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Dramatic Publishing



THINGS CAN ALWAYS BE WORSE!

A One-act Comedy

by

LOIS KIPNIS

Based on an old Rumanian folktale



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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LOIS KIPNIS

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Production Note

This play has evolved from years of improvising the folktale with children as young as six and with adults as old as eighty-six. Several improvised versions have been performed as “works in progress.” A variation of this version was performed by a Hebrew school confirmation class at their graduation.

THINGS CAN ALWAYS BE WORSE!

A One-act Comedy

For a flexible cast (minimum 8)

There are roles for 30 (may be expanded)

CHARACTERS

In the Modern House

PAPA

MOTHER, his daughter

SEVERAL CHILDREN

In the Small Hut, Long Ago

LEAH

REBBE

DAVID, the younger son

GRANDMA

SARAH, the younger daughter

JACOB, the older son

RACHEL

MENDEL

ANIMALS (can be actors or imagined with sound effects)

In the Town, Long Ago*

YOUNG CHILD

BRAGGART

SADIE

SELMA

GRANNY

KVETCH

TWO COLLEAGUES

SAM

SOL

PHILOSOPHER

FOUR YENTES

WORRIER

* Several parts can be played by one person if the acting company is small, or characters can be added if more parts are needed.

THE SETTING can be suggestive with a bare stage, platforms, and minimal props and furniture, or it can be more elaborate, depending on budget, facilities and time.

THE ACTION OF THE PLAY alternates between the present (in a modern-day house), and the past (in a little village in Rumania).

MUSIC acts as a transition between characters and the present and past time.

Approximate running time: 45 to 60 minutes.

THINGS CAN ALWAYS BE WORSE!

AT RISE: *PAPA is sitting DR, attempting to read his newspaper, while his daughter is trying to peel potatoes, make latkes, and sew a Maccabee costume. Offstage we hear the following dialogue—overlapping.*

- Mommy, Rachel won't play the dreidel game with me!
- Mommy, David broke my new Chanukah present Papa gave me last night!
- Mommy, when is Daddy (or Abba) coming home?
- Mommy, I can't find the card I made for Grandma.
- Mommy, I can't study. Everyone's making too much noise.
- Mommy, when will my costume for the Chanukah play be fixed?
- Mommy, I'm trying to practice my part in the play. Jacob says he's not coming to see me because I'm a wimpy-looking Maccabee.

MOTHER. Everyone, quiet! Someone come here and watch the latkes or they'll burn! Rifke, come help wrap some presents and...

(TWO CHILDREN come running into the kitchen chasing each other and arguing.)

TWO CHILDREN. It's my toy! No, it's my toy! (*Ad lib. The baby wakes up and cries.*)

MOTHER. Now look what you've done! You woke the baby! (*As MOTHER picks up the baby from the cradle, the latkes start to burn.*) That's enough arguing! (*She calls offstage.*) Everyone come in here. Now!

(CHILDREN enter the kitchen arguing.)

CHILDREN. I'm sitting next to Papa. I want to put the candles in the menorah! (*Ad lib.*)

PAPA (*calling from other room*). What's going on in there?

MOTHER (*yelling to PAPA*). I've just burned the latkes. Jonathan's costume is torn. We'll never be ready to go to the play. I can't get the baby back to sleep.

(CHILDREN continue to argue. PAPA walks into the kitchen area.)

PAPA. Shush! Everyone, listen. While we're waiting for Abba to come home, let me share a story with you that my grandfather, a rebbe, in a village in Rumania, always told us when we thought things couldn't possibly get worse! Children, come sit with me in the other room, so Mommy can finish cooking supper.

(Lights slowly fade out as PAPA and the CHILDREN cross to the R area and he starts to tell the story.)

PAPA. There once was a very poor family who lived in a very small hut with several children. They were always

quarreling and complaining. They were always asking my father, the Rebbe, for advice.

(Lights dim on PAPA and come up on a tableau of the crowded house. Everyone remains frozen until he/she speaks. REBBE is DL in his study.)

