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The Jack Plays

The House That Jack Built

Appoggiatura

Miranda

Three plays by
JAMES STILL

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT

The House That Jack Built was originally produced by the Indiana Repertory Theatre, Indianapolis, Janet Allen, Artistic Director; Steven Stolen, Managing Director.

The House That Jack Built was developed in part at a retreat at the Weston Playhouse Theatre Company, Weston, Vt.

The House That Jack Built was further developed as part of The New Harmony Project conference.

The House That Jack Built was the winner of the Todd McNerney Playwriting Prize and given readings at the Piccolo Spoleto Festival.

APPOGGIATURA

Appoggiatura was commissioned, premiered and originally developed by the Denver Center Theatre Company, a division of The Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Kent Thompson, Artistic Director.

Appoggiatura was developed as part of the LAUNCH PAD Preview Production Program at University of California, Santa Barbara - Department of Theater and Dance, Risa Brainin, Director.

Appoggiatura was developed at Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School & Camp, Steamboat Springs, Colo.

MIRANDA

Miranda was commissioned and first produced by Illusion Theater, Minneapolis, Michael H. Robins and Bonnie Morris, Producing Directors.

Miranda was developed by Illusion Theater as part of Fresh Ink.

Miranda was further developed as part of the New Harmony Project conference.

Foreword

I have had the great good fortune to closely observe nearly 25 years of James Still's playwriting career. The breadth and depth of that career continue to leave me breathless. In our 2017-18 season, we honored James' 20th year as playwright-in-residence at the Indiana Repertory Theatre (IRT), celebrating the vast diversity of his work as well as the close relationships he has developed with our artists and audience. It is the rare playwright who can excel in so many forms, and for so vast an audience. From three-year-olds to 103-year-olds, James' work continues to charm audiences not only in Indianapolis but also across the country.

The IRT produced the world premiere of *The House That Jack Built* in 2012 and was the first theatre to produce all three plays in the trilogy (albeit not in order). We created those all-important second productions of *Miranda* in 2017 and *Appoggiatura* in 2018. Our audiences have enjoyed the conversation about how the plays are both separate and interlinked, giving them wonderful insight into the mind of a playwright in intersection with story and character.

Perhaps most important to the casual reader or producer, these plays stand alone beautifully, with no diminution in their impact by seeing or reading them alone or in any order. For those who see more than one, however, the accumulation of detail is delightful, with the introduction of new characters in each and the appearance of oft-discussed offstage characters appearing in the second and third plays. The plays pass the proverbial baton of family and generation from one to the next, focusing in one play on the middle generation of adults (Jules and Lulu), in another on the split generations of grandparent and grandchild (Helen and Sylvie), and in a third on Miranda, who has pulled herself out of the familial

centrifugal force for reasons only she can reckon with. In each play, James creates a unique social surround for these family members, illuminating their resiliency, their curiosity, their yearning for connection and their zest for life.

James has told me that he actually began writing the trilogy in what turned out to be the middle—with characters taking a trip to Venice as they do in *Appoggiatura*. He soon realized that he didn't know enough about the characters—which is how he began on *The House That Jack Built*, its chronological predecessor. *Miranda* came later, as an exploration of a character about whom much is said but little is known. *Miranda* also reveals a key piece about the polestar character of the trilogy, Jack, who remains an elusive offstage mystery, haunting all three plays. Thus, we watch a playwright's mind at work in deep discovery of character and story. I hope he writes one more play about this family before he finishes with them—I would love to see what fireworks ensue when Helen, Lulu, Miranda, Jules and Sylvie all end up in one temporal plane!

The plays all share an exploration of this extended and unusual family and their journeys to reconnect or escape one another, the magnetic polar opposites of intention. Three generations are united and separated by loss—loss created by divorce, death, dementia and the dislocation of self both geographically and psychically. Each play expands the reach of the family and extends location as a character. In *The House That Jack Built*, several are at home in Vermont on Thanksgiving; in *Appoggiatura*, a different group decamps to Venice for a holiday; and in *Miranda*, we experience the toll taken by Miranda's work in the war-torn Middle East—far from her family. This vast reach of place, particularly in our 21st-century global landscape, speaks to a deep yearning for home: Where is it? Is it a chimera? Is

it possible to find it by searching? Can one be lost and find one's way home? The characters all yearn for a sense of belonging while being deeply distrustful that such a sense is even possible in today's fractured world.

