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Dramatic Publishing

EINSTEIN
A STAGE PORTRAIT

by

Willard Simms

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(EINSTEIN: A STAGE PORTRAIT)

EINSTEIN
A STAGE PORTRAIT

A Play in Two Acts
For One Actor

ALBERT EINSTEIN a scientist, in his late 60s

TIME:
1946

PLACE:
The study of his home near Princeton University

EINSTEIN was first performed as a professional equity production at the Westwood Playhouse, in Los Angeles, California, on April 23, 1985. It was directed by Willard Simms, and featured Larry Gelman as Albert Einstein.

The play was subsequently given a national tour by the New York Theatre Production Company of Alexander White and Virginia Jackson. As a result of the tour, some of Albert Einstein's relatives, friends, and colleagues had the opportunity to see the play, and their contributions to the development of this script are deeply appreciated.

The script has also been beautifully served by the tireless dedication, imagination, and intelligence of Larry Gelman, whose commitment to humanizing this great genius has always been 100%.

ACT ONE

SCENE: *The play begins with the stage area in darkness. A radio announcement of the latest weather forecast is heard from onstage, followed by music.*

ANNOUNCER. It's 8 o'clock, and this is WPRI, your classical music station in Princeton, New Jersey. Tonight's weather: Intermittent thunderstorms, possibly followed by an ongoing storm. And now back to our music presentation.

A match is lit and the lights come up slowly to reveal ALBERT EINSTEIN lighting his pipe at the blackboard, lost in thought, puzzling over an equation. He frowns, puts down the chalk, frustrated, and crosses to the small table near the easy chair, muttering in German. He fills his pipe with tobacco, and in the process notices the AUDIENCE, turns and speaks to them, somewhat sheepishly.

EINSTEIN. My friends, you are here already? I was so involved with my work; (*Smiles.*) that I did not hear you come in...

(He slips on his jacket and crosses to the AUDIENCE, speaking to them warmly, and slightly apologetic.)

Hello... How are you...? Good evening... You know, we could have met over at the Institute, but I thought we would be so much more comfortable here in my home. (*Crosses to another stage area.*) And I'm so glad you could all accept my invitation to join me here at home this evening. You see I wanted to speak with you personally tonight to set the record straight. So many peculiar articles are written about me. Sometimes I think the American press expects me to have only one occupation: Genius, and to practice it twenty-four hours a day. But you see they insist on writing about my behavior.

(He has become distracted by a Mozart piece playing on the radio.)

Please, you will excuse me – Mozart, they are playing Mozart, and I cannot resist playing along with the orchestra.

(He crosses over toward his violin, speaking to the AUDIENCE.)

Welche freude de musik bereiten kann. (*He translates.*)
What joy music can bring! Such beauty and harmony – how could mankind live without it?

(His bow is raised in preparation to play when a dog food commercial takes over for the music. He looks at the radio in amazement and frustration while he listens to the commercial. The sound of a dog barking is heard, followed by:)

ANNOUNCER. This classical music presentation has been brought to you by the makers of SCARF, the dog food that every dog, every age, just loves to eat. That's SCARF, in the bright purple can, spelled S-C-ARF!

EINSTEIN. I love music, but not on the radio! All these advertisements—even products for dogs and cats as if they listen to the radio also!! Buy this—buy that...! *(Pause, then smiles.)* But there is one program on the radio I always enjoy listening to. This man—Jack Benny, he always makes me laugh. Perhaps I can imitate him.

(He begins to play “Love in Bloom” on the violin, in a warm tribute to Jack Benny. He finishes, turns to the AUDIENCE, and smiles, with a pixyish twinkle.)

Beautiful, yah?

(He crosses back to the music area and lovingly puts the violin back in its case, then gestures to the letters strewn about.)

So much mail, I cannot keep up with it all...

(He glances at a letter and holds it up, in angry astonishment.)

