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**American Association of
Community Theatre AACT
NewPlayFest Winning Plays:
Volume 6 (2024)**

Criminal Mischief by
WILLIAM CAMERON

The Red Flags by
CATHERINE CASTELLANI

I Thought I Knew You by
PHILIP J. KAPLAN

Eating Blackberries by
PAM HARBAUGH

Tennessee Wet Rub by
KIM E. RUYLE

The China Shop by
RICHARD MANLEY

Dramatic Publishing Company
Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

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American Association of Community Theatre
AACT NewPlayFest Winning Plays:
Volume 6 (2024)

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INTRODUCTION

The American Association of Community Theatre (AACT) is proud to present the six winning scripts and playwrights of the sixth AACT NewPlayFest cycle. AACT NewPlayFest is an initiative by AACT to address the critical need for new, high-quality plays for community theatre audiences around the globe. It has been embraced by playwrights and theatres across the country, bringing exciting theatrical journeys to producing companies and joyful realization and anticipation to playwrights and their work.

AACT is pleased to partner with Dramatic Publishing Company for this program. AACT NewPlayFest is unparalleled in new play competitions, providing full productions of the winning scripts, plus publication and rights representation by a major theatrical publisher.

This sixth cycle of AACT's NewPlayFest, ending in 2024, proved to be a success with more scripts submitted than in prior years and six theatres from across the country were selected to produce world premieres of the winning scripts. This festival continues to benefit the producing theatres by giving them the excitement of bringing new works to their patrons, and the playwrights by allowing them to experience quality productions of their work and publication and representation by Dramatic Publishing. The benefits of AACT NewPlayFest will expand as additional theatres produce these top-notch plays.

We hope you will consider one of these plays for your next season.

Break a leg,

Quiana Clark-Roland, Executive Director
American Association of Community Theatre

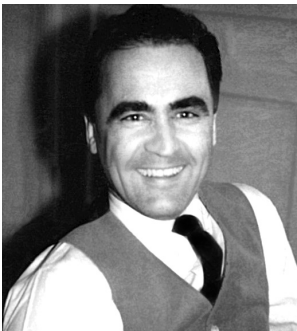
The American Association of Community Theatre is the resource connection for America's theatres. AACT represents the interests of more than 7,000 theatres across the United States and its territories, as well as theatre companies with the U.S. Armed Services overseas. To learn more about AACT NewPlayFest and AACT, go to aact.org.

FOREWORD

Jack K. Ayre, born in Pittsburgh on July 9, 1921, celebrated his 90th birthday before passing away in December 2011. At his birthday party in Sunnyvale, Calif., he sang with a barbershop quartet—one of his favorite activities—and celebrated with his cousin and lifelong friend, Frank Ayre Lee. Though as adults they lived on opposite sides of the country, the cousins kept in touch through letters that displayed a love for the written word and an irreverent sense of humor. Jack had participated in theatre productions at Drew University in New Jersey and at a community theatre in Connecticut in his younger years and continued that interest when he moved to California.

Frank, a chemical engineer by profession, was also an avid aficionado of theatre and had dabbled in playwriting, adapting Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* for a children's theatre production, and penning *McSteg*, a tongue-in-cheek discourse ribbing his cousin Jack and based on a scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

The Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation has been created by the children of Frank as a tribute to their father, who passed away in August 2012, and a legacy for the creative endeavors of Jack, who was an advertising executive and public relations director. The family is pleased to honor both men through a lasting legacy promoting new works for theatre.



Jack K. Ayre



Frank Ayre Lee

Photos: Courtesy of the Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation.

Criminal Mischief

By
WILLIAM CAMERON

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Criminal Mischief was premiered by The Sauk (Jonesville, Mich.) in February 2024.

CAST:

ALICE FORD Tiffany Thatcher
SPENCER BISHOP Jacob Weldon
FRED MASON..... Josh Lightner
ANGIE BISHOPSavannah Bruton
RUSTY..... Summer Housler

PRODUCTION:

Director Trinity Bird
Stage Management..... Allison Tappen
DramaturgyDavid A. VanCleave
Set and Design Joella Hendrickson
Properties Design Travis Blatchley
Marketing Materials/PhotographyLisa Cook & Patrick Cook
Assistant Stage ManagerMorgan Francis
Sound Board Manager Scott Keef

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“*Criminal Mischief* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by The Sauk in Jonesville, Mich.”

Criminal Mischief

CHARACTERS

ALICE FORD: A detective lieutenant, late 30s.

SPENCER BISHOP: Angie's husband, early 40s.

FRED MASON: Spencer's half-brother, early 30s.

ANGIE BISHOP: Spencer's wife, 30s.

RUSTY: Spencer and Fred's mother, 60s.

SETTINGS

ACT I takes place in a variety of locations—two police interrogation rooms, a hospital room, a bar—all easily indicated by minimal furniture and area lighting.

ACT II takes place in the modestly furnished living room of Spencer and Angie's home. A functional front door is visible. A door on one side of the room leads to the kitchen and a hallway on the opposite side leads to other areas of the house.

For Nancy Bach

Criminal Mischief

ACT I

Scene 1

(ALICE FORD, dressed in pants, a shirt and leather sports coat with a holstered gun visible, speaks into a small voice recorder.)

ALICE. Detective Lieutenant Alice Ford responding to report of shots fired at one-one-seven Pellerman Road, private residence. Thursday, May nineteen, eight-fourteen a.m. Arrived on scene eight-twenty-three, accompanied by uniformed officers Smith and Barker. Shooting victim Frederick Mason, thirty-one, taken by ambulance to Pinecrest Hospital with single gunshot wound to left shoulder. Suspected assailant Spencer Bishop, forty-two, taken into custody. Suspect and victim are half-brothers.

(ALICE clicks a button, turning off her recorder as the lights rise on SPENCER BISHOP in a police interrogation room, nervously waiting. ALICE enters behind him and places a can of soda in front of him.)

ALICE *(cont'd)*. Couldn't find any Dr. Pepper. I got you a ginger ale.

SPENCER. Oh.

(SPENCER cracks open the can, takes a sip and sets it back down immediately.)

ALICE. Need anything else?

(A forlorn look at the ginger ale, then SPENCER shakes his head. ALICE sits opposite him.)

ALICE *(cont'd)*. OK. Tell me what happened.

SPENCER. Well ... um, see it was ... I can't quite ...

ALICE. Just start from the beginning.

SPENCER. The very beginning? Because the very beginning is different from the beginning. See, I think of today as the beginning, but not the very beginning. The very beginning goes back to ... well, before today. But when *you* say the beginning, I'm not sure what you—

ALICE. How about you start from when you shot your brother?

SPENCER. My half-brother. And it was an accident.

ALICE. An accident?

(SPENCER nods, ALICE sighs.)

ALICE *(cont'd)*. What a surprise. OK, Lee Harvey, where'd you get the gun?

SPENCER. From Fred.

ALICE. Your brother?

SPENCER. Half-brother.

ALICE. And he gave you the gun?

SPENCER. No, I wouldn't say he *gave* it to me.

ALICE. You stole it from him?

SPENCER. No, I wouldn't say I *stole* it from him.

ALICE. What *would* you say?

SPENCER. See, this is why I think we should go back to the very beginning, because—

ALICE. Mr. Bishop, this is not a joke. I take gun violence very seriously.

SPENCER. Me too. I never would've—

ALICE. You know how many people die from guns in a single day in this country?

SPENCER. I don't know the exact figures but I know it's—

ALICE. A hundred. More'n that! Your brother's not one of 'em, fortunately, because you missed but—

SPENCER. And I'm so glad I did, believe me, I never wanted to hurt Freddy and, besides, I didn't really shoot my—

ALICE. We got the gun, Mr. Bishop. We got your prints. We got your brother with a bullet in his shoulder. From where I sit, I got you on attempted murder.

SPENCER. Murder!? No! I would never—

ALICE. Yeah, a lot of people would never until all of a sudden they would and then they do.

SPENCER. Why would I shoot my brother?

ALICE. Half-brother.

SPENCER. Why would I shoot my half-brother?

ALICE. You tell me. What motivation might you have to shoot your half-brother?

SPENCER. None. I love Freddy!

ALICE. Love! Gimme a break! You know how many women take a shot at their husbands just for leaving the toilet seat up? So, tell me what really happened, or you and me are gonna have a problem.

SPENCER. OK. (*He takes a sip of his ginger ale.*) You sure there's no Dr. Pepper?

