

Excerpt terms and conditions

This excerpt is available to assist you in the play selection process.

You may view, print and download any of our excerpts for perusal purposes.

Excerpts are not intended for performance, classroom or other academic use. In any of these cases you will need to purchase playbooks via our website or by phone, fax or mail.

A short excerpt is not always indicative of the entire work, and we strongly suggest reading the whole play before planning a production or ordering a cast quantity.

Dramatic Publishing



A one-act play

Paul's Case

by
MARC BUCCI

Adapted from the
story by Willa Cather



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

*** NOTICE ***

The amateur and stock acting rights to this work are controlled exclusively by THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY without whose permission in writing no performance of it may be given. Royalty must be paid every time a play is performed whether or not it is presented for profit and whether or not admission is charged. A play is performed any time it is acted before an audience. Current royalty rates, applications and restrictions may be found at our Web site: www.dramaticpublishing.com, or we may be contacted by mail at: DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, 311 Washington St., Woodstock IL 60098.

COPYRIGHT LAW GIVES THE AUTHOR OR THE AUTHOR'S AGENT THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT TO MAKE COPIES. This law provides authors with a fair return for their creative efforts. Authors earn their living from the royalties they receive from book sales and from the performance of their work. Conscientious observance of copyright law, is not only ethical, it encourages authors to continue their creative work. This work is fully protected by copyright. No alterations, deletions or substitutions may be made in the work without the prior written consent of the publisher. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, videotape, film, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. It may not be performed either by professionals or amateurs without payment of royalty. All rights, including, but not limited to, the professional, motion picture, radio, television, videotape, foreign language, tabloid, recitation, lecturing, publication and reading, are reserved. *In all programs this notice must appear:*

“Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois”

For performance of any songs, music and recordings mentioned in this play which are in copyright, the permission of the copyright owners must be obtained or other songs and recordings in the public domain substituted.

©MCMLXXXI by
MARC BUCCI

Printed in the United States of America
All Rights Reserved

(PAUL'S CASE)

for Kelly and Warren

PAUL'S CASE
A One-Act Play

C H A R A C T E R S

Paul Benton. a high school student
Five Women (or six) . . .for smaller cast, three women
Three Men (or two). for smaller cast, two men

With the exception of Paul's role, all the other actors will play a variety of roles.

Note: PAUL'S CASE can be performed with THE COP AND THE ANTHEM as a full-length production under the comprehensive title TURN OF THE CENTURY.

PRODUCTION NOTES

PAUL'S CASE has no set to speak of, save a few neutrally-colored shapes that can suggest furniture, part of a locale, etc. If necessary these can be easily moved by the players. Or there could simply be a few chairs, a folding table or two and a stepladder where indicated in the script.

Each performer should wear a rather basic costume appropriate for the period — the winter at the turn of the century in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania — to which can be added (or subtracted) something which would indicate the new character he or she is playing. The simpler the better.

The character of Paul is a difficult one to play. His underlying insecurity and vulnerability must always be visible to the audience.

PAUL'S CASE

SCENE: High School Corridor. Entering R and crossing to RC are an ENGLISH TEACHER, MATH TEACHER and GEOGRAPHY TEACHER (women) and a DRAWING MASTER (man).

ENGLISH TEACHER. I should really be home correcting those English exams for tomorrow.

MATH TEACHER. Some people just naturally foster inconvenience . . .

ENGLISH TEACHER. Then mother and I have tickets for the Wiederschaum recital this evening.

MATH TEACHER. And Paul breeds inconvenience like a contagion.

DRAWING MASTER. What I really dislike is that look of insolence.

GEOGRAPHY TEACHER. In my class he tends to look haunted, as if something were wrong.

MATH TEACHER. My dog gets that look whenever he dirties the rug.

ENGLISH TEACHER. I know what you mean.

DRAWING MASTER. I hope *this* time the Principal expels him. Come, ladies.

(The TEACHERS "enter" the Principal's office just left of C. Simultaneously PAUL and the PRINCIPAL (woman or man) enter into that area. PAUL is rather formally dressed with a red rose in his lapel.)

SCENE: Principal's Office.

PRINCIPAL. Paul Benton, your suspension from Pittsburgh High School should — by all rights — be permanent.

MATH TEACHER. You're taking him back again.