LEAH. Rebbe, we have problems with the Brit. First of all, we don't know what to name our newborn son. I want to name him after my father, may he rest in peace, who was a learned man, a scholar. Mendel, my husband, wants to name him after his father, may he rest in peace, who wasn't a scholar, but who was a kind man who always gave tzedakah. Grandma wants us to name him after an uncle who has no one named after him. Also, Rebbe, we have no money this week. We can't pay the mohel for the circumcision. What shall we do?

REBBE. Don't worry! You'll figure out what to name him. It could be worse. At least you have a healthy child and good people to name him after, and you'll pay the mohel next week. *(MUSIC.)*

DAVID. Rebbe, I can't study for my bar mitzvah lessons. My house is so noisy and crowded, I can't concentrate. The baby is always crying. My sisters and brothers are always fighting. At night my grandmother keeps me up with her snoring. Every time I finally find a moment of quiet, I get called to feed the chickens and milk the cow. I have trouble reading my Haftorah, but we have no money for a tutor, and my mother and father think I just don't want to study. It's too noisy to even have a conversation with them about this. What should I do?

REBBE. Don't worry. We'll work it out. It could be worse.

At least you're interested in learning. (*MUSIC.*)

GRANDMA. Rebbe, it's so crowded in here that I can't do my sewing. I'm trying to embroider a chuppah for my granddaughter's wedding, but half the time I can't find the needle, or the cat's got the thread. There's not enough light to see, and—

REBBE (*interrupting her*). It will be fine. It could be worse. Thank God you still have your eyesight and you've lived to see your granddaughter married. (*MUSIC.*)

SARAH. Rebbe, the matchmaker found my sister a match, but he's very poor. My sister says that's because we don't have enough of a dowry. Rebbe, when I'm older do I have to marry whomever someone else picks for me and wear a hand-me-down wedding dress because we have no money?

REBBE. Don't worry. It'll all work out. It could be worse.

At least the match for your sister is a good person with a good heart. (*MUSIC.*)

LEAH. Rebbe, the Aufruf is next week. Uncle Harry is traveling so far that he wants to stay with us all week until the wedding. We have no extra food or money or room, and he'll only add to the confusion in our house.

REBBE. Don't worry. We'll find a place for him. It could be worse. Be thankful that Uncle Harry is able to travel so far and share the simcha. (*MUSIC.*)

JACOB. Rebbe, I want to go to the synagogue with friends for a party, but my parents are insisting I bring some soup that my mother cooked to Mrs. Rabinowitz who is sitting shiva for her husband. It's a long walk, and it's cold outside. I don't want to go. I always have to do

errands. Why can't my sister or brother go? Mrs. Rabinowitz will make me stay for a long time. It'll be boring, and I won't know what to say to her.

REBBE. It could be worse. Go do a mitzvah.

JACOB. Look, Rebbe, my sister's sitting next to my grandma, and Grandma's telling her stories, and teaching her to sew. She can go to Mrs. Rabinowitz. She's not too young to walk a short distance by herself.

LEAH. Jacob, take the soup. It's getting cold.

JACOB (*goes to SARAH*). The Rebbe said it would be a mitzvah to go to Mrs. Rabinowitz.

SARAH. I'll do a mitzvah tomorrow. Right now I want to hear the rest of Grandma's story, and then my friend is coming over to help me with my Hebrew letters.

JACOB. I have things I'd like to do, too, instead of going to Mrs. Rabinowitz's.

SARAH. Oh, all right. I'll go with you, but promise me you won't let her pinch my cheek and tell me how much I've grown and that you'll help me with my letters later.

JACOB. I promise. (*They leave with the soup. MUSIC.*)

RACHEL. Rebbe, I'm trying to study so I can do well in school and go for advanced studies so I can make something of myself. No one here seems to understand that. The little ones always want me to read them stories because they say I read better than anyone else here. I'd rather read my own books.

REBBE. Don't worry. You'll do well in your studies. This will build character.