The plays are also united by a theatrical commitment to explore (and explode!) time. It's as if the past is always present, just outside our field of vision, waiting for us to hold still and experience it. In each play, the past overlaps and competes with the present—you might storm out of the house into your own childhood in Vermont, or turn a corner in Venice and find yourself 50 years ago, or re-experience an explosion from years ago as you quietly sit in your apartment today. These sequences don't work like typical flashbacks, but more like seamless and instantaneous jump cuts from one temporal plane to another. The past sometimes soothes and sometimes intercedes like a case of PTSD, but always it is vivid and simultaneous with the present, as can only happen in the theatre. And always it creates profound wonder in the characters who slip back and forth through the time barrier.

Ultimately, the plays exist in very different styles, making the trilogy a delightful collective act. Where *The House That Jack Built* is Albee-esque in its fractured revelation of family dynamic, *Appoggiatura* is Chekhovian in its wistful humor and longing, while *Miranda* is almost a John le Carré action thriller. This experimentation with form awards the reader or audience member with insight into the jazz riffing of a master playwright as he rotates the lens on a set of characters, gaining dimension, depth and diversity as the trilogy progresses.

The hallmark of James' work, both in this trilogy and in all his work, is a deep sense of humanity. While there are social issues in all the plays, the characters' open hearts and their yearning to connect are what drive this writer. In our

technology-driven era, where media so often overwhelms us, James reminds us that human beings must connect and be heard, understood and loved, with all their many differences and flaws, in order for all of us, artists and audiences alike, to deeply experience our humanity.

—Janet Allen
Executive Artistic Director
Indiana Repertory Theatre

The House That Jack Built

The House That Jack Built premiered at Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis on Nov. 2, 2012.

CAST (in order of appearance):

Jules.....Jenny McKnight
Lulu.....Deirdre Lovejoy
Ridge.....Joseph Foronda
Eli.....Christopher Allen
Helen.....Patricia Hodges

PRODUCTION STAFF:

Artistic DirectorJanet Allen
Managing Director Steven Stolen
DirectorJanet Allen
Scenic Designer Russell Metheny
Costume Designer.....Guy Clark
Lighting DesignerMichael Lincoln
Composer and Sound Designer..... Fabian Obispo
DramaturgRichard J Roberts
Casting, Chicago Casting..... Claire Simon
Casting, New York Casting.....Stephanie Klapper
Stage Managers..... Amy K. Denkmann, Nathan Garrison

The House That Jack Built was developed in part at a retreat at the Weston Playhouse Theatre Company (Weston, Vt.) in 2011. The play was further developed as part of the 2012 New Harmony Project conference, and it was the winner of the 2012 McNerney Playwriting Award and given readings at the 2012 Piccolo Spoleto Festival.

The House That Jack Built

CHARACTERS

JULES: in her mid-40s.

LULU: in her mid-40s.

RIDGE: in his 50s.

ELI: in his early 30s.

HELEN: in her 70s.

PLACE

A funky house in Vermont.

TIME

Thanksgiving (mostly in the present).

NOTE: There is no intermission.

“The social ramble ain’t restful.”
—Satchel Paige

“Any idiot can face a crisis; it is this day-to-day
living that wears you out.”
—A. Chekhov

“We have all eternity to please the dead,
but only a little while to love the living.”
—Sophocles

The House That Jack Built

(We're in a house but not just any house, not a boxy, cookie-cutter house, not a house you've seen in a million other plays ... more rambling, a run-on sentence if architecture were grammar.

Look closer, and it's beautiful in its rawness, comfortable in its shadows, almost perfect in its incompleteness. Exquisite furniture and pieces of art are all mixed in with found objects now reconsidered and slyly celebrated.