(*ALICE gives him a look.*)

SPENCER (*cont'd*). Sorry. So ... Fred ... um, he came to the house and ... see, I haven't really seen him or talked to him since—(*He stops himself.*) Never mind. So Fred—

ALICE. Wait. Since what?

SPENCER. See, this is what I meant by ... the *very* beginning.

ALICE (*leaning forward, a bit menacing*). Since what, Mr. Bishop?

SPENCER. Since I found out. See, Fred he ... (*Clears his throat.*) He's in love with Angie.

ALICE. Who's Angie?

SPENCER. Angie's my wife.

ALICE. Ahhh. Fred, your half-brother that you shot this morning, he's in love with Angie, your wife.

SPENCER. Yes.

ALICE. That changes things, doesn't it?

(*SPENCER sighs.*)

ALICE (*cont'd*). OK, this Angie, did she return his affections?

SPENCER. Oh yeah, she returned 'em. She returned 'em a bunch of times. Mostly on Wednesdays.

(ALICE makes a note in her notebook.)

SPENCER *(cont'd)*. I travel on Wednesdays. Work.

ALICE. I see. How long have you known about the affair?

SPENCER. Two weeks. Well, more like seventeen days. Let's see, today's the nineteenth, so—

ALICE. And yet you still contend you had no motive for shooting your—

SPENCER. No, I ... I mean, I guess you could say I had a motive and ... I guess you could say I shot him, but it was an accident! See, Fred came over this morning and said he needed to talk to me and I said OK and then he walked into the front room. I followed him in and said, "What do you need?" And that's when Fred pulled a gun out of his back pocket and pointed—

ALICE. Wait, wait, wait! He pulled a gun out of his ... so Fred brought the gun to the house?

SPENCER. Yes.

ALICE. Why didn't you just tell me that to begin with?

SPENCER. Because! I've never been ... arrested or whatever this is and I've ... I've never shot anybody and ... and I'm worried about Freddy, and ... *(He picks up the can of ginger ale, guzzles and slams it back down.)* This is warm! And it's not Dr. Pepper, which I specifically requested!

ALICE. This is not a restaurant, Mr. Bishop!

SPENCER. Then why did you ask me what I wanted, and when I said I wanted a Dr. Pepper why did you say, "Comin' right up!" when you intended all along to bring me a less desirable beverage choice!!

ALICE *(rises and crosses to the door)*. Calm down, calm down! *(She opens the door and calls out.)* Get me a cold Dr. Pepper, stat! *(She slams the door closed.)* Mr. Bishop, are you OK?

SPENCER. I don't understand why I'm even here. I didn't do anything wrong!

ALICE. Mr. Bishop, calm down. Can you do that for me? Calm down.

(SPENCER takes a deep breath.)

ALICE (*cont'd*). Atta boy. Now, real slow ... Fred pulled the gun out of his back pocket ... right?

SPENCER. Yes. He, um ... he pulled the gun out of his back pocket. He pointed it at me. I said, "Is that a gun?" He said, "Oh yeah, it's a gun." I said, "Why do you have a gun?" He said, "Why do you think I have a gun?" I had no idea why he had a gun, so I said, "I have no idea why you have a gun." And then he started crying.

ALICE. Crying? Why was he crying?

SPENCER. He cries a lot.

ALICE. So, what did you do?

SPENCER. I stood there.

(She looks at him, incredulous.)

SPENCER (*cont'd*). He had a gun, his hands were shaking, he was crying. I didn't want him to shoot me!

ALICE. What happened then?

SPENCER. He shot me.

ALICE. He shot you?!

SPENCER. He shot *at* me. He missed.

ALICE. Two shots were fired?

SPENCER. Yes. One by him, one by me. But him first.

ALICE. The only bullet we know about was in your brother's shoulder.

SPENCER. His bullet hit the piano.

ALICE (*making a note*). The piano.

SPENCER. Angie plays. She's very good. She's been working on some of Scott Joplin's—

ALICE. So he fired the shot after he started crying?

SPENCER. Right after.

(ALICE goes to make a note)

SPENCER (*cont'd*). Well, not *right* after but very close to being right after. I would say, one, he started crying then twooooo ... and threeeee—BANG!

ALICE. So, he fired the gun, dropped the gun, you grabbed the gun and shot him?

SPENCER. Yes. No. Well, see, he dropped the gun right after he shot it and—well, not *right* after. I would say, one, bang ... then twooooo ... and—

ALICE. He dropped it or you knocked it out of his hand?

SPENCER. He dropped it. He was crying and when the gun went off, I think it scared him, and he dropped the gun.

ALICE. And you picked it up?

SPENCER. Yes. I was afraid if he got the gun he would shoot again and maybe hit me this time or put another hole in the piano. It's a really nice piano.

ALICE. So, that's when you shot him?

SPENCER. Yes. No! That's when he jumped at me and tried to get the gun from me, but I had a tight grip on it, so he pushed me, and I fell backwards over the ... um ...

ALICE. Chair?

SPENCER. No.

ALICE. Stool?

SPENCER. No.

ALICE. Coffee table?

SPENCER. Cat!

ALICE. And that's when you shot him?

SPENCER. That's when the gun went off.

ALICE. A gun doesn't go off unless you pull the trigger.

SPENCER. Then I must have accidentally pulled the trigger because Freddy had just pushed me and I was on my back and he was hovering over me.

ALICE. And that's when you shot him.

SPENCER. It was an accident!

(ALICE regards him for a moment, then makes a few notes.)

SPENCER *(cont'd)*. I really don't think Freddy meant to pull the trigger. His hands were shaking so hard and he was so ... oh, Freddy. *(A discouraged sigh.)* I didn't even know he owned a gun.

(He shakes his head and sighs. Lights up in a hospital room. FREDDY MASON lies in bed, bandages over his arm and shoulder. He is hooked up to an IV.)

SPENCER (*cont'd*). How is Fred? Is he gonna be OK?

FREDDY. It hurts to get shot.

ALICE. You got lucky. It's not a life-threatening injury.

SPENCER. Oh, thank God.

FREDDY. Still hurts.

ALICE. We're waiting for word that he's safely out of surgery, at which point I will speak to Mr. Mason and get his side of the story.

FREDDY. My brother shot me. That's my side of the story.

(Lights out on SPENCER as ALICE crosses into the hospital area.)

ALICE. It was your firearm, am I correct?

FREDDY. I have a permit.

(FREDDY punches the TV remote. Loud game show music, "Come on down!!")

ALICE. I didn't ask if you—

(FREDDY hits a button, TV gets louder. ALICE grabs the remote and clicks the TV off.)

ALICE (*cont'd*). Who owns the firearm that was used in this morning's shooting?

FREDDY. Uhhhhh ... me.

ALICE. Why did you take the gun to your brother's house?

FREDDY. Is it against the law to take a gun to my brother's house?

ALICE. If it's for the express purpose of shooting your brother, yes.

FREDDY. That was not my express purpose.

ALICE. What was your express purpose?

FREDDY. Did you ask Spencer his express purpose? He's the one who shot me. *(He pushes a button connected to his IV.)*

ALICE. Mr. Mason, did you fire—

(FREDDY pushes the button more furiously.)

ALICE (*cont'd*). Mr. Mason?

FREDDY. Damn thing doesn't work.

ALICE. What doesn't work, sir?

FREDDY. This button thing. Supposed to give me a painkiller dose.
(*Pushes the button quickly and angrily.*) Stupid thing!

ALICE. Are you in a great deal of pain right now, sir?

FREDDY. Yes! It hurts to get shot. Guy gets shot in the movies—
like Indiana Jones! He gets a bullet in the shoulder, then he
drives a truck and punches a guy. No way could he drive a truck
and punch a guy after—

ALICE. Do you think this is funny, Mr. Mason?

FREDDY. No! I'm just saying that in the movies—

ALICE. Bad enough we got the crazies using nightclubs and
classrooms for target practice, we gotta worry about people
being stupid with guns.

FREDDY. I agree. Who do those people think—

ALICE. Like you!

FREDDY. Me?

ALICE. How long you owned that gun, Mr. Mason?

FREDDY. Uhhh ... couple of days.

ALICE. So you take a loaded pistol you barely know how to use,
you point it at your brother—

FREDDY. Half-brother.

ALICE. And you pull the trigger! That's what I call being stupid
with guns.

FREDDY. Yeah but ... Spencer shot me!

ALICE. Who fired the bullet that we dug out of the piano twenty
minutes ago?

FREDDY. Uhhhhh ... me.

ALICE. Right.

(*ALICE makes a note as FREDDY pushes the button on his IV
device.*)

ALICE (*cont'd*). Get it going?

