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SEARCHING FOR DAVID'S HEART

A Play in Two Acts

by

CHERIE BENNETT

Adapted from *Searching for David's Heart*,
also by Cherie Bennett (Scholastic Books, 1998)

- * winner, 1999 Aurand Harris Memorial Children's Playwriting Award
- * winner, 1998 New Visions/New Voices biennial, The Kennedy Center
- * winner, 2000 American Alliance of Theater and Education Unpublished Play Reading Project
- * certificate of award, 1999 Bonderman biennial



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For Jeff, my partner in art as well as in life; my biggest booster and toughest critic, and dramaturge, who so often sees what I miss and brings me to the truth...sometimes more easily than other times!

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SEARCHING FOR DAVID'S HEART

A Play in Two Acts

For 10 actors (4f, 6m, with doubling as indicated below.)
The play can be done with a cast of 9 (3f, 6m) by eliminating the role of Linda (line changes available from the playwright), and having only Winston's father present.

CHARACTERS

FEMALE ROLES

DARCY (DEE DEE) DEETON: Age 12. Small for her age.

CLAIRE DEETON: Darcy's mom. A nurse.

Doubles as **ENID MANNERS:** Older, gullible.

Passenger on the bus.

DR. LINDA PAWLING: Winston's mom. A pediatrician.

Can double as **DR. LEE.**

CRYSTAL EVANS: Age 17, David's girlfriend, lovely.

Can double as **AMANDA BLISS:** Age 13, a classmate;

also as **CHARLENE:** Age 18, an escape artist's assistant.

MALE ROLES

SAM WEISS: Age 12, Darcy's best friend and soulmate.

Even smaller than Darcy.

HARRY HOUDINI: The one and only consummate showman.

He also plays many other roles as indicated. He is not doubling and is always obviously recognizable as Houdini.

DOUG DEETON: Darcy's dad. A cop.

AARON WEISS: Sam's dad. A public defender lawyer.

Can double as DR. JOHN PAUL PAWLING: Winston's dad. A doctor.

DAVID DEETON: Age 18. Darcy's brother. Can double as AMAZIN' EDDIE: Age 18. Second-rate escape artist.

WINSTON PAWLING: Age 12, but could look younger.

Everyone but Darcy, Sam, Enid, Amazin' Eddie and Charlene can double as audience in carnival scenes. The non-speaking, motionless role of Meemaw can be played by any actor of the director's choice. We never see her face.

TIME: The present.

PLACE: Appleton, Wisconsin; on the road; Miami, Florida; a Wisconsin airport.

NOTES FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

HOUDINI: The one and only Harry Houdini is our narrator and facilitator. As Houdini, the audience sees him, the characters do not. He alone breaks the fourth wall and weaves in and out of scenes at the discretion of the director, even joining the action at some points to play various small roles. No effort should be made to hide the fact that it is Houdini playing another role, e.g., a lady selling raffle tickets. He is allowing us, the audience, in on his great performance. A pegboard with various simple costume elements might be available for his use. While bigger than life, Houdini must never be allowed to become the focal point of the play.

DOUBLING: Except for Houdini, doubling should be disguised.

STYLE/SETS: The play flows seamlessly from one scene to the next unless otherwise indicated. Because of this flow and the varied locations, sets can be minimal. Upstage could be a large platform with usable space underneath. This platform is used as a Ferris wheel, tree house, etc.

RUNNING TIME: The act break noted is for convenience only; this play can be performed without an intermission.

MUSIC: All music is suggested only.

ACT ONE

SETTING: *Upstage: a large multipurpose platform. Stage right: a coat rack from which hang various simple costume elements—hats, wigs, etc. A trunk, some boxes, and large screen are used in various ways for all sets. The play flows from scene to scene seamlessly except where indicated.*

AT RISE: *A Sunday afternoon, September. DARCY (DEE DEE) DEETON and SAM WEISS, best friends, are holding a seance in a room lit by a red-flame candle. SAM tries to summon the spirit of the Great Houdini.*

SAM (*eyes closed, dramatically*). O Great Houdini—

DARCY (*eyes closed, highly dubious*). O Great Houdini—

SAM. O Powerful Houdini—

DARCY (*very "let's get it over with"*). O Powerful Houdini—

SAM. O Great One, the most incredible, unbelievable magician and escape artist that ever lived in the history of history—

DARCY (*opens eyes*). Sucking up to the dead is pointless, Sam, OK?