Evidence of a child having spent time here, growing up here. Books and more books everywhere. A framed copy of the Declaration of Independence shares the space with posters of Colette, Farrah Fawcett, the movie Charade starring Audrey Hepburn and Cary Grant, and various political races through the years. A map of Tuscany. A much-used dartboard featuring Sarah Palin's face ... ah, nostalgia. A faded, old Soviet Union flag. It's all part of a comfortable, lived-in, mash-up jumble of a life.

JULES lives here, it's home. Her English accent is both who she is and who she used to be. She makes hosting seem easy and looks good while doing it. Some people have all the luck.

ELI is the new boyfriend. Younger. Barefoot. The odd man out.

LULU is JULES' sister-in-law and oldest friend. An American now living in Canada with her husband, RIDGE. He's Asian-Canadian and a good ten years older than the women.

A cold sunny afternoon in November.

Thanksgiving.

Vermont.

JULES is mixing drinks; LULU is stirring a pot on the stove. [There it is, right from the beginning, those two things are all you need to know.]

LULU. ... Sean Connery or Daniel Craig.

(JULES hands RIDGE a drink.)

JULES *(to RIDGE)*. Cheers.

LULU *(to JULES)*. Pick one.

JULES *(to LULU)*. Keep stirring.

RIDGE *(about the drink, noncommittal)*. Hm.

LULU. Sean Connery or Daniel Craig.

JULES *(to RIDGE)*. Wait, did you just say “hm” or “mm”?

(RIDGE takes another drink.)

JULES *(cont'd, to ELI)*. You heard him, right?

LULU *(pressing)*. Sean Connery or Daniel Craig?

RIDGE *(about the drink)*. Mmm.

JULES. That was definitely a “mmm.”

ELI. What is he drinking?

JULES *(to RIDGE)*. Please tell me I've finally redeemed myself.

RIDGE. Redemption, dear Jules, would require further tasting. Testing. Taste-testing. Test-tasting—testing one-two-three—

LULU. Ridge! Just drink it!

(RIDGE drinks.)

JULES *(to ELI)*. My attempts at bartending are famously awful.

RIDGE. That's true.

LULU *(to ELI, faux British accent)*. Thank God there's at least one thing she's not good at.

RIDGE. Mixing a proper drink—

JULES & LULU (*together*). —it's an art.

RIDGE. Exactly.

JULES (*to RIDGE*). So?

(RIDGE starts to speak, then playfully and greedily takes another drink.)

LULU. Jack was always the bartender in the family.

RIDGE. Jules ... ?

JULES. Yes ... ?

(RIDGE looks at the drink, pauses dramatically.)

JULES (*cont'd, laughing*). What???

(RIDGE finishes off the drink.)

LULU. It's cruel to tease a recovering perfectionist.

RIDGE (*simple, surprised*). It's good.

JULES. Truly?

(RIDGE holds out his glass.)

RIDGE. Fill 'er up.

JULES. How many years have I waited to hear you say that?

RIDGE (*shrugs*). You know me, I'm just a people pleaser.

(JULES and LULU laugh/groan.)

ELI (*about the drink*). What is it?

RIDGE. A Calgary Red-Eye.

ELI. Never heard of it.

RIDGE. The national drink of Canada.

JULES. Is that true?

RIDGE & LULU (*together*). No.

(JULES playfully punches RIDGE.)

LULU (*translating*). Beer and tomato juice.

ELI. No way.

RIDGE (*to ELI*). Have a sip.

ELI. Beer and tomato juice.

JULES. And clam broth.

RIDGE. The secret ingredient.

JULES. Mustn't forget the clam broth.

(JULES hands ELI a drink.)

ELI. Beer and tomato juice and clam broth.

LULU. It tastes better than it sounds. Really.

ELI. Then why aren't you having one?

LULU. Oh I don't drink.

(JULES clocks this.

ELI takes a sip.)

RIDGE. So?

ELI. So now I can say I've tasted a Calgary Red-Eye.

(They laugh.

JULES very casually kisses ELI on the mouth. LULU and RIDGE exchange glances.)

LULU. One or the other, Jules: Sean Connery or Daniel Craig?

JULES. Mmmmm ... in tuxedo or swimsuit?

LULU. You're stalling.

JULES. You were telling us about the faculty party ...

LULU. Ooo, right!