PRINCIPAL. His father begged me to give Paul the chance to meet with you in my office, to hear your charges against him and apologize.

DRAWING MASTER. Why on earth bother?

PRINCIPAL. Paul can best answer that.

PAUL. Because . . . (Hesitates, hiding behind his set smile.)
. . . I would like to come back to school.

DRAWING MASTER. Lies, like fuel in a locomotive, keep some people going.

PRINCIPAL (to PAUL). Your behavior has been reported to me time and again from each one here.

GEOGRAPHY TEACHER. He's always looking out the window whenever I lecture, not uncommon among the young, I suppose. But he insists on delivering a running commentary as I speak with the humorous intent of disrupting the class. How will he ever learn geography?

MATH TEACHER. In my class he habitually sits with his hands covering his eyes. Since I'm sure he sleeps through my classes, it's a wonder he can add.

DRAWING MASTER. I suppose I could live with his utter lack of drawing ability. But what is totally unacceptable is that subtly defiant attitude — never aboveboard, but

always glimmering there, barely concealing his contempt for us.

ENGLISH TEACHER. That's right. Why, once when he'd been working at the blackboard, he was making a mistake delineating some of the syntax. So I stepped to his side and attempted to guide his hand. He suddenly pulled away shouting, "Don't touch me." (She is still hurt by the memory.) In all my years in the teaching profession, I've never been so . . . insulted. (The other TEACHERS are sympathetic.)

PRINCIPAL (to PAUL). Do you think that is a courteous way to behave to a woman?

PAUL (slightly shrugging his shoulders). I didn't mean to be impolite. I guess it's sort of a way I have.

PRINCIPAL. Well, don't you think you should get rid of "that way you have"?

PAUL (a half-grin). I guess so.

ENGLISH TEACHER. He guesses so? I don't know about the others, but that simply won't do for me. If I'm to have that . . . person . . . in my class again, I demand an apology.

DRAWING MASTER. You're absolutely right.

GEOGRAPHY TEACHER. I agree.

MATH TEACHER. At the very least, an apology.

PRINCIPAL (to PAUL). And it would be nice if you meant it.

PAUL (a steely smile, an exaggerated bow first to ENGLISH TEACHER). I offer my apology for what may have seemed improper behavior. If you won't accept my apology immediately, take this flower so I may anticipate the beginning of forgiveness. (ENGLISH TEACHER takes the rose from him, doesn't know what to do with it, eventually

gives it to the PRINCIPAL.) To you all, my humble apologies. (After standing straight he looks them over.) May I go now?

PRINCIPAL (awkwardly). Understand that you are on probation and that you are allowed to resume your studies on the condition that you permanently improve your behavior. (PAUL barely nods as he pleasantly awaits an answer to his question.) Yes, you may go. (PAUL crosses R and exits.)

ENGLISH TEACHER (to PRINCIPAL). You're far too charitable. I'm running late. (Exits.)

MATH TEACHER. I give it one week and we'll be back to his covert mockery. (Exits.)

DRAWING MASTER. Or worse.

GEOGRAPHY TEACHER. One could almost feel sorry for him were it not for the fact that he's really annoying.

DRAWING MASTER (exiting with GEOGRAPHY TEACHER). And he can't draw to save his soul.

(The person who played the PRINCIPAL moves away from the "office" to DC and now neutrally narrates.)

NARRATOR. Paul's teachers left the building in various degrees of dissatisfaction. They had intended to be far more vindictive than he ultimately allowed them to be. And, as for Paul, he ran whistling the *Soldiers' Chorus* from Faust — not really caring if his teachers might witness his light-heartedness.

SCENE: Street. ELLY, Paul's sister, enters L carrying groceries. She is a rather plain girl. PAUL enters R.)

ELLY. Paul, you're supposed to be home cutting the firewood. How am I going to cook dinner?

PAUL. I have to replace a flower some sharks devoured earlier today.

ELLY. Sharks?

PAUL. The meeting at the Principal's office. I am, of course, reinstated.

ELLY. You're . . . not lying, are you, Paul? You can tell me.

PAUL. In a way, would that it were a lie. No, sister dear. I and our family name have been snatched from the jaws of social dishonor. Truly.

ELLY. Please apply yourself, Paul.

PAUL. I really do the best I can. Now excuse me, I have to be at the recital hall tonight.

ELLY. If you wouldn't waste your time lollygagging.