FREDDY. Uh, yeah. Think so.

ALICE. So, to be clear, you shot the piano.

FREDDY. Well, I—

ALICE. You dropped the gun.

FREDDY. Uhhhh—

ALICE. And you started crying.

FREDDY. No, I didn't start—did Spencer say I started crying? That son of a—

ALICE. But you did drop the gun, as opposed to Spencer taking it away from you.

FREDDY. Yeah, I dropped the gun.

(ALICE writes a note.)

FREDDY (*cont'd*). Or ... you could kinda say he took it away from me.

ALICE. Kinda?

FREDDY. Yeah. See, I dropped the gun and *then* he took it away from me.

ALICE. You mean he ... picked it up.

FREDDY. Yes. He picked it up ... and *awaaay* from me. (*He suddenly sits back in bed. A distant smile.*) I think the painkillers are kicking in.

ALICE. Mr. Mason, is it true that you've you been sleeping with Angela Bishop?

FREDDY. Your head looks really big right now.

ALICE. Your half-brother's wife. You're having an affair with her?

FREDDY (*with a jaunty, slightly loopy smile*). I know! She's so beautiful.

ALICE. Angela Bishop?

FREDDY. Yes. And she loves me. And I love her. And she loves me. And someday—

ALICE. Did Angela Bishop ask you to kill your half-brother Spencer Bish—?

FREDDY. Huh?

ALICE. Did Angela Bishop ask you to kill your brother?

FREDDY. No ... I don't know ... I can't concentrate. My brother SHOT ME TODAY!!

ALICE. Mr. Mason—

FREDDY. YOUR HEAD IS BIG!! YOU'RE SCARING ME!!

(FREDDY's head falls to the pillow, his eyes close.)

ALICE. Mr. Mason?

(FREDDY snores loudly. A beat as ALICE pulls out her recorder, speaks into it.)

ALICE (*cont'd*). Interview with Mr. Mason inconclusive.

(Lights up on SPENCER. There is an empty Dr. Pepper can in front of him, and he is cracking open another as ALICE re-enters the room.)

SPENCER. Is Freddy OK?

ALICE. He's fine. He was a little incoherent when I spoke with him.

SPENCER. Incoherent?

ALICE. Pain medication can make anyone a little distracted.

SPENCER. He's in a lot of pain?

ALICE. Well, it hurts to get shot—

(SPENCER sighs.)

ALICE (*cont'd*). But I spoke with his doctor who assured me that the bullet didn't do any serious bone or tissue damage.

(SPENCER sighs, relieved.)

ALICE (*cont'd*). He'll be fine, Mr. Bishop.

SPENCER. Call me Spencer. Mr. Bishop sounds so ... old.

ALICE. OK. Spencer.

SPENCER. That's better.

(ALICE drops a pad and pencil on the table in front of him.)

ALICE. Spencer, I need your wife's phone number.

SPENCER. Angie? Why?

(ALICE looks at him, waiting him out. He writes the number on the pad.)

SPENCER (*cont'd*). May I go?

ALICE. It'd really help us out if you could stick around for a bit longer.

SPENCER. Why?

ALICE. Just ... help us out.

(SPENCER nods as ALICE picks up the pad and pencil.)

ALICE *(cont'd)*. Thank you. See you've got your Dr. Pepper. Is there anything else I can get for you?

SPENCER. Something to read, maybe. Oh, and can I make a call? I left my cellphone at the house this morning, you know, in all the craziness.

ALICE. Sure. Follow me.

(ALICE starts out.)

SPENCER. Or better yet, could you call someone for me?

ALICE. Who?

SPENCER. My mother. She needs to know about this, but I don't really ... I mean, I'd rather not have to explain it myself.

ALICE *(dropping the pad and pencil on the table)*. Write her number down.

SPENCER *(as he writes)*. Thank you. I know I'm being a coward, but I just don't think I can face ... never mind. *(Handing her the pad.)* Here's the number.

(She starts to take it; he pulls it back, writes some more.)

SPENCER *(cont'd)*. Although now that I think about it, she might be ... here.

(Finished writing, he holds out the pad. She reaches for it. He pulls it away again.)

SPENCER *(cont'd)*. Or better yet ... try this number first.

(He writes, hands her the pad. She takes it, trying hard to stifle a laugh.)

SPENCER *(cont'd)*. This is her cellphone, although she's notoriously bad about charging her phone, which can make it hard to reach her, but I gave her a pretty stern talking to about it

last week, and she promised she would try and do better. So, try the third number first and then if there's no answer, try the first number—that's her home phone—and then the second number, which is my office because sometimes she just shows up there out of the blue and my secretary ... well, never mind. So, third number first, then the first, then the second. Three, one, two.

ALICE. Three, one, two. Got it.

SPENCER. Thank you.

(She starts out again)

SPENCER *(cont'd)*. Oh, and what's your name?

ALICE. Detective Lieutenant Ford.

SPENCER. Detective Lieutenant Ford. What's your first name?

ALICE. My first name?

SPENCER. Well, you called me Spencer, so I figured ...

(SPENCER shrugs, a short beat.)

ALICE. Alice. My name is Alice.

SPENCER. Nice to meet you, Alice.

(SPENCER smiles, and ALICE cannot help but smile back.)

Lights fade on them and rise on the hospital room where FREDDY lies asleep.

ANGIE BISHOP walks surreptitiously into the hospital room. She carries a Starbucks cup, finishes her coffee off with a loud slurp and throws the cup in the garbage. She stops, looks around and edges close to FREDDY.)

ANGIE. Freddy.

(No response. She taps his shoulder.)

ANGIE *(louder)*. Freddy.

FREDDY *(stirring)*. Huh?

ANGIE. Is your mother here?

FREDDY. Honey, where you been?

ANGIE. Is your mother here?

The Red Flags

By
CATHERINE CASTELLANI

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(THE RED FLAGS)

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The Red Flags premiered at the Verona Area Community Theater (Verona, Wis.) in February 2024.

CAST:
GABRIELLE Natalie Coombs
RIC.....Scott Wieland
PHILIP Steve Fecteau
CHLOE Marsha Heuer

PRODUCTION:
DirectorAllen Ebert
Producer Sara Ward-Cassady
Stage Manager Paul Stiller
Costume Design..... Claire Johnson
Set Design Joshua Carson
Prop Master Marie Kyle
Light Design..... Steve Nickels
Sound Design Dale Nickels

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“*The Red Flags* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Verona Area Community Theater in Verona, Wis.”

The Red Flags

CHARACTERS

GABRIELLE: A vibrant, happily single woman, 38.

CHLOE: A happily married woman, late 30s to early 40s.

RIC: A handsome, single, diagnosed psychotic, mid-to-late 30s.

PHILIP: Chloe's husband and Ric's older brother, late 30s to early 40s.

TIME AND PLACE

A city, the present. The action takes place over roughly six weeks in a lively bistro, along a riverfront walk, in a city park and in Philip and Chloe's apartment.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Gabrielle pronounces Philip's last name *airMEHZ*, like the scarf. Everyone else pronounces it *HERmeez*. She knows how he pronounces it—it's an affectation she puts on.

STAGING: This play works well on a unit set or in a fluid space without blackouts between scenes.

The Red Flags

ACT I

SCENE 1: THE SETUP

(A chilly evening in springtime. PHILIP sits alone in a lively brasserie. He is waiting for someone and clearly feels awkward. He has a Manhattan in front of him. He sips it and makes a face. It's not his thing. He ordered it because this feels like the kind of place one orders a classic cocktail, but he'd be much happier with a Guinness.)

Enter GABRIELLE. Her energy and verve is calculated to turn every head in the place. She goes straight to PHILIP, who rises to kiss her hello on the cheek. She throws him off his game by making it a two-cheek affair. He plops back into his seat while she flamboyantly uncoats and unscarfs herself.)

PHILIP. Drink?

GABRIELLE. I'll have a Lillet blanc.

(It arrives almost instantly, in a white wine glass with a generous slice of orange.)

PHILIP. They know you here.

GABRIELLE. It's my meeting place.

PHILIP. We're not going to run into a lot of ex-boyfriends here, are we?

GABRIELLE. I never meet lovers here.

PHILIP. Oh.

GABRIELLE. Where's Chloe?

PHILIP. Chloe?

GABRIELLE. Your wife, Chloe. That Chloe.

PHILIP. She's not here.

GABRIELLE. Philip Hermes. You surprise me.

PHILIP. You're the only one who says it that way. Air-MEHZ, like the scarf.

GABRIELLE. Your text said “meet us.”