SAM. K-O. (*A beat, as he shifts tactics*). O Great Houdini, I, the Great Samdini, can now do your most famous es-

cape trick, Metamorphosis, better than you ever did it, and—

DARCY. Wrong. That's never gonna get him to show up.

SAM (*opens eyes, matter of fact*). Anger might jar him from The Great Beyond, you never know. His ego was out of control. (*Back into seance mode.*) O Former Greatest Escape Artist who ever lived, if your spirit is here, give us a sign by making the candle flicker now. (*They wait. Nothing happens.*)

DARCY. Maybe he doesn't like you telling him what to do.

SAM. If your spirit is here, give us a sign of your choice. (*They wait again. Nothing.*) If your spirit is here—

DARCY. It isn't.

SAM. It might be.

DARCY. It isn't. (*She blows out the candle and flips on a light.*) You can't talk to the dead, Sam. No one can. We've got homework.

SAM (*booming Samdini voice*). The Great Samdini does not do homework. (*Normal voice.*) Let's work on the Metamorphosis trick.

DARCY. Homework first, Metamorphosis trick second.

SAM. Metamorphosis first, homework second.

(*He opens the trunk, takes out handcuffs and ropes, handcuffs himself, and kneels in the trunk, as DARCY takes a sheet of paper from her pocket.*)

DARCY. Homework first. I need to work on my speech.

SAM. Deed, you need to get in the trunk.

DARCY. I hate the trunk.

SAM. Metamorphosis depends on it. Let's review. Handcuffed, I get in the trunk. You rope and lock the trunk. In mere seconds, I miraculously exit the trunk while you, my lowly assistant—

DARCY. Watch it!

SAM. —my lovely, lowly assistant, get inside, without disturbing the ropes or the lock. How do they do it, folks?

Metamorphosis. Noun. A—

DARCY. —Change of form or character. You told me.

SAM (*lowers the trunk lid on himself*). See? Nothing to it.

DARCY. I'm not doing it, OK?

(*SAM pops up, uncuffs himself and steps out of the trunk, closing it behind him.*)

SAM. K-O. And please, don't blame yourself just because you've ruined my career and my entire life.

DARCY. I won't. I hate Ms. Clark's guts. Why do I have to give a speech in front of the whole class? I'd rather eat snot.

SAM. Ms. Clark is malevolent. Adjective. Wishing harm to others. Your speech?

(*He motions DARCY to stand on the trunk and give her speech. She reluctantly climbs up, hesitates, then climbs down.*)

DARCY. You first.

SAM (*from memory, very been-there-done-that*). The Person I Admire Most, by Sam Weiss. The person I admire most is the Great Harry Houdini. He grew up right here in Appleton, Wisconsin, we're both Jewish, and his last name was also Weiss before he changed it to Houdini.

(*During SAM's speech, the GREAT HOUDINI rises, bound, from inside the trunk. He easily frees himself and climbs jauntily out. He sees and hears all, but can't be seen or heard by DARCY and SAM.*)

SAM. Coincidence? I think not. He was formerly the greatest escape artist who ever lived. That is, until me, the Great Samdini.

HOUDINI. And you talk about my ego, kid!

SAM. I'm mastering all his tricks, so when I'm rich and famous and all you mere mortals who ever made fun of me are begging for my autograph, for which I will make you grovel, I will owe it all to my mentor, the Great Houdini. Thank you.

HOUDINI (*wryly*). You're welcome.

SAM. Now do yours.

DARCY (*anything to avoid the speech*). Let's eat instead. (*To entice him.*) We've got chunky peanut butter.

SAM. On white bread? With marshmallow Fluff?

(*They run off to kitchen. HOUDINI suddenly sees the audience, preens, and plays to it grandly.*)

HOUDINI (*bowing with a flourish*). Ladies and gentlemen. Perhaps my reputation precedes me. I am the Great Houdini. Pay no mind to that little braggart. The child cannot shine my spats. Frankly, he annoys me.

SAM (*offstage*). Hey, Deed, where's the Fluff?

DARCY (*offstage*). Look in my room.

