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FIRST ON THE ROPE

A Play in One Act

By

TIM KELLY

Dramatic Publishing Company

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FIRST ON THE ROPE

Cast

Emma, an Indian woman
Adele, leader of a rock-climbing team
Charlotte, member of the team
Laura, another member
Rosemary, another member

TIME: The present

PLACE: An open space on a mountainside, located in
an Arizona wilderness area



FIRST ON THE ROPE was developed from a work-in-progress at the Playwright's Unit of the Los Angeles Actors Theatre.

The play was first performed at the Los Angeles Actors Theatre Half Stage, opening on April 26, 1982, and directed by Beverly Michaels-Cohn with the following cast:

Emma Molly David
Adele Shelley Fine
Charlotte Robin Cantor
Laura Lee Arnone
Rosemary Holgie Forrester

STORY OF THE PLAY

Adele, a dedicated young woman, leads three girls on a mountain climbing expedition in a wilderness area. They are to be the first women who have actually reached the top. They camp in an open space while their Indian helper, an old woman who has reached the site by a hiking trail, prepares for the evening meal. The climbers' excitement provides a humorous insight into human frailty.

Ultimately, however, they must face the fact they were not the "first" after all. The Indian woman and her mother accomplished the feat long ago and considered it no big thing. Outraged, defeated and a little wiser, the climbers decide they must "find another mountain." Oh, yes, someone does fall off the mountain—only to return in the play's hilarious climax.

Excellent for contest use since the open stage comprises the entire set. Running time: About 20 minutes.

FIRST ON THE ROPE

[AT RISE: The stage remains empty for several moments. Then— sound of female voices, singing, from Offstage Right. The “singing” is breathy and forced but grows loud. . . s the singers near the open space]

VOICES. Oh, don't you remember Sweet Betsy from Pike,
Who crossed the big mountains with her lover Ike,
With two yoke of oxen, a large yaller dog,
A tall Shanghai rooster and one spotted hog?

[Attracted by the voices, EMMA enters Left. She's an Indian woman of indeterminate age, but definitely not young. She wears a long, voluminous skirt and a colorful, full-sleeved blouse. She crosses Right, peers offstage looking downward because the voices belong to climbers who are making their way up a steep incline. The offstage VOICES continue]

VOICES. Sing ho-di-dee du-di-dee—
Ho-di-dee day. *[EMMA stares a moment longer, crosses to Upstage Left, fluffs her skirt and sits cross-legged, with her back to the approaching climbers]* Sing ho-di-dee du . . . *[VOICES “give out”—obviously from lack of breath. Silence. Followed by an attempt at a yodel. Another silence. The “yodeler” backs in, tries another yodel. This is ADELE, an athletic young woman who is leading the climb. She wears a parka-type jacket, shorts, cleated boots, and thick socks. Around her waist is a belt and climbing rope which feeds out every ten feet or so to another climber. ADELE pulls on the rope to give it tension. She calls offstage and “down” to the next climber]*

ADELE. Almost there. One foot in that climbing crack and you're up. *[ADELE gives a hard tug and this brings CHARLOTTE into view. CHARLOTTE takes a deep breath]*

CHARLOTTE. I'm amazed I have a breath left.

ADELE. I told you we'd do it.

CHARLOTTE. Yes, but I didn't believe you. I do now.

ADELE. Give a tug. *[ADELE and CHARLOTTE give a joint pull on the rope and this brings LAURA into view]*

LAURA. Phew! I'm glad I coated my face with sunburn lotion. *[Looks about]* Home safe. I was afraid when I started up.

ADELE. When a woman starts to climb she leaves fear behind her.

LAURA. You're right.

ADELE. One more. [*ADELE, CHARLOTTE, and LAURA give the feed line a steady pull and ROSEMARY appears*]

ROSEMARY. We did it! We did it! [*Climbers embrace and jump about*]

CLIMBERS. We did it! We did it!

CHARLOTTE. Victory!

LAURA. Success!

ROSEMARY. Fame! [*They laugh. Like Adele, the others are youthful, collegiate or even younger. They're in excellent physical condition, dressed in similar fashion to their leader: parkas, boots, etc. They are somewhat awed by Adele. There's nothing officious or forbidding about Adele—it's just that she knows her own mind, is both a capable organizer and a woman who doesn't suffer failure easily. The climbers respect her*]

ADELE. Save some of that enthusiasm for the top. What we need now is rest.

LAURA. Time to catch our breath. What's left of it.