PHILIP. I’d like you to meet my brother.

GABRIELLE. You have a brother?

PHILIP. I think you two might really hit it off.

GABRIELLE. I never knew you had a brother.

PHILIP. He’s a very private person.

GABRIELLE. Oh no.

PHILIP. Private is bad?

GABRIELLE. It’s code for something. Tell me.

PHILIP. No! No no it’s not code! Really! He’s very ...

GABRIELLE. Single.

PHILIP. Yes. He’s very single.

GABRIELLE. Philip—you’re *matchmaking*!?

PHILIP. Well ...

GABRIELLE. This is Chloe’s idea.

PHILIP. I know she wants you to see that professional matchmaker.
But you won’t.

GABRIELLE. Do you have any idea what that costs? A long weekend in Paris, that’s how much.

PHILIP. But a long weekend is just a few days. We’re talking about the rest of your life.

(GABRIELLE drains her drink in one panicked swallow.)

PHILIP *(cont’d)*. That came out wrong! I just mean, finding a partner, finding someone you can rely on, that’s a big deal.

GABRIELLE. Oh, I really don’t know about this.

PHILIP. Please, Gabrielle. He thinks he’s just stopping by to see me. I’ll tell him we just ran into each other. He’s not expecting anything. It’s just hello.

GABRIELLE. Very private, what does that mean? What’s wrong with him?

PHILIP. He’s good looking, he’s well off, he can be charming.

GABRIELLE. What does he do?

PHILIP. He’s in finance.

GABRIELLE. Ew.

PHILIP. I think he’s rich. On his way to rich, anyway.

GABRIELLE. And “he can be charming.”

PHILIP. He’s my brother. I don’t think of him the way women think of him. But he does well for himself. With women, I mean.

GABRIELLE. He doesn’t sound like the marrying type anymore than I am.

PHILIP. Sometimes, two people who aren’t the marrying type, *are* the type, for each other.

GABRIELLE. You’re very sweet, / but—

PHILIP. He’s not like me. He’s, he’s ... debonair.

GABRIELLE. Debonair?

PHILIP. Yes.

GABRIELLE. That is a ridiculous word. I can’t believe you just said “debonair.”

PHILIP. Well, he is!

GABRIELLE. But ... ?

PHILIP. No but.

GABRIELLE. You don’t usually have to matchmake with the handsome, successful ones.

PHILIP. Nor the beauties.

GABRIELLE. Meaning ... ?

PHILIP. It’s just hello. You’ll just happen to meet. Like you happen to meet a lot of people all the time, right? You meet people, you meet the friends of friends ...

GABRIELLE. The brother of the husband of a friend.

PHILIP. Yes!

GABRIELLE. You don’t.

PHILIP. What?

GABRIELLE. Don’t meet the brother of the husband of a friend unless you’re being set up. The brother I never knew existed of the husband of the friend? No.

PHILIP. Well, he doesn’t have to know that.

GABRIELLE. Smart guy?

PHILIP. Very. Brilliant.

GABRIELLE. He’ll know.

PHILIP. Oh.

GABRIELLE. I’ll just tell him.

PHILIP. Don’t!

GABRIELLE. You're not afraid of him, are you?

(Strange pause. PHILIP seems suspicious and upset.)

GABRIELLE *(cont'd)*. Did I say something wrong?

PHILIP. Why do you think I might be afraid of my brother?

GABRIELLE. Are you?

PHILIP. Of course not!

GABRIELLE. I didn't think so!

PHILIP. Good.

GABRIELLE *(awkward beat)*. Is he in the middle of a divorce? Is that it?

PHILIP. Never married.

GABRIELLE. Lone wolf?

PHILIP. Just private.

GABRIELLE. He sounds like he could have any woman he wants, from your description. Handsome, successful, intelligent. *Debonair*.

PHILIP. If it's just a matter of picking up a woman, he doesn't need anyone's help.

GABRIELLE. So it's not just a matter of ...

PHILIP. Uh, I'm not a procurer, Gabrielle. I'm hoping there may be a relationship here, you know?

GABRIELLE. I can't remember you ever mentioning your family, not at Thanksgiving, not at / Christmas—

PHILIP. My parents are both dead.

GABRIELLE. Oh. I'm sorry.

(This is awkward. All the fun has fizzled.)

GABRIELLE *(cont'd)*. So tell me! How did you and Chloe meet?

PHILIP. She never told you?

GABRIELLE. No, I don't think so!

PHILIP. She tells everyone.

GABRIELLE. You never told me.

PHILIP. It's the same story.

GABRIELLE. Well you didn't get set up, I know that.

PHILIP. We were a lot younger.

GABRIELLE. Oh great. That's great, Philip. Thank you. That is marvelous.

PHILIP. Crap. Sorry.

(Beat.)

GABRIELLE. I can't do this.

PHILIP. You can.

GABRIELLE. It's too close to home. You don't want my mess for your brother, Philip, you don't.

PHILIP. Gabrielle, he'll be here any minute. No commitment at all. You don't have to be afraid.

GABRIELLE. Maybe I'm just not up to debonair tonight.

(GABRIELLE has flung on her coat and grabbed her bag and positively flees—coming face to face with RIC, who's every bit as handsome and debonair as advertised. PHILIP is head down, maybe texting.)

RIC. Hello.

GABRIELLE. Hello.

RIC. I can't let you leave without telling me your name and everything else about you.

GABRIELLE. Wow. That is quite a line!

RIC. That was TERRIBLE! I can do much better. Let me buy you a drink and try that again.

GABRIELLE. Oh, this is a two part pick-up line.

RIC. I should never try that with someone so beautiful. You've heard it all.

GABRIELLE. Three-part now. You are well-practiced.

RIC. Actually, I'm shy. It helps to be prepared.

GABRIELLE. FOUR!

RIC. Have a drink with me.

GABRIELLE. One. And not here.

(RIC turns and gallantly offers his arm to GABRIELLE who playfully takes it. RIC exits with GABRIELLE. PHILIP, oblivious, slams the remains of his Manhattan. The brasserie sounds fade.)

SCENE 2: THE RIVERFRONT WALK

(RIC and GABRIELLE walking. Their rhythm is slow and luxurious, two people who are walking for the sake of being together, not in order to get somewhere. Moonlight, streetlight—bright enough but romantically soft, too.)

GABRIELLE. And that's all you need to know about me!

RIC. Mysterious.

GABRIELLE. You've told me less.

RIC. I've told you as much!

GABRIELLE. But most of it was lies.

(RIC freezes. GABRIELLE spins away, laughing.)

GABRIELLE *(cont'd)*. Ah ha! It was mostly lies! It's OK. I've been thoroughly entertained. I'm having a much better evening than I expected to have.

RIC. Oh that's not nice. But you make up for it.

GABRIELLE. I do want to know if you're married. And I want to see some ID and verify that you've told me your real name. Other than that I'm not going to press you, really. Those are the rules with me. No married men, no aliases. Other than that, have your stories.

(RIC gets out his wallet and hands over his driver's license.)

GABRIELLE *(cont'd)*. Frederic Hebert, never look at me like this. You look positively homicidal in this picture.

(She returns it.)

RIC. The DMV makes me feel that way. Can I see yours?

GABRIELLE. No.

RIC. Fair is fair.

GABRIELLE. My birthday is on my driver's license.

(An unseen taxi pulls up. GABRIELLE waves it off.)

GABRIELLE *(cont'd)*. No taxi!

RIC. Let me see your hands.

(She extends them. Perhaps he drags her under a streetlight to look more closely. He runs his fingers across the backs. Then he turns over one palm and kisses it.)

GABRIELLE. Mmm. You are playing the Latin lover to perfection.

RIC. Thirty-eight.

GABRIELLE. Bastard.

(She hands over her driver's license.)

RIC. Ha! Thirty-eight!

GABRIELLE. I wouldn't have shown you if you were wrong.

RIC. So now we know the essential things.

GABRIELLE. Wait! Are you married?

RIC. Not now, not ever. I mean, not so far.

GABRIELLE. No, you mean not ever.

(Another taxi. RIC waves it away.)

RIC. You?

GABRIELLE. Not married. Not ever.

(Another unseen taxi. GABRIELLE waves it off, annoyed.)

GABRIELLE *(cont'd)*. Why are we being hunted by taxis?

RIC. It's your shoes. They're very alluring. And not for walking.

GABRIELLE. I say they are.

(RIC offers his arm again, and GABRIELLE takes it. They walk, relaxed.)

GABRIELLE *(cont'd)*. Are you trying to seduce me by acting the perfectly unattached gentleman? It will work.