(*SAM enters, looking for Fluff.*)

HOUDINI (*unhappy*). But, alas, he calls for me. Relentlessly.

SAM. Hey, Deed? I don't see it! Deed? (*SAM exits again.*)

HOUDINI. I appear before you today to tell you a story. Not his, however.

(HOUDINI magically makes a jar of Fluff appear. DARCY enters and sees it.)

DARCY. It was right in front of your face. *(Picks up Fluff.)*

HOUDINI. Hers. *(DARCY exits with the Fluff.)* But first, about me. Born Erich Weiss, a poor rabbi's son, I became The Man Who Could Walk Through Walls. Chained or shackled, roped or cuffed, I could escape from anything made by man or God. Failure meant a sudden, gruesome death. I never failed. How did I do it? The know-it-alls called it a miracle. They were idiots. The truth is, I did tricks, not miracles. For after my dear mother died, I longed for a miracle—to enter the spirit world while still alive, to hear her voice just once more. But alas, even I, the Great Houdini, could not do it. Not without a miracle.

(DARCY and SAM enter. She chugs the last of the milk from the carton, he finishes last bites of a sandwich.)

SAM. Food of the gods. My home is junk-food challenged.

(They play catch with the empty carton. As SAM mangles it:) I wish this was Henry Farmer's head.

HOUDINI. And I did not believe in miracles.

(SAM throws the carton to DARCY.)

DARCY *(as she kicks it back to him)*. I wish it was Amanda Bliss's butt!

HOUDINI. Tonight I offer you, dear people, my finest performance—dazzling storytelling, astonishing feats of magic. At times I will even enter the story, playing various parts. All thus proving, with great humility, that I—*(shoots SAM a dirty look)*—was the greatest entertainer

who ever lived. And now I give you... the story of a miracle.

(DAVID DEETON enters and grabs the carton mid-throw.)

DAVID *(to DARCY)*. Go long! *(He fires it to her like a football, she nabs it.)* Yes! David Deeton's little sister makes a circus grab in the end zone. And the fans go wild! Man, it's nice out, huh? Still feels like summer.

SAM. Global warming. Noun. An increase in the temperature of the Earth's atmosphere.

DAVID. You kill me with that stuff, Sam. *(To DARCY.)*

So, you wanted me to hear some big speech you wrote?

DARCY. What if I stutter and my whole class laughs?

DAVID. No way. You'll be great.

SAM. Agreed.

DARCY. I'm only great with you guys. The rest of the time, I'm this dweeb, Stutter-girl. Here goes nothing. *(Climbs on the trunk.)* The Person I Admire Most, by Darcy Deeton, grade 6. I cried the first time I saw the ocean, because I knew my dad would make me swim in it. When I was four I fell into a swimming pool and almost drowned. Ever since then, I've been afraid of things. My dad says all it takes to get over fear is willpower. So when he ordered me to put my head under, I used all my willpower. But my mouth and lungs filled with water, it was so scary, like drowning all over again. The next thing I knew, I was lifted up, and my brother David was smiling at me, and the bad feelings went away. He said when I was ready, he'd teach me to swim, and I'd be a great swimmer. I thought how lucky I am that David is my brother, because he believes in me

even when I don't believe in myself. This is why he is the person I admire most.

DAVID (*touched*). That's awesome, Darce. You sure can write.

DARCY. But what if I stutter and they all laugh at me?

DAVID. Hey, wanna know what I do when I'm scared?

DARCY. You?

DAVID. Sure. Like, we play Oshkosh tomorrow night. They play dirty. So what do I do? I pretend they don't scare me. Pretend myself right out of the fear. Run right past 'em.

DARCY. Great. I'll remember that next time I suit up.

DAVID. You gotta believe in yourself, Darce. Then you can do anything. (*Looks at his watch.*) Oh, man, I'm late.

SAM. Got a hot date? Is it luh-luh-luh-love?

DARCY (*scoffing*). I'm so sure.

DAVID. Tell Dad I won't be home for dinner. See ya.

(*HOUDINI points at the door, which magically opens. DAVID looks at it curiously, shrugs, exits. SAM opens the trunk.*)

SAM. Madam, your trunk.

DARCY. Nope.

SAM. You're afraid.

DARCY. So?

SAM. Two things overcome fear. One—you have to be highly motivated. And two—

SAM & HOUDINI. You have to believe in yourself.