ROSEMARY. I'm not surviving on breath. I'm living on euphoria.

ADELE. It's not euphoria. It's thin air.

CHARLOTTE. Let's get rid of this rope. I feel like it's part of my skin. [*They free themselves from the climbing rope*]

ROSEMARY. My hands ache a little.

LAURA. What's the name of that Indian woman?

CHARLOTTE. I can't pronounce it. She said we could call her Emma.

ADELE. I wonder if she's here yet. [*ADELE crosses Left, exits*]

LAURA. She started up the hiking trail before dawn.

ROSEMARY. I hope nothing's happened to her.

CHARLOTTE. What could have happened to her?

LAURA. I hope my nose doesn't peel. The sun and I don't get along.

CHARLOTTE. You put on enough grease to preserve a carburetor.

LAURA. Better that than skin looking like cracked wallpaper.

ROSEMARY. I windburn.

CHARLOTTE. We couldn't have had better weather for our climb. [*Looks up*] Look at that sky. Not a cloud.

ADELE. [*Returns carrying two folding canvas stools*] The pack pony's there and most of our bivouac equipment. Trust she didn't forget the lantern. [*CHARLOTTE sits on the ground, sighs deeply*]

CHARLOTTE. It was rough . . . rougher than I expected. [*LAURA*

also sits on the ground, takes off a boot and sock, checks and massages a foot. (NOTE: From time to time the climbers stretch, rub sore muscles, perform simple loosening up exercises)

LAURA. Herzog had it rough. *[ADELE hands a stool to Rosemary. The stools are opened and ADELE and ROSEMARY sit. The climbers are in a wide semicircle]*

CHARLOTTE. Herzog?

LAURA. The man who climbed the mountain of Annapurna. He got caught in a blizzard and frostbite did the rest. Lost fingers and toes.

CHARLOTTE. We only lost a few pounds.

ADELE. There's a big difference between ice climbing and rock climbing.

ROSEMARY. You're welcome to snow and ice. I'll take this Arizona desert any time. *[Looks at her fingers, wiggles them]* No frostbite for this young lady.

ADELE. The temperature will drop tonight. I suggest we have a good supper and an early lights out.

LAURA. You mean lanterns out. *[LAURA, ROSEMARY, and CHARLOTTE chuckle]*

CHARLOTTE. We owe a lot to you, Adele. You're a wonderful leader. A general in charge of the troops.

LAURA. I could never have gone first. What if someone behind me started to fall?

ADELE. Nonsense. You could have gone first with a bit more training. Dedication and training, strength and vision. That's all it takes. Each one of you has curiosity and a spirit of adventure.

CHARLOTTE. Takes more than that.

ADELE. I've already told you—training. I've been climbing since I was eleven. Tomorrow morning will be my crowning achievement. Everything I've been striving for.

LAURA. Like the Olympics.

ADELE. Yes. Only, for me, this isn't the Olympics. It's Mount Olympus. Do you *fully* understand what we've accomplished?

CHARLOTTE. I think I do. I've sweated enough for it.

ADELE. Climbing takes sweat.

LAURA. And perspiration. *[Others give her a cool look not thinking her little joke too amusing]* Sorry.

CHARLOTTE. We're not to the top yet.

ROSEMARY. We will be. Trust Adele.

ADELE. We're the first women to have climbed this mountain from its steepest side. Almost vertical. Most men couldn't do it, but we did.

LAURA. We ought to plant a flag or something. *[They're more and more delighted with the success of their climb]*

CHARLOTTE. Who's got the miniature camera?

ROSEMARY. I have! *[ROSEMARY produces a tiny camera from her parka. The others, gleeful, move Center and pose side by side, grinning as ROSEMARY snaps a picture]* Now me! *[She hands the camera to LAURA, who takes Rosemary's position. ROSEMARY joins the others]*

LAURA. Watch the birdie. Smile. *[Others grin as widely as possible. LAURA snaps]* Gotcha. *[They return to their original positions. LAURA hands the tiny camera to Rosemary]*

CHARLOTTE. I'm glad we made it. After all those newspaper interviews—

ROSEMARY. —Television—

LAURA. —Radio—*[Thoughtfully]* I may have lost Arthur because of this.

ADELE. Arthur?

LAURA. My boyfriend.

ROSEMARY. Is he the one with the mole?

LAURA. No, that was George. As soon as Arthur understood I was really serious about this climb his whole attitude toward me changed.

ROSEMARY. What did he say?

LAURA. It was more what he didn't say. Arthur was *very* angry with me.