RIC. I am not trying to seduce you. I am succeeding.

GABRIELLE. Confident. Too confident. That's a little off.

(RIC pulls GABRIELLE around to face him and plants the most romantic and yet sexual kiss on her ever planted on a woman by a man. The kiss breaks. GABRIELLE is dazzled. A moment.)

GABRIELLE (*cont'd*). Yes.

RIC. That's all today. I want to see you again.

GABRIELLE. No. Now or never.

RIC. Really?

GABRIELLE. I don't trust you.

RIC. What? Why?

GABRIELLE. There's something wrong about you.

RIC. Get to know me better.

GABRIELLE. I'll find out what that something is. And then we'll be done. But we'll have spent days or weeks or months together, and it will hurt to let go. I'm not going to see you again. So make up your mind. Your place, now? Or nothing, ever.

RIC. You shouldn't go home with a man you don't trust.

GABRIELLE. I'd never go home with a man if I followed that advice.

(Without taking his eyes off her, RIC hails a taxi.)

SCENE 3: PHILIP & CHLOE AT HOME

(At the kitchen table, CHLOE is perusing several binders and files. PHILIP enters. It looks like she's doing their taxes old-school. She is not; she is looking at adoption forms.)

PHILIP. You started without me.

CHLOE. This feels ... wrong.

PHILIP. I thought you were sure this time.

CHLOE. I don't mean adopting. I mean this agency. These forms. It feels wrong. It feels cold.

PHILIP. We don't have to use them. They come recommended, but we don't have to use them.

CHLOE. I want an infant.

PHILIP. Which means open adoption.

CHLOE. Which I am fine with.

PHILIP. Which scares the hell out of me.

CHLOE. Which I prefer to going to a foreign country and bringing home a toddler. What if the mother didn't really want to give up her child? You read horror stories.

PHILIP. There are always horror stories. Don't read them. Most people have a good experience. If most people had a horror story, no one would do this.

CHLOE. You're home early. I had a plan to read through everything once and sort of absorb how I feel before you got here. Are you OK? How was your day?

PHILIP. Boring.

CHLOE. You seem agitated.

PHILIP. Nope.

(CHLOE's phone makes a blooping text sound. She checks it.)

CHLOE. "Not what P planned sorry." What does that mean?

PHILIP. Who's it from?

CHLOE. Gabrielle. Who's P? *(The text bleeps again.)* "Tell him I'm not the type but thank you." What type?

PHILIP. Actually, I ... I saw Gabrielle this evening.

CHLOE. Not the type for *what*, Philip?

PHILIP. I had this idea ...

CHLOE. If you proposed a three-way to my oldest friend—

PHILIP. No! No, no. I ... tried to set her up with someone. She didn't go for it. She thinks you put me up to it.

CHLOE. You tried to set up Gabrielle? On what? A blind date?

PHILIP. You wanted her to see a matchmaker!

CHLOE. You're not a matchmaker. You're my husband.

PHILIP. Should I even look at these files? If you don't like them—

CHLOE. Who.

PHILIP. Why do I need your permission to introduce someone to Gabrielle? You want her to—

CHLOE. WHO?!

PHILIP. The problem is—the problem is that Gabrielle doesn't like the whole idea of being set up, right? So I texted her to meet "us" and of course *she* thought that meant you and I—

CHLOE. You *texted* her?

PHILIP. So?

CHLOE. You're texting my friends?

PHILIP. She thought she was meeting *us*!

CHLOE. Where?

PHILIP. What?

CHLOE. Where did you meet?

PHILIP. Some huge French place. It was very loud. She picked it.

CHLOE. Marseilles.

PHILIP. That's it.

CHLOE. OK.

(CHLOE relaxes and goes back to looking at the files.)

PHILIP. What?

CHLOE. She never meets men there. It's her place. She doesn't want it cluttered up with ex-lovers and drama.

PHILIP. Oh. Maybe that's why.

(CHLOE gives him a questioning look.)

PHILIP *(cont'd)*. She didn't stay to meet him.

CHLOE. Who?

PHILIP. The guy. My brother.

(A deadly beat.)

CHLOE. Ric!?

PHILIP. I only have one brother living, Chloe, yes, Ric!

CHLOE. Are. You. Crazy??

(Beat. That one's actually a low blow.)

CHLOE *(cont'd)*. I'm sorry, Philip. But this is my friend.

PHILIP. Chloe. You're right. You're right. But—they both need someone. You've said it and said it about Gabrielle. And I've been thinking. Ric would do well—he'd be on solid ground—if he had a wife and some kind of responsibility to somebody else.

CHLOE. He's a *psychopath*.

PHILIP. A highly functional—

CHLOE. You introduced my oldest friend to a diagnosed psychopath!

PHILIP. It's managed!

CHLOE. He's out of his fucking mind!

PHILIP. He's one of the most in-control people I know!

CHLOE. Because if he let himself go everyone would instantly realize that he is insane!

PHILIP. He's not insane. He's in his right mind. He's demonstrated that.

CHLOE. Oh I need a drink.

PHILIP. Chloe—

CHLOE. I can just picture you in Marseille, fiddling with a cocktail—

PHILIP. I tried a Manhattan. I think I like whiskey straight—

CHLOE. Ric and Gabrielle. What did you really think would happen?

PHILIP. It didn't happen. She ran. Well, not immediately. She was polite to me. But nothing happened. Right. You need a drink.

(PHILIP goes to kitchen area to make CHLOE a drink.)

CHLOE. Make me a cocktail. Everyone has had a cocktail but me. I've never told her about Ric and Mikey or any of it. You made me swear never to tell anyone.

PHILIP. There's only beer.

CHLOE. Isn't that a perfect metaphor.

PHILIP. Do we have Worcestershire?

CHLOE. I think so.

PHILIP. And Clamato?

CHLOE. What the hell are you doing?

PHILIP. Hebert family beer.

CHLOE. I've known you for over twenty years and tonight you pull out a family recipe?

PHILIP. When I changed my name I dropped everything that went with it. But you want a cocktail. And there's nothing but beer. So ...

CHLOE. Is your family stuff going to stop the adoption, Philip?

PHILIP. Not as long as I'm Philip Hermes—no relation to the scarf.

CHLOE. It's going to come out.

PHILIP. It hasn't come out in—it never has.

CHLOE. If we get caught—

PHILIP. We join the family felons. You knew this about me—you're the only one who knows. I never misled you. The day I knew I was serious about you, I told you everything. And you didn't speak to me for a fucking month.

I Thought I Knew You

By
PHILIP J. KAPLAN

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I Thought I Knew You premiered at Stage Left Theater (Spokane, Wash.) on March 22, 2024.

CAST:

AMANDA..... Rebecca Craven
LEO..... Tom Sanderson
JEN..... Abby Burlingame
CODY Barin Saxton

PRODUCTION:

Director Susan Hardie
Scenic Design..... Jeremy Whittington
Asst. Scenic Design & Props Design..... James Landsiedel
Lighting Design Isabella Hurrell
Costume Design..... Joy Wood & Neva White

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*I Thought I Knew You* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Stage Left Theater in Spokane, Wash.”

I Thought I Knew You

CHARACTERS

AMANDA: 50s, Leo's wife and Jen and Cody's mother.

LEO: 50s, Amanda's husband and Jen and Cody's father.

JEN: 30s, Cody's twin sister.

CODY: 30s, Jen's twin brother.

SETTING: A dining room. One door leads to the kitchen, the other to the entrance hallway. A set of stairs leads to the second floor.

I Thought I Knew You

ACT I

Scene 1

(LEO is sitting at the dining room table. The phone starts ringing. He ignores it. It stops. After a moment, it starts ringing again. His wife, AMANDA, comes in from outside wearing a coat.)

AMANDA. Aren't you going to get that?

LEO. No.

(The phone rings a few more times, and AMANDA finally answers.)

AMANDA. Hello? ... Yes ... No ... I don't want to talk about it ...
I have nothing to say! ... Don't call again.

(She hangs up. After a moment the phone rings. LEO takes the batteries out of the phone.)

AMANDA *(cont'd)*. Do we really have to?

LEO. The calls are nonstop. I should have turned it off earlier, but ...

(Beat.)

AMANDA. But?

LEO. Easier to let it ring.

AMANDA. Have you been sitting here all day?

LEO. It's possible. How was your shift?

AMANDA. I'm glad I went in. I had to get away. They need me ...
and ... everything here reminds me of ...

LEO. I know.

AMANDA. I got a lot of looks at work. They were shocked I went in. But what I was going to do here? Should I have stayed home with you?