DARCY. Please. That's what David says. That's what everyone says.

SAM & HOUDINI (*thundering*). The Great Sam(Hou)-dini is not everyone!

SAM (*normal voice*). Look, there's nothing to be afraid of. Watch how fast I escape. Time me.

(*SAM gets in the trunk. DARCY locks SAM in, then crosses in front of the screen and times his escape as she speaks.*)

DARCY. Sometimes, Sam—don't tell anyone—I wish I really could become someone else. Hey, maybe this is only my larval stage and I'll turn into this beautiful butterfly girl. I'll be brave, like David. And tall. Everyone in my family is brave and tall but weird me. I hate hunting. I hate dirt bikes. Did you know I'm the only one in my family who even has a library card? Sam? Sam? (*Nothing from inside the trunk.*) Sam? (*She runs behind the screen. (Panicked.)*) Sam! Get out! Bang if you're okay! I can't get the lock open! I've gotta get help! Keep breathing!

(*DARCY runs toward the door, as SAM strolls out from behind the screen.*)

SAM (*calling to her, with a huge grin*). Miss me?

HOUDINI. Highly doubtful.

(*DARCY runs and punches him.*)

DARCY. You idiot! You really scared me.

(*As they tease and argue—*)

DOUG DEETON (*offstage, furious*). What the—I don't believe it! Who the hell...

(*DOUG DEETON enters angrily, with a bright pink leaflet and a portable phone. A back injury has him in constant pain.*)

DOUG DEETON (*punching numbers into the phone*). Didn't you hear anyone?

DARCY (*nervous*). Wh-where?

DOUG DEETON. At the front—(*The phone is answered*). Massey? Deeton. I just got home and found that piece of filth leaflet under my own front...right, the same one that showed up on your block. I looked down the street and saw these bright pink things sticking out of everyone's door! Thought they could sneak around and do it on Sunday morning while everyone was at church...No, I didn't see them, but...Fine. I'll fill out a report when I get there, I've gotten real damn good at sitting on my butt filling out reports. (*Hangs up.*)

DARCY. D-dad? W-what happened?

DOUG DEETON (*ignoring her question*). Did you do your chores yet?

DARCY. N-no, sir.

DOUG DEETON (*to SAM*). Dee Dee has chores to do, Sam. Time to go home.

SAM. My father made soy burgers for lunch. I choose chores.

DOUG DEETON (*to DARCY*). Chores. Now.

(*DOUG exits, the flyer is left on the table. SAM crosses, reads the flyer.*)

DARCY. What does it say?

SAM (*to divert her attention*). I'm still hungry. Possibly it's a tapeworm. Noun. Ribbon-like parasite that lives in the—

(*DARCY crosses, reads flyer.*)

DARCY (*reading*). "Attention Homeowners! Do you know that Appleton's maniac police officer Doug Deeton is your neighbor?"

HOUDINI. She knew what they were saying about her father. But she didn't want to think about it. So she thought about chores instead. Every Sunday, she had home chores, and one looming away-from-home chore, at an ugly brick building that smelled like death. Appleton Acres Nursing Home.

(A room in the nursing home. In bed, still, is an old woman, Meemaw. We can't see her face.)

HOUDINI. Room 104. Home for the last two years of Mrs. Deanna Deeton, grandmother. Formerly a teacher of English, currently ... *(A beat.)* Meemaw, they call her.

(DARCY and SAM enter reluctantly and sit as far from Meemaw as possible. SAM pulls out a deck of cards.)

SAM. I've mastered a new trick even Houdini couldn't do. Nothing up my sleeves. Pick a card, any card.

(SAM fans the cards. HOUDINI flicks his finger against them and they fly all over the bed. Meemaw doesn't react.)

DARCY. Sam! *(She and SAM cross to the bed, stare down at Meemaw.)* It costs my parents like a hundred dollars a day to keep her here.

SAM. For that kind of money, they should provide entertainment. *(Beat.)* You think she's still in there, Deed?

DARCY. Nope. If she was in there, she'd still blink when you asked her a question—once for yes, twice for no. She hasn't blinked in a year now. *(They gingerly pick up cards, then cross and sit again. DARCY checks watch.)* Eight minutes down, fifty-two to go.