So, here I am “Relativity Himself”! That is what is written on this letter. No name or address, it is just written to “Relativity Himself”, Princeton, New Jersey—and still they deliver it to me! Relativity Himself... To discover a scientific truth is not to become that truth! I wonder

if they called Isaac Newton "Gravity Himself"? Or Luis Pasteur "Rabies Himself"? I am always pleased when a man of science is honored, but the manner in which it is done is so peculiar. We scientists are a solitary breed and our best work is done in isolation. In the temple of science are many mansions and various are they who dwell within.

(He thinks for a moment, then goes to get a pad and pencil.)

(Boyish enthusiasm). I should write that down... I am often called upon to give lectures and I have such a difficult time thinking of intelligent things to say. All over the world they ask me to speak, and all over the world they later regret it. *(Writes.)* In the temple of science... Yah, I will use this sometime.

(He crosses back to his chair, putting down the pad and pencil, then notices an envelope and picks it up, sadly.)

But this letter, however, was addressed quite correctly.

(He opens the envelope and shows the letter to the AUDIENCE.)

It arrived several days ago, and has been troubling me ever since. It is from a little girl, nine years old... *(Reads it.)* She writes to ask me: How can I be such a terrible monster? Is it true I am the father of the atomic bomb? And do I really hate America? And her father enclosed this statement, which was read into the congressional Record of the United States Congress in

Washington, by Representative Rankin, from the little girl's home state of Mississippi, a place I have never even seen, and printed in newspapers all across the state! *(Reads.)* "Albert Einstein, this foreign-born agitator, would have us plunge into another European war in order to further the spread of communism throughout the world. It is about time the American people got wise to him."

(He puts down the letter, and smiles sadly to the AUDIENCE.)

I want to receive no more letters like this one. So, I am glad you could all join me here this evening, so that perhaps I can personally help you "get wise" to me. Tonight, my friends, I hope you will see no terrible monster, and no foreign-born agitator, but only a man, a much too famous man whose reputation has grown so out of proportion! And if at times I don't live up to your expectations — *(Warm smile.)* please remember, they are your expectations, not mine.

(He looks over the letters, picks up the one addressed to "Relativity Himself," and begins to laugh; then crosses to the chair C and sits.)

Relativity himself — I must laugh. Laughter is a wonderful gift, it keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously. If I couldn't joke, perhaps I should go a little crazy... You see when I was a small boy in Munich, I never dreamed of such a life as this! I am sometimes asked: "What signs of genius did you exhibit as a small child?" And the answer is — none. In fact, I had great

difficulty even learning how to talk. I began to use words only around the age of three—and it wasn't really until nine or ten that I could speak as well as other children of my own age. *(Thinks.)* But there is an incident I remember, from early childhood. I must have been five or six years old, and confined to bed due to some illness, chicken pox or measles...I don't remember. My father brought a small pocket compass into my bedroom for me to play with.

(He crosses back to music table, and opens a box filled with his mementoes. He takes out a compass and holds it up. He begins to play with it, fascinated, as if a child again.)

I still have it, I have kept it for all these years. Well, I had never seen one before, and I was astonished to find that no matter which way I turned the compass, the needle always pointed in the same direction! I spent hours and hours experimenting with this amazing new toy.

(He re-enacts his experimenting with the compass.)

Finally I came to realize that there was something I couldn't see, which no one, in fact, could see—that caused the needle always to point in the same direction. Invisible things caused things to happen!! I wanted to get well immediately, to find out more about these forces. I was fascinated by them!

(He returns to the table and puts the compass back in the box.)

When I got well, I took the compass to school with me. But none of my classmates shared my fascination with it. For the most part, I was a dreamy little boy, lost in my own world. My teachers considered me to be a slow learner. There was even a time, once, when my father had to come to the school to speak with my headmaster about me.

(He re-enacts a scene of his father leading an imaginary Albert to a corner of the classroom, and having him stand alone there. Albert then becomes a young boy, straining to overhear the conversation of his father and the headmaster.)