LEO. No. I'm doing enough brooding for the both of us.

AMANDA. Driving up I passed a news van parked down the road.
Did they—

LEO. Why the hell are they still here! I said I wasn't ever gonna talk to them! I don't want to talk to anyone! I want to pretend this didn't happen. They won't let me.

AMANDA. They're just doing their job.

LEO. Let them do it somewhere else.

(Beat.)

AMANDA. What if there's an emergency?

LEO. More of an emergency?

AMANDA. A different emergency. We might need the phone.

LEO. I'll put the batteries back if there's a different emergency.

AMANDA. I mean if someone else has an emergency and needs to call us.

LEO. We are last on everyone's contact list.

(AMANDA takes off her coat. She's still wearing some hospital clothes.)

AMANDA. Why do they want to talk to us?

LEO. Because they can't talk to ... Cody.

AMANDA. They found another one ... did you see the news?

LEO. I saw.

AMANDA. That makes five ... that makes five!

LEO. I CAN COUNT! I KNOW IT'S FIVE!

AMANDA. Don't yell at me!

LEO. I'M NOT ... can we change the subject ... or not talk?

AMANDA. I'm going upstairs.

LEO. I didn't mean to yell.

AMANDA. I'm going upstairs to change out of my clothes.

LEO. I'm sorry. Don't be mad.

AMANDA. I'm not ... at you.

(AMANDA hugs LEO.)

AMANDA. We'll get through this.

LEO. How?

(AMANDA lets go of LEO.)

AMANDA. Faith.

LEO. I need something more concrete.

AMANDA. I had a thought.

LEO. Let's hear it.

AMANDA. I ... I want to reach out.

LEO. To who?

AMANDA. The families.

LEO. No.

AMANDA. Think about it.

LEO. No.

AMANDA. I wouldn't call. It wouldn't be a phone call.

LEO. No!

AMANDA. I'd ... I'd write a letter.

LEO. They don't want to hear from us.

AMANDA. A note. A short note.

LEO. Saying what?

AMANDA. Saying I'm sorry.

LEO. Deepest condolences. Sorry our son killed your daughter.

That what you want?

AMANDA. No, not that. But you know Cody didn't mean to kill them.

LEO. That will be quite the comfort. Sorry our son *accidentally* killed your daughter.

AMANDA. He warned them to evacuate! They could have listened.

LEO. Dear Grieving Parent, why didn't your stupid child listen to our psychotic son and leave before being blown to bits! Would that have been too much to ask!

AMANDA. Leo!

LEO. Sorry.

AMANDA. Sorry?

LEO. Yeah. Sorry. I'm sorry we raised a monster. I'm sorry Cody was ever born. I'm sorry I miss him. I'm sorry that if he were alive, I'd forgive him in a second and go broke defending our

worthless son. I'm sorry I resent the people he killed ... and I'm sorry I said anything. I should have kept this to myself.

AMANDA. Talking is good.

LEO. It isn't. It doesn't change anything. And it makes me feel worse.

AMANDA. You don't have to talk.

LEO. Can you make me forget?

AMANDA. No.

LEO. I want to forget. But I can't.

AMANDA. I won't contact the families.

LEO. Good.

AMANDA. I still want to do something.

LEO. That's why you're better than me.

JEN (*offstage*). Mom! Dad!

AMANDA. Jen?

(JEN enters, still wearing a coat.)

JEN. You're OK! I was so worried about you!

AMANDA. What are you doing here?

JEN. I was out of my mind worried about you.

AMANDA. Why?

JEN. Why? Because of what happened! And because you didn't answer your phone or reply to any of my texts! I thought you might be dead too!

AMANDA. We did call. Right, Leo?

LEO. Right.

JEN. Dad left a voicemail, "Cody's dead, don't worry."

AMANDA. Leo! You said you spoke to her.

LEO. I did. Well, I spoke to her machine. Is that the message I left?

JEN. Yes! And I heard it on the news before I heard your message!

LEO. Well ... I don't want you to worry.

JEN. Mission unaccomplished. Dad, I called you twenty times!

LEO. Why didn't you call your mom?

JEN. Because you trained me not to call her when she's at the hospital, and stupidly I ... doesn't matter, I'm here now! ... Are you a hundred percent sure it was Cody?

LEO. The police are.

AMANDA. Yesterday they knew it was Cody's van. This morning, they identified Cody.

JEN. Cody blew himself up.

LEO. And five other people.

JEN. Fucking asshole!

AMANDA. Jen!

LEO. She's right. Fucking asshole.

AMANDA. Leo!

JEN. Goddamn him. I mean, what the fuck? ... Why?

AMANDA. You didn't have to come. That's a long drive.

JEN. Are you kidding? I mean, jeez. I mean, Cody blowing himself up. And ... I was worried.

AMANDA. We're fine.

JEN. I don't think you are.

LEO. I'm glad you're here. But ... well, I'm glad you're here.

AMANDA. So am I.

LEO. I didn't answer the phone because the press got our number. And crazy people got our number and—

AMANDA. You must be starving.

LEO. What is wrong with me. I should have called again.

AMANDA. Tonight's a microwave dinner. I probably have enough.

LEO. I should have called in person.

AMANDA. The frozen food isn't vegetarian. I'll make spaghetti. But the sauce might have meat in it.

JEN. Stop! I can't think about food, and I desperately have to pee. Hold those thoughts.

(JEN exits quickly.)

LEO. I was sitting here all day, and I could have called her. I just sat stewing. Why did I leave that message?

AMANDA. Leo, pull yourself together. I need you to focus.

LEO. On what?

AMANDA. Dinner. I need help with dinner.

LEO. What do you want me to do?

AMANDA. Salad. Wash the lettuce. Chop the lettuce. Oh! The dressing!

LEO. What about the dressing?

AMANDA. Jen had a fit the last time when we gave her dressing that had fish in it.

LEO. Let's not do that.

AMANDA. I don't remember which dressing was the problem.

LEO. I'll ask her.

AMANDA. No! It would mean we didn't remember. So, job number one, check the dressing labels.

LEO. What about fried onions? I can make fried onions. Jen loved my friend onions.

AMANDA. No.

LEO. No?

AMANDA. It was Cody. Cody loved your onions.

(JEN enters.)

JEN. That feels better.

AMANDA. Rest, you must be tired.

JEN. Mom, I'm here to help. What do you want me to do?

AMANDA. I don't need any help. I'm fine.

JEN. Of course, Sonia must have been here helping.

AMANDA. I haven't spoken to Sonia.

JEN. What? Why?

LEO. We'll take care of dinner.

JEN. OK ... so you must need help. I'll help with other things.

AMANDA. What other things.

JEN. There's probably paperwork, right?

AMANDA. I suppose.

JEN. And what about the funeral? Where and when? *(Long pause.)*

Mom? ... Dad? The funeral ... you're having a funeral, right?

AMANDA. Leo.

LEO. No funeral.

JEN. Why?

AMANDA. Can we discuss this after dinner? Or tomorrow ... or never.

LEO. It's a little raw.

JEN. You need a funeral. At least for closure. It's not for Cody, it's for us.

AMANDA. Jen, you said you wanted to help.

JEN. I did.

AMANDA. You drove all the way from Boston to help.

JEN. I did. I'm very concerned about—

AMANDA. Here's how you can help ... distract us.

JEN. But—

LEO. Your mom's right.

AMANDA. You're helping by being here.

LEO. We don't want to think.

AMANDA. Not today. Understand?

JEN. I do.

AMANDA. Thanks for coming.

(Beat.)

LEO. I can make fried onions for dinner.

JEN. If you want to. But, honestly, not a big fan. Cody. Cody loved fried onions.

Interlude 1

(Pre-recorded audio.)

REPORTER. I'm standing at the site of Saturday's bombing on South Fifth street. Behind me, FBI agents are sifting through mountains of debris, looking for more victims and an explanation. While the bomber, Cody Davis, has been identified, his motive for this horrific explosion remains unknown and may never be known, but according to authorities, it's early in the investigation.

Scene 2

(Midnight, the dining room. It's dark. JEN enters dressed in a bathrobe, carrying an open laptop, which provides the only light. She puts the laptop on the table. Lights may be raised slowly throughout.)

JEN. Connectivity! A beautiful thing.

(She types for a moment and stares intently at the screen. She does not notice the person behind her.)

CODY. Hey, sis.

(JEN gives a startled shriek. Then another shriek as she fully takes in CODY. He looks pale and disheveled. JEN backs away from CODY.)

JEN. Cody?

CODY. Long time no see.