PAUL. Specifically, I'll be ushering tonight — in a sense, training myself.

ELLY. Ushering does not require training.

PAUL. Artists are always training themselves; singers, actors, painters. What a marvelous world it would be if their audiences trained themselves in the art of appreciation.

ELLY. Paul, right now my main concern is getting dinner for you and father. Run your errand and hurry back. If I don't have that firewood, there'll be no dinner.

PAUL. All right, all right. I'll chop enough for a whole week. (Exiting L.) Good-bye.

ELLY (to herself). The art of appreciation indeed. He can "appreciate" some jackass making a fool out of himself on a stage, but he ignores the best home-cooked meals on Cordelia Street. (She exits R.)

SCENE: Recital Hall. PAUL and a few somewhat-dressed-up people position themselves LC. PAUL gives them a program or mimes giving them programs and ushers them off R, as if to their seats. He returns, stands LC as if it were the rear of the recital hall. There is a brief flurry of off-stage applause at the unseen soprano soloist entrance. PAUL listens attentively at her rendition of "The Last Rose of Summer" [an Irish folksong also used in Act Four of Von Flotow's opera *Martha*.] Shortly after the singing begins the ENGLISH TEACHER and her MOTHER [old and stooped] enter L.

ENGLISH TEACHER. Well, mother, I hope you're satisfied. The recital's already started. (Not knowing it's PAUL, she taps his back and extends the tickets to him. He turns.) Oh.

PAUL. You're late. (Takes tickets.)

ENGLISH TEACHER. How ironic that *you* should tell me since you were the reason for my tardiness. You and that farce this afternoon.

PAUL. Farce? More like a minstrel show.

ENGLISH TEACHER (reaching for tickets). Don't be crude. Give me those —

PAUL. I can't seat you during the first selection. (He turns away. The MOTHER, becoming aware, looks at PAUL, then her daughter.)

MOTHER. Who is he, Clara?

ENGLISH TEACHER. Shut up, mother. (To PAUL.) Listen to me, you rude little boor, there are rules, customs and manners in life. You either observe them or succumb to your ultimate ineptitude.

MOTHER (staring at PAUL). What a nice young man. (The

vocal selection is over. There is light applause. The ENGLISH TEACHER snatches tickets from PAUL, yanks MOTHER.)

ENGLISH TEACHER. Come on, mother.

PAUL (following them off R, offering program). I can seat you now. Don't forget your program. Careful. (They are off R. Applause dies out. Lights darken.)

SCENE: The Cellar of Paul's Home. ELLY sneaks on L.)

ELLY. Paul . . . Paul?

(PAUL enters R.)

ELLY. What are you doing in the cellar?

PAUL. I didn't want father to know how late I came home.

MAN'S VOICE (off). Is that you, Elly?

ELLY. Yes, father. I forgot to bank the fire.

MAN'S VOICE (off). All right, now go to bed.

ELLY. Yes, father. (To PAUL.) Someday he's going to come down here with a gun and not know it's you and kill you.

PAUL. Maybe he'll kill me because he knows it's me.

ELLY. That's not funny, Paul.

PAUL. Nothing in this house even merits a smile. Nothing in this so-called "iron city" with its dark days. Do you know they had to turn on the streetlights again this afternoon because the air was so filled with smoke and soot?

ELLY (nodding). I hung the laundry indoors again today. That's the way things are.

PAUL. Sometimes I think I'm going to choke. Except when I

go to the recitals and the stock company. Music and theatre are like light and air to me.

ELLY. I never could cotton much to that stuff. It costs too much and it's all a fake.

PAUL. A little artificiality is necessary to beauty. That's what Madame Wiederschaum was telling me after the concert. Although there's nothing contrived about her singing.

ELLY. Madame who?

PAUL. The singer at tonight's recital. I took her out to dinner afterwards and she told me how important people like me are . . .

ELLY (overlapping). Paul, please don't lie; there's not a word of truth to . . .

PAUL (overlapping). And that without appreciation there is no art.

ELLY. And without work there is no money! That's what you should be "appreciating."

PAUL (a tight burst of anger). I was born in the wrong city! If we lived in New York it would all be obvious to you.

ELLY. Paul, if I'm lucky I won't marry a lout. But better an honest lout than a dreamer who can't tell the truth. (Catches herself.) Oh, what am I getting upset about. You're young, you'll work out of it, with the help of God. It's late. I'm going to bed. (Pats his cheek, exits L.)