(*MUSIC. Everyone freezes. Lights fade out on the hut and come up on PAPA.*)

PAPA. Well, one day when the hut seemed noisier than ever, and the cramped space became unbearable, Mama couldn't take it anymore, so she told Mendel, her husband, that he must go to the wise Rebbe and seek advice. Mendel, however, being a kibbitzer, stopped along the way to chat with the townspeople.

(MUSIC. Family inside the hut exit and TOWNSPEOPLE take their place around the auditorium or onstage.)

NOTE: Here is where the script is flexible. You can create scenes with whatever characters you chose. Actors can improvise new scenes using new characters. Actors can double up on parts, also. Here are some suggested characters and scenes:

MENDEL walks through town and meets a happy child hugging a teddy bear.)

YOUNG CHILD. Hi, mister. Where are you going? Why do you look so sad?

MENDEL. You wouldn't understand. I'm poor. There's no room in my house. My children quarrel loudly. I don't have room to think. There's no room for my wife to cook.

YOUNG CHILD. Why don't you come home with me and tell my bubbe your problems. She's so nice. Whenever I get hurt, she makes me feel better. Whenever I'm sick, she makes my favorite soup. Whenever I'm bored, she plays a game with me. When I can't fall asleep, she tells me stories about her little village where she grew up. And whenever I have a problem with my friends, my

bubbe always has an idea about what to do. And you know what else? If she doesn't have the answer, she gives me a piece of her homemade strudel, and a big hug, and I feel better.

MENDEL. I'm sure that helps. But I don't think a piece of strudel will solve my problems. *(He leaves.)*

YOUNG CHILD *(calling out to MENDEL as he walks away)*. But it's the best strudel in the village! *(She looks at him, shrugs her shoulders, and skips off.)*

(MUSIC. MENDEL continues walking, mumbling to himself. A BRAGGART sees MENDEL rushing by and calls to him.)

BRAGGART. Mendel! Mendel! How are you?

MENDEL. I could be better! How's by you?

BRAGGART. What could be better? I've got the most wonderful children and grandchildren. Little David is three years old and he's ready to ask the Four Questions at the Seder. And little Becky, she's five years old and already knows her Hebrew letters. My oldest daughter is getting married, and her wedding dress, I understand *(leans in to MENDEL)* is beyond description. Best tailor in the next village. If you ever need a suit or dress for your wife, I recommend him highly. *(MENDEL tries to interrupt him, but he continues.)* And my son Aaron is a doctor now! Best in the area. And we're so close to his wife's family and... Oy! Forgive me, Mendel. I get carried away when I think of how fortunate I am. So what's with your family?

MENDEL. Oh... *(He hesitates and then thinks quickly.)*
Oh, they're fine. They're developing good strong voices.

I think one of them will be a cantor one day. And, uh...
(*He thinks.*) We're getting closer and closer as a family.
(*Under his breath he mumbles "yeah—closer and closer!"*) Listen, I must hurry. The Rebbe wants to see me. *Zei gezunt!*

(*MUSIC. As MENDEL rushes down the street, we see SADIE and SELMA.*)

SADIE. Selma, remember the year we first moved in here?
We had so many good times!

SELMA. I remember! Every holiday we all shared our food. Except Ruth. She never wanted to bother with us.

SADIE. No, that wasn't Ruth! That was Sarah!

SELMA. No! It was Ruth! I remember. She lived two houses down from us.

SADIE. No, you're wrong! *Rosie* lived two houses down from us with that good-for-nothing son!

SADIE. No! She had a daughter! Ruth had the good-for-nothing son!

SELMA. Well, whatever! Remember the day Tessie's cow got loose and...

SADIE. Tessie didn't have a cow! She only had chickens, and... (*Sees MENDEL.*) Wait. Mendel will remember. (*She calls out.*) Mendel! Who had a good-for-nothing son and owned the cow that kept getting loose?

MENDEL. I can't remember my own children's names right now. You want me to remember who had a cow and who had a good-for-nothing son? I got a good-for-nothing goat, and a good-for-nothing cow. Figure it out for yourself. (*He leaves.*)