ADELE. The male ego considers female competition irritating and demeaning. He was probably jealous.

ROSEMARY. Would anyone like some ice cream?

AD LIBS. Good idea.

Sure.

Why not? *[ROSEMARY stands, exits Left. ADELE checks her watch]*

ADELE. Eleven hours and nine minutes and, uh—*[Squints at watch]* Fifty-nine seconds to the dot.

LAURA. As soon as he saw me in my cleated boots the color went out of his face. He looked so uncomfortable.

ADELE. We must do what we can to lead them out of the darkness.

CHARLOTTE. Imagine a magazine paying all that money before we even began to climb.

LAURA. They call that “sewing up the rights.”

ADELE. It’s clearly understood that we share everything equally. The glory, any benefits. *[ROSEMARY returns with “astronaut” ice cream bars in plastic bags, begins to distribute them]*

CHARLOTTE. Technically, you were the first on the rope.

ADELE. Even though I’m the most accomplished, we made this climb as a group, a unit, a team.

CHARLOTTE. One for all—

LAURA. All for one—

ADELE. *[Checks the ice cream bar]* This is strawberry.

ROSEMARY. *[Sits]* It’s all I could find. The astronauts claim it tastes like the real thing.

ADELE. I don’t like strawberry. *[Shift in mood]* I wish to make an announcement of great importance. *[Others give her their attention. She stands]* In 1893, the first climbing team scaled the rocky side of this mountain, led by Colonel Mortimer Saltmarsh—one lead climber, himself, and three amateur climbers. Recorded time: Eleven hours and fifteen minutes and twelve seconds.

LAURA. To the dot?

ADELE. *[Confirms]* To the dot.

CHARLOTTE. That means we’ve beaten their record!

ADELE. In spades.

AD LIBS. Hooray!

Wonderful!

Fantastic!

ADELE. Saltmarsh and his team only made it to this spot. We will go them one better. *[ADELE steps to forestage and points to some locale supposedly above them. LAURA, ROSEMARY, and CHARLOTTE step downstage, look up to where Adele is pointing]* There it is. Our final challenge. That overhang. Tomorrow morning we conquer.

LAURA. Other men did reach the top.

ADELE. Individual climbers, not a team.

CHARLOTTE. There was another team of women—back in the ’20’s.

ADELE. They failed.

CHARLOTTE. Very fatal-looking, isn’t it? That overhang.

LAURA. *[Her ice cream bar]* Does this stuff melt?

ROSEMARY. No, it crumbles.

ADELE. *[Holds out her ice cream]* A toast. To us. *[They take bites, grimace. ROSEMARY notices Emma]*

ROSEMARY. What's that over there?

LAURA. Where?

ROSEMARY. *[Points]* Over there. *[All look]*

CHARLOTTE. It's Emma, isn't it?

ADELE. Where did she come from?

LAURA. Must have snuck in while our backs were turned.

ADELE. Glad you finally got here, Emma. *[EMMA grunts in way of reply]*

ROSEMARY. Why didn't she speak up when she saw us?

LAURA. Indian custom. I think you're supposed to notice them first and then say something.

ADELE. If we hadn't seen her she might have sat there all night impersonating a bookend.

LAURA. Maybe.

ADELE. *[Calls out to her as if she were talking to someone with a hearing impairment]* Unpack the pony. *[EMMA continues to sit]* Unpack the pony-y-y-y-y. *[Still sits]* What's the matter with her?

CHARLOTTE. How should I know?

ADELE. The pony-y-y-yyyyyy. *[EMMA rises, exits Left]* Oh, there she goes.

LAURA. She's a Navajo, isn't she?

ROSEMARY. Is she? I don't know.

CHARLOTTE. I think she's a Hopi.

ADELE. To me she's a Sherpa.

LAURA. Never can understand her when she talks. She mumbles.

ROSEMARY. Maybe she has no teeth.

CHARLOTTE. She has teeth.

ADELE. When I think of the training—

ROSEMARY. The sit-ups—

CHARLOTTE. The push-ups—

LAURA. The jogging—

ADELE. Think of all the champion mountain climbers. From the Caucasus to the Himalayas. We have joined their ranks.

CHARLOTTE. I don't think we should go overboard.

LAURA. I'm not following.

CHARLOTTE. We've done a wondrous thing, no doubt about it. But this is a rather obscure mountain in a wilderness area. It's not Mt. Everest.

ADELE. It's not Mt. Everest, I admit.

ROSEMARY. But it's still a triumph.