PAUL (pulling out a small package as he starts exiting L). Wait, Elly. I bought you a present. Violet water to kill the cooking odors on your clothing . . . Elly? (He is off L.)

SCENE: Street. Lights up. MRS. LARKIN and MRS. THORPE, two housewives, enter DL carrying groceries. They cross R throughout the following.)

MRS. LARKIN. Well, I must say I *am* proud, though God knows I've always tried to avoid the sin of pride.

MRS. THORPE. When you stop to think that just five short years ago your boy Albert was what you might call a trifle dissipated and now he's the envy of Cordelia Street.

MRS. LARKIN. A mother lives for times like this.

MRS. THORPE. By the way, what *does* a clerk earn at Mr. Carnegie's steel corporation?

MRS. LARKIN. Enough to support a wife and four children, thank you. Don't be nosy.

MRS. THORPE. Just interested. Oh. Here comes poor Mr. Benton.

(Paul's father, MR. BENTON, enters R crossing L.)

MRS. LARKIN. Do try not to mention that son of his.

MR. BENTON. Ah, good day, Mrs. Larkin, Mrs. Thorpe.
(The WOMEN return the salutation.) Lovely day, isn't it?

MRS. LARKIN. For a change we can see the sun.

MRS. THORPE. Which reminds me -- how's your son Paul doing?

MR. BENTON. He's resuming his studies and doing nicely, thank you. But my fondest wish is that he do as well as your Albert when he grows up.

MRS. LARKIN. How nice. (The WOMEN start to exit R.)
Well, I hope some day your ship will come in.

MRS. THORPE (barely aside, to MRS. LARKIN). It already sank at sea.

MR. BENTON. Beg pardon?

MRS. THORPE. I said, it was nice to *see* you. (The WOMEN exit R.)

MR. BENTON (to himself). Her son's working for a steel magnate and mine can barely get through high school.

(PAUL enters R.)

MR. BENTON. Where are you going?

PAUL. To Ben's house. (Flashes book.) He's going to help me with my algebra.

MR. BENTON (starting to exit L). Well, I hope there's an improvement in your grades. You've got to graduate and get a job. Then maybe some day you'll be like Mrs. Larkin's boy Albert. Five years ago he took his employer's advice and married a good woman. And now all of Cordelia Street looks upon him as a young man with a future.

PAUL. Yes, father. (MR. BENTON exits L. PAUL speaks to the turbulent wake his father has left behind.) Albert Larkin married an angular school-marm much older than he, who, like Albert, wears thick glasses and who has now borne him four children, all near-sighted like both parents. When the family's all together they look like a rack of empty milk bottles! (He exits R.)

SCENE: Theatre. Two women, ACTRESSES, enter UR and pass C to DL.

ACTRESS ONE. All us girls in the theatre want to know how you got rid of that old curmudgeon. The one who's been pestering us at the stage door.

ACTRESS TWO. Easy. I told him he reminded me of that Lincoln story.

ACTRESS ONE. What Lincoln story?

ACTRESS TWO. Supposed to have happened at the First

Republican State Convention. Some society woman made no bones about telling Lincoln she thought he was ugly. So Lincoln said he's not responsible for his looks and the woman replied, "Well, you could have at least stayed home!" (They laugh.)

ACTRESS ONE. And I guess he took the hint.

ACTRESS TWO. I told the old geezer it was either that or I'd contact his wife. (They laugh.)

ACTRESS ONE. Smart! (They exit DL. [A slight change in the lighting may be desired here.]

(A man portraying an ACTOR walks on to C.)

ACTOR (extremely mannered, almost over-acting). "To be or not to be. That is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing them end them? To die . . . to sleep . . ." To heck with it. I can't do the part. I never wanted to. And I think it's very inconsiderate of Chesney to have forsaken a fellow actor in such a manner.

(The lighting becomes more realistic. PAUL enters and ministers costume needs to the ACTOR, who pantomimically checks his make-up in a mimed mirror.)

PAUL. But they say he's very ill.

ACTOR. Very drunk, you mean. He should be drummed out of the company. He said I only had to understudy Hamlet, not *play* it! I feel terribly betrayed.

MALE VOICE (off). Places everyone.

ACTOR. Everything should be in its proper place.