RIDGE. It wasn't a "faculty party"— *(To LULU.)* You make it sound like something from the '60s.

LULU. They served absinthe.

JULES. At the faculty party?

RIDGE. It wasn't a faculty party—

ELI *(to LULU)*. I thought you don't drink.

LULU. It was absinthe, how could I say no?

RIDGE *(to JULES)*. It was cocktails at the dean's house—

LULU. Sounds dreary, right?

JULES. Not if they were serving absinthe.

LULU. But we didn't know they'd be serving absinthe—

JULES. You always make living in Canada sound so damned civilized.

RIDGE. They didn't really serve absinthe—

LULU. Are you telling the story or am I telling the story?

RIDGE. Which version?

LULU. The version that happened.

RIDGE. OK, doc, but I get to tell her why we went—

LULU. For cocktails at the dean's house ...

(LULU cedes the floor to RIDGE.)

RIDGE. As you know, I am not a political person—

JULES. Sweetie, that is not something to be proud of—

RIDGE. I'm stating a fact, not waving a flag.

JULES. It's still a cop-out.

LULU. And a big fat lie.

(JULES opens bottles of wine.)

JULES. And anyway, saying

you're "not political"—

that's pretty aggressive,

don't you think?

LULU. He's just trying to

pick a fight—

RIDGE. Aggressive? How is it aggressive?

JULES. I'm not saying it isn't subtle—

RIDGE. Which is it, Jules? Aggressive or subtle?

LULU (*to the rescue*). It's subtly aggressive.

JULES. Exactly! Which means it's entirely too calculated NOT to be a cop-out—

RIDGE. Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa, all I said is that I am not a political person—

JULES. —which is, let's face it, a subtle act of political terrorism.

RIDGE. Hey, I'm Chinese!

JULES. So?

LULU. See? He always uses that—

RIDGE. AND Canadian—

LULU. Cop-out.

RIDGE (*to ELI*). It's true! I'm Chinese and Canadian—

ELI. Which makes you ... ?

RIDGE. Swiss. Totally neutral.

(*JULES and LULU laugh/groan.*)

RIDGE (*cont'd*). I am!

LULU. Oh come on, Ridge! JULES. You? Neutral?

RIDGE. OK, OK, if the prosecution would kindly just hear me out. It's true that I have been known, on occasion, to have slightly strong opinions about this or that—

JULES (*to ELI*). Ridge's politics are just to the right of Attila the Hun.

RIDGE. That radical lefty bastard? Way too liberal for me.

JULES. Do you even know the definition of liberal?

RIDGE (*relishing*). Oh this is going to be fun!

JULES. Seriously! The word "liberal"? It means "open-minded."

LULU. So when did being open-minded become the same thing as being the anti-Christ?

JULES. He was a liberal.

LULU. Who?

JULES. Jesus Christ.

ELI. But wouldn't that make Jesus Christ the anti-Christ?

(They stop and look at ELI.)

LULU. What?

JULES. Eli is right. Jesus could never get elected president. Too liberal.

ELI. Now wait a minute. Are we talking about religion or politics?

LULU & JULES *(together)*. Yes.

RIDGE. No, no, let's not get on religion yet, we have the whole weekend to kill each other.

LULU. Fine. But only if we don't talk politics either.

RIDGE. Fine.

JULES. Fine.

(ELI realizes they're all looking at him.)

ELI. Yeah, OK.

(Beat.)

RIDGE. No religion, no politics.

(Beat.)

They have nothing to talk about.)

JULES. I'm bored. Lick me.

(ELI perks up, the only one who seems to have heard what JULES said, but things keep moving.)

LULU *(to RIDGE)*. What was your point?

RIDGE. That being opinionated and being political are two entirely different things.

LULU. You're splitting hairs— JULES. Semantics!

RIDGE. Anyone can have an opinion! Just because you're loud doesn't make you political. That's an American fallacy.

JULES. So ... what? You've lost your edge?

RIDGE. No, no, no, I know exactly where it is.

JULES. Ridge goes soft. It's the end of an era.

RIDGE. Soft? I'm employed by a university! Every day is like trying to get the Middle East to hold hands and sing "We Are the World"—in Hebrew—during Ramadan.