JEN. Cody ... how did you—you're alive?—I thought you were dead!

CODY. Do I look dead?

JEN. You don't look good. Where the hell have you been? Why did you do it? I miss you. I fucking hate you.

CODY. Good to see you too, sis.

JEN. What the hell is going on?

CODY. I will have to get back to you on the what the hell is going on question. There are so many moving parts and pieces that don't fit together. But it's all true. It'll blow your mind.

JEN. What the fuck does that mean?

CODY. Blow your mind? It's a figure of speech.

JEN. Not that. The parts and pieces. And you're supposed to be dead! You exploded. Your mind was literally blown.

CODY. You're funny, sis.

JEN. I don't understand.

CODY. If I'm being honest, I don't either. Things are fuzzy. For example, where am I?

JEN. Mom and Dad's house.

CODY. Vermont?

JEN. Yes.

CODY. Not Louisville?

JEN. Vermont.

CODY. How'd I get to Vermont?

JEN. You tell me!

CODY. Are you screwing around?

JEN. Why would I do that?

CODY. This isn't a joke! Don't play with me! What's going on!

JEN. My brother did a crazy thing and now he's attacking me.

CODY. There's gotta be more. This is fake! A set.

JEN. Look around, they haven't redecorated in twenty years. And still no cell service. It's like the stone age here.

CODY. When we were seven, we went under the dining room table and carved something. Tell me what we carved.

JEN. I carved a cross, and you carved a peace symbol.

CODY. Is it still there?

JEN. Are you gonna make me crawl under the table?

CODY. Yes.

(JEN crawls under the table.)

JEN. It's still there. Wanna see?

CODY. I'll take your word.

JEN. Decent of you.

(JEN comes out from under the table.)

CODY. I have to get to Louisville. Can you drive me? Like right now.

JEN. You have a ton of explaining to do.

CODY. Don't turn on the light!

JEN. How did you know I—

CODY. I just did. Don't.

JEN. Dark then. We'll talk in the dark.

CODY. I gotta think. It's fuzzy. My thoughts ... I'm at the house. Why? How? What's the connection?

JEN. They said you set off a car bomb.

CODY. Who told you that?

JEN. It was in the news! On TV.

CODY. Well, that's progress. That's making an impact.

JEN. No! It's horrible! Tell me you didn't do it!

CODY. I wanted to tell you, I really did, but—

JEN. Damn you! ... The only thing—the *only* thing that kept me going was the hope that the police had it wrong!

CODY. It was me in the van, all right. That's the last thing I remember. I was in the van, and now I'm here. Did they say anything about the tunnel on the news?

JEN. No. Nothing about a tunnel.

CODY. You see! They're already hiding the evidence! I gotta get back!

JEN. Pretend I don't know what you're talking about.

CODY. I'm a hero. Can you understand that?

JEN. No, I can't. I can't understand a word you're saying. It's gibberish!

CODY. I'll break it down for you.

JEN. Please.

CODY. But this is going to put you in danger. Are you sure you want to know? Ignorance is safer.

JEN. That's never true.

CODY. You'll be a target.

JEN. Focus! Eyes on me! Fucking talk!

CODY. OK—OK—I'll talk, boss lady. This is some heavy-duty shit, with—the federal reserve is—no, that's not a good place to start ... and the Rothschilds. No. OK. I think you'll understand this. Something's wrong with the world. You can see that, right? Things don't work the way they used to. No job security. We're in a surveillance state. Nothing's getting better. You could throw up your hand and say, "shit happens, not my problem," or you can dig deeper and do something! Cryptocurrency is taking over. The media lies. 9/11. The Iraq War. What do they have in common? Fear. Manipulation! You can trace it further back. World War I was the accidental war. It served no one. Right? Wrong! It was by design! Even little things. Your check bounces but you can prove you had the funds. Accident, or deliberate? All through history you can find patterns of manipulation and deceit. Look at the Egyptians! The pyramids! Who built them? You with me? ... Sis? ... Jen?

JEN. I'm listening.

CODY. They exist, they're real and they're not human.

JEN. Who?

CODY. This is the part that's going to be hard to believe.

JEN. I'm still listening.

CODY. Lizard people.

JEN. Oh, Cody.

CODY. You can't see them. They blend in, I mean, they look like real people—even close up. How do they do that? Mental projection. They make you see what they want you to see. But at their essence, at their core, they're intelligent lizards. Their symbol is a moon with two stars, and I found it—

JEN. Stop.

CODY. They mark the tunnels and—

JEN. Stop!

CODY. Too much to take in?

JEN. You murdered five people because of an insane delusion.

CODY. No!

JEN. You killed five people.

CODY. I did not.

JEN. Then what did you do?

CODY. I killed five lizards!

JEN. You murdered five human beings.

CODY. Oh, you're an expert then? You sifted through the rubble. You got into the tunnel. You checked their DNA.

JEN. They were people.

CODY. I warned everyone. I had a loudspeaker. "Get out of the area, a bomb is about to go off!" If you heard that a bomb was about to go off, you'd leave right? *If* you were a human. These were not humans!

JEN. One of the victims was deaf.

CODY. Don't give me that crap. I got those liz-tard mother fuckers fair and square!

JEN. They are—they were—human. People—with names.

CODY. Where'd you learn that? From the lizards?

JEN. You're crazy.

CODY. That's the best you got? Sure, everything's going to look crazy if you're ignorant. That's why I gotta get back. They're filling in the tunnel as we speak. They're covering up the evidence! They're going to frame me! Don't let them frame me.

JEN. What happened to you?

CODY. I opened my eyes. I'm sorry you won't open yours.

(Beat.)

Eating Blackberries

By
PAM HARBAUGH

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(EATING BLACKBERRIES)

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Eating Blackberries was premiered by the Hickory Community Theatre (Hickory, N.C.) on April 5, 2024.

CAST:

ELIZABETH Holley A. Dagenhardt
JACKSON..... Hudson Ackerman
PAUL Paul Sapp
SOFÍALisa Aquino

PRODUCTION:

Director Eric Seale
Dramaturg David VanCleave
Scenic/Lighting Designer/Technical Director..... Duane Pagano
Costume designer..... Emma Lee Kurts
Sound design..... Eric Seale
Stage manager Bethany Spears

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*Eating Blackberries* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Hickory Community Theatre in Hickory, N.C.”

Eating Blackberries

CHARACTERS

ELIZABETH ASHCROFT: 40. An earthy, artsy type. A former literature professor, she is now a writer with a growing number of rejections. A kind and generous person, she has a solid relationship with her son, Jackson. She struggles over her feelings for her ex.

JACKSON ASHCROFT: On the cusp of 18. He is strong, funny, a smart-ass and a thinker. Protective over his mother, he is easily angered by his father and blames him for all that is wrong. He works as a lifeguard and has a swimming scholarship.

PAUL ASHCROFT: 40. Elizabeth's ex-husband and Jackson's father, now married to Sofia. He made a fortune in the real estate market. A painful mix of narcissism and guilt, he wants everyone to be happy, especially himself. He agonizes over Jackson's antipathy.

SOFÍA ASHCROFT: 24. Married to Paul, pregnant with their first child. Latina, former real estate agent in Paul's office, she now teaches yoga and has big dreams. She looks great in yoga pants, even while pregnant. She grew up poor and has more strength and determination than her uptalk and Valleyspeak suggest.

TIME: May to August, 2022

PLACE: The Ashcroft home in Orinda, California, in the San Francisco Bay Area.

PRODUCTION NOTES

TECH: The sound design is a fifth character here. It should impart the outside threats of fires, fierce nature and low rumbles, cracks and thuds of earthquakes. Further, for the earthquakes, show your cast being thrown off balance and props falling.

INTIMACY: Depending on your cast and how far you want to go for your typical audience, you may want to employ an intimacy coach in two scenes.

PROFANITY: The director has permission to soften the profanity if they deem it prudent for their company and its typical audience.

“Nature is about balance. All the world comes in pairs—yin and yang, right and wrong, men and women; what’s pleasure without pain?”

—Angelina Jolie

Eating Blackberries

ACT I

(Lights up on an open area family room. A counter divides the space from the kitchen. Moving boxes are scattered about. There are three exits—one to the front door, a patio door to the outdoors and one to the hallway leading to the bedrooms. There is a fireplace. Distant siren gets louder, then returns into far distance. JACKSON enters through the patio door. He carries two pails of blackberries, which he puts onto the counter. He pops a couple in his mouth. He crosses to turn off the AC, sees a large kingsnake behind a moving box and tenderly picks it up.)