He led me to a corner of the classroom and had me stand there, while he and the headmaster spoke together up by the blackboard. For the most part they spoke quietly, but I did manage to overhear one part of their conversation. My father asked the headmaster “What profession do you think little Albert should adopt?” And the headmaster answered him. “Albert? Albert wir nie mals folk reich zein.” *(Translates.)* Albert will never make a success of anything.

(He smiles and shrugs his shoulders, then crosses back to the AUDIENCE.)

So many of the teachers were uninspired and unaccomplished; they cared only about discipline and order.

(He becomes a stern teacher, barking orders to a student.)

“Learn to obey the rules and to memorize, but do not learn to think for yourself!” (*As himself again.*) But this was not true of my Uncle Jacob, my father’s younger brother, who was also a teacher. I remember the first time he described algebra to me. (*Crosses to DL corner. Jacob voice:*) “Albert? Albert, where are you?”

(He becomes a jovial but caring mathematics teacher, who obviously knows how to appeal to younger students.)

“Ah, you are such a lucky little boy, Albert, because today we begin our study of higher mathematics—algebra! Algebra is such a merry little science! We go hunting for a mysterious little—butterfly, whose name we do not know, so we call it “X”. We stalk our game, come Albert, get your net... We stalk our game...”

(He begins to stalk about the stage, with an imaginary net.)

“There, Albert, by the bush, get it! Then we pounce on it, and give it its rightful name!! Three hundred sixty seven. Good, Albert, good.”

(He becomes himself again, speaking to the AUDIENCE. Crosses to C.)

Now that was the way to interest students in their studies! School was a constant source of problems for me, not because of difficulties with my studies, but because of difficulties with my teachers. Teaching is an honorable profession, and I have known many fine teachers in my life—but I am convinced that none were in Germany

at the time I was in school! I had many problems in the gymnasium, what you Americans call high school. At that time I was beginning to believe that although the universe presents us with extremely difficult riddles, it never presents us with unanswerable ones. God does not play dice with the universe; he is subtle, but not malicious! And so I began to question everything. My curiosity was so strong, I even questioned some of my teachers' statements. They didn't like this. They said all of my questions were interfering with the learning process; and I was called a disruptive influence in the classroom. But the world stood before me like a great eternal puzzle, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life trying to fit the pieces together! But the more I questioned, the angrier my teachers became, until our differences became irreconcilable. So, partway through my high school studies, by mutual agreement, I left. How sad my poppa looked when he saw me arriving home from boarding school, suitcase in hand. He had always wanted me to take up engineering—a sound, practical field, he said, where a man could carve out a nice safe place for himself in society. But you see my friends, I have never wanted *any* place in society! No, engineering was not for me; but how I hated to hurt my poppa's feelings. My whole family was quite upset for a while. But later they accepted things, and even arranged for me to continue my studies at a school in Switzerland much more to my liking. And from there I was accepted into one of the finest technical colleges in all Europe! College... Well, if my high school teachers were upset with me and all my questions, this was nothing compared with what some of my college professors thought! My reception was rather—rather

mixed. Some of my professors liked me very much, and others found me arrogant. Well, I was young, concerned, inquisitive, dedicated — and arrogant.

(He had been smiling in amusement; but now he grows angry.)

In fact one of my professors, Herr Weber, became so upset with me that when I graduated he wrote a very bad recommendation. And, because I had a troublemaker's reputation as a result of this; I received no immediate teaching offers. So, I was out of school and out of work — and my skepticism for all kinds of authority was now complete. *(Smiling.)* But that was good; because skepticism is the foundation of a sound scientific attitude.

(He looks at the blackboard; and can't keep himself from thinking once again about the equation written on it. He is lost in this world for a few moments; then breaks away and turns back to speak to the AUDIENCE.)

You see — I deal with a *conception* of reality, rather than with observable reality itself.

(He crosses to the blackboard area, and the lights come up to illuminate it fully.)

Physics demands the highest standard of precision in the description of spatial relations, such as only the use of mathematical language can give.