors slamming.

KATHRYN. They made up later. Sometimes it took a few days.

CASSIE. Days? Weeks ... I remember weeks of strained silences.

KATHRYN. It wasn't weeks. At most, it was three days.

CASSIE. I swear it was weeks.

KATHRYN. And it wasn't strained. I think they kinda liked fighting.

I remember them glancing at each other when the other person wasn't looking as if they were testing the waters.

CASSIE. I remember them shooting daggers at each other.

KATHRYN. Then they would have this very passionate, very loud sex.

CASSIE. How do you know?

KATHRYN. I could hear them. My wall was right next to their room.

CASSIE. I don't remember that.

KATHRYN. That's cuz you were a kid.

CASSIE. So were you.

KATHRYN. But I was older.

CASSIE. I don't understand why they kept playing if it made them so mad?

KATHRYN. It's what people did.

CASSIE. They could've done other things ... bowling.

KATHRYN. I don't think any of them were big bowlers. Whatever happened to them?

CASSIE. Harry and Betty? There was a falling out.

KATHRYN. Why do you say that?

CASSIE. They were cut out of all the pictures in the photo album.

KATHRYN. Really?

CASSIE (*nodding*). That picture was in a box hidden in the back of Dad's office closet.

KATHRYN. Hidden? You make it sound so nefarious.

CASSIE. Well, it was behind a bunch of stuff with a pile of files on top of it. I would say that's hidden.

KATHRYN. Maybe it was just forgotten.

(*CASSIE shrugs.*)

KATHRYN (*cont'd*). You were snooping?

CASSIE. No, I found them cleaning out Dad's office. When I moved back home, Dad gave me his office to use as a bedroom.

KATHRYN. You didn't sleep in our old room?

CASSIE. No.

KATHRYN. Why not?

CASSIE. Mom wouldn't let me touch anything. I started packing up our closet once. She had a complete meltdown. Her OCD had gotten bad ... really bad. If I moved a stuffed animal, you were going to crash your car. If I threw away a paper, you would die. It got so all I had to do was walk into the room to provoke an episode. It wasn't worth it.

KATHRYN. A time capsule of our teenage selves ... that's creepy.

CASSIE. It looks exactly like it did the day you went to college. Down to the posters on the wall. Imagine living in the Kathryn shrine with all your trophies and high school shit. I couldn't wait to leave.

KATHRYN. Funny how you only see my shit ... your shit was in there, too.

*(CASSIE looks at her. Not wanting to start a fight, KATHRYN goes back to the funeral.)*

KATHRYN (*cont'd*). It was cool you found one of Mom's journals ... for the funeral. I saw a lot of people reading it.

CASSIE. Did you read it?

*(KATHRYN shakes her head "no.")*

CASSIE (*cont'd*). It was about our beach vacation.

KATHRYN. That summer all of us spent on the beach?

CASSIE. Dad's colleague at the university loaned us his beach house.

KATHRYN. Harry and Betty were there, too.

CASSIE. They rented the house next door.

KATHRYN. That was a good summer.

CASSIE. We spent days in our bathing suits.

KATHRYN. Collecting seashells.