LULU. What???

JULES *(laughing)*. Crikey.

RIDGE. Let's just say I know myself, which is code for "I'm a tired old fart."

JULES *(cheeky)*. You are not old.

RIDGE. Old enough to have finally risen above the petty politics of academia, which is why you are looking at the new head of the department.

JULES. What?

RIDGE. They finally realized it was either put me out to pasture or put me in charge.

JULES. My God! When did this happen?

RIDGE. A couple of months ago—

LULU. He wanted to surprise you.

RIDGE. Surprise.

JULES. That's amazing. *(To ELI)*. Isn't that amazing?

ELI. Uh-huh.

(JULES kisses RIDGE.)

JULES. A couple of months—? *(To LULU.)* I can't believe you didn't tell me.

RIDGE. I can't believe you didn't tell her either.

LULU. You seem hurt.

RIDGE. No.

LULU. I wanted to tell her, but you said you wanted to surprise her—

JULES. Eli?

(ELI helps JULES with a bottle of champagne.)

RIDGE. No, I know, but it seems like if you thought it was really great news—

LULU. Of course I thought it was really great news—

RIDGE. I mean news you were really excited about—that you wouldn't have been able to keep it a secret, especially from Jules.

LULU. So what—you were testing me?

RIDGE. No—

LULU. And I didn't pass the test.

JULES. I knew something was going on—

RIDGE. No you didn't—

JULES. I did! You seem—anew.

RIDGE *(mocking/teasing)*. “Anew”? I seem anew?

JULES. Like a man who knows he's accomplished something. I thought maybe you'd finally read Proust.

RIDGE *(to ELI)*. She gave me that book for my birthday.

JULES. Did I?

RIDGE. Twice.

JULES. Anyway: being the head of the math department becomes you.

(They all clink glasses of champagne and sip.)

JULES *(cont'd, to LULU)*. I thought you weren't drinking.

LULU. Champagne doesn't count.

RIDGE *(to ELI)*. Have you read Proust? It's OK to lie.

ELI. I read *Proust for Dummies*.

JULES. Oh God!

ELI. I read it twice.

RIDGE. Did Jules give you a reading list? She's a real snob, you know. Best-selling author that she is.

JULES. It was a cookbook—

RIDGE. Which sold a billion copies—

JULES. A zillion years ago, and I am not a snob.

ELI. You wrote a book?

JULES. I wrote a cookbook—

LULU. And it was a *New York Times* bestseller.

RIDGE. You didn't tell him about your book?

LULU. *Fast Cooking for Fast Living*.

RIDGE. Hollywood bought the movie rights.

ELI. To a cookbook?

RIDGE. Jules was famous.

JULES. I was not famous—

LULU. You were on the *Today* show.

JULES. It was *Good Morning America*, and it wasn't a book, it was a cookbook. It wasn't even a cookbook—it was a microwave cookbook.

RIDGE. And it made a lot of money—

JULES. And I've not written anything since. ANYWAY!
We're toasting the new head of the math department!

(Clink.)

RIDGE. Department of math and statistics.

(They clink glasses again.)

JULES, LULU & ELI. Department of math and statistics.

(All drink.

Beat.)

RIDGE. To be honest, I didn't want it.

JULES. What do you mean?

RIDGE. I was the only one who didn't lobby for the job.

JULES. So you've been rewarded for NOT being political.

RIDGE. What a world, huh? And all these years I thought I'd be rewarded for being brilliant.

(LULU raises a champagne glass.)

LULU. You ARE brilliant.

RIDGE. Thank you.

(LULU and RIDGE kiss. They all clink glasses again.)

LULU *(continuing her story)*. Which brings us back to why we go to the cocktail party at the dean's house.

RIDGE. I just grabbed her by the hair and said: *(Macho voice.)* "C'mon, woman. We're going for drinks at the dean's house." *(Explaining.)* She's the dean—it wasn't optional.

LULU. The *Queen* Dean—

LULU & RIDGE. As we like to call her—

(They suddenly stop, seeing JULES staring at them.)

LULU. Jules? Are you OK?