JACKSON. Nope. Henry. You don't belong in here.

(He exits through the patio door with the snake. Wind chimes sound. ELIZABETH enters from the front door with mail, a bottle of wine in a paper bag and an urn. She tosses her keys onto the counter along with the bag and mail. She turns on a nearby speaker, fiddles with her phone. The "Lacrimosa" from Mozart's Requiem plays. We hear the sound of JACKSON urinating into the pool. It's a strong, youthful stream followed by a little plop. He re-enters, zipping up.)

JACKSON *(cont'd, sees urn, stops short)*. Noooooo ...

ELIZABETH. Yes ... I murdered all my darlings. Poof! "The Last of Paul" now lives in the fiery underground with all its siblings, snug in this urn of failures ...

JACKSON. What? Mom, you need to make it work.

(He turns the music to something more lighthearted, eats more blackberries.)

ELIZABETH. I'm fine.

JACKSON. Not with all those bills you aren't.

ELIZABETH. I'm fine. Don't worry about it. Everything's gonna be OK.

(JACKSON looks at her unconvinced.)

ELIZABETH (*cont'd*). My editor wants more “contemporary context,” more “honesty.”

(JACKSON continues to look at her, then, audible sigh)

ELIZABETH (*cont'd*). I don’t want my book to hurt anyone ... I’m talking about your / father.

JACKSON. I know!

ELIZABETH. Don’t think I want him back, because I don’t want him back.

JACKSON. I hope not.

ELIZABETH. I don’t.

JACKSON. Good. So get fierce. Be a truth teller!

ELIZABETH (*changing the subject*). Why is it so hot in here? I can’t breathe it’s so hot.

(ELIZABETH opens the fridge, hangs onto its door. The power goes out.)

ELIZABETH (*cont'd*). Noooo ...

(Cellphones ping.)

JACKSON (*reading his cellphone*). PG&E’s working on the grid.

(Power returns. A speaker says “Ready to Connect” repeatedly.)

JACKSON (*cont'd*). Ugh. This speaker has been doing this all day, whenever the power goes out and comes back on. *(He turns off the speaker.)*

ELIZABETH. Connection is an illusion. Did you know that, Jackson? It’s nature’s magic trick. You can’t truly touch anyone, or anything ... there’s this tiny space between you and ... whoever it is you are trying to touch. The molecules in your skin ... the atoms in those molecules ... with an army of electrons protecting their nucleus keeping you away—

JACKSON. Touching and connecting are two different things.

(JACKSON goes back to packing. ELIZABETH adds items to the box.)

JACKSON *(cont'd)*. Mom! You're dripping all over me.

ELIZABETH. Did you turn off the AC?

JACKSON. Of course I turned it off.

ELIZABETH *(resetting the AC)*. Just for today ... OK?

JACKSON. Worsening drought ... then the wind—

ELIZABETH. There's not even a breeze / out there.

JACKSON. The wind snaps all the dried-up twigs off the trees and they blow onto power lines ... sizzle, pop ... and they catch fire and the hill over there burns up ... we are an invasive species and have brought ecologic and economic harm to our world ... now we're all endangered, Mom ... at risk of vanishing. All because we're "hot."

ELIZABETH *(off his preachiness)*. "Let thunder rumble. Let lightning spit fire!"

(JACKSON doesn't respond.)

ELIZABETH *(cont'd)*. What? No King Lear?

(Cellphones ping.)

JACKSON *(reading text message)*. Winds are supposed to pick up later.

ELIZABETH *(opening a bill)*. What's this? What the ... hey ... hey! ... Here's the cherry on top of moving day! Your father goes on a vacation and my name's on the bill. Oh! He's traveling already? No one really knows if it's safe yet to ... *(To herself, worried, sudden tears.)* That's too soon, Paul Ashcroft! You're not invincible. You ... dick! They went to Puerto Vallarta!

JACKSON. So?

ELIZABETH. He's high risk—

JACKSON. No he isn't. And the vaccines work.

ELIZABETH. His low blood pressure—

JACKSON. When's the last time he fainted?

ELIZABETH. She wouldn't know the first thing to do. I hate him so much.

(JACKSON is silent, then another audible sigh.)

ELIZABETH *(cont'd, still crying)*. I do. I hate him.

JACKSON. You should.

ELIZABETH. Why didn't he use one of his own credit cards? Did you know they were going on a trip?

JACKSON. All we do is grab burgers and sit there and eat and check our cellphones. He asks me how my grades are and if I'm still on the swim team and if I'm still doing laps in "his" pool. Then he drops me off at BART. That's it.

(Cellphones ping.)

JACKSON *(cont'd, checks cellphone, worrying)*. The fire's in Danville now. We are an invasive species, and we're being exterminated.

(ELIZABETH wants to hug him, but she's so sweaty. They look at each other, a sea of understanding.)

JACKSON *(cont'd)*. I bet their stupid baby will get my room ... This is our home. Our backyard is so righteous ... *(Looking outdoors.)* My fort, I built that! ... The deer by the creek—

ELIZABETH. Eating my roses—

JACKSON. The fog coming in—

(Sound of a bear and cubs tromping through bushes.)

JACKSON *(cont'd)*. Whoa! They're back! Look! The bear and her cubs ... they're heading for the blackberries again. The heat made 'em ripe early. I got a whole bunch this morning. Here, taste.

(JACKSON hands bowl of blackberries to ELIZABETH. They watch bears and eat blackberries, surprised at the taste.)

ELIZABETH. Mmm. So sweet! All those thorny thickets ... taking over the ravine, climbing ...

JACKSON. Up to the edge of the house ... *(Playfully, taking bowl back.)* Don't eat all of them!

(Sound of bears lapping water.)

JACKSON (*cont'd*). No, no ... the bears are drinking from the pool.
Shoo! Hey ... get outta there.

(*JACKSON steps outdoors, waving hands, shouting "shoo!"*
ELIZABETH pulls him back inside and closes the door.)

ELIZABETH. Let 'em drink. It's hot and they're thirsty.

JACKSON (*suddenly, almost in tears*). But I pissed in the pool.

ELIZABETH. I know.

JACKSON (*crying*). Why did I do that? I pissed in the pool.

ELIZABETH. Everything is everything, baby. Bears and piss.
Blackberries and thorns. Your father and ... her. "The air is full
of our cries."

JACKSON. Too easy. Beckett. "Godot."

ELIZABETH. You are right, sir!

(*Sound of bears leaving.*)

JACKSON. They're leaving ... I'm gonna miss this.

ELIZABETH (*forced upbeat, fighting tears*). We'll find new
thickets ... maybe I'll get a cat ... or a dog ... no, a cat ... I'll ...
we'll ... um ... uh ... when you're gone at school, I'll have ... I
dunno ... time to ... um ...

JACKSON. I fucking hate him for hurting you.

ELIZABETH (*kissing his cheek*). You're too smart to settle for that
word.

(*Beat. JACKSON waits for ELIZABETH to get back to work so
she does not see him wipe her sweat off his cheek. The emotionally
wounded mother and son take good care of each other.*)

(*Cellphones ping. They look at their phones. ELIZABETH goes
back to bills. JACKSON picks up a box and exits through front
door. ELIZABETH watches him leave, delighting in what she
sees. Wind chimes slowly sound, softly.*)

ELIZABETH (*cont'd, to herself*). Nothing will be the same. It's no
fair. Paul gets a brand new life, and I get pried out of my home
... *Spasibo*, Natasha. (*Cellphone pings. She reads the message.*)
There are no winds! It's not time.

(Wind chimes slowly stop. JACKSON re-enters, eats a couple more blackberries.)

JACKSON. I'm hungry ... did you pack up all the food?

ELIZABETH. Look in the fridge.

(JACKSON fills a saucepan with cereal and milk. Grabs a serving spoon, sits on the counter and eats.)

JACKSON. Dad should give you his credit card. *(Beat.)* It's freezing in here.

(ELIZABETH takes the bottle of wine from the paper bag, tries to open its twist top but can't. JACKSON opens it for her and exits to his room. She fills a glass.)

ELIZABETH *(calling after JACKSON)*. What will I do when you're at college?

JACKSON *(offstage)*. Chico's only a couple hours away.

ELIZABETH *(raising her glass, calling)*. "He had not time to say 'alack,' before the bear was on his back."

JACKSON *(offstage)*. It's California. No one has read *The Three Sisters*.

ELIZABETH. You have.

JACKSON. 'Cause you made me read it. When I was like, thirteen. *(Imitating his mother.)* "It's a comedy. You'll love it."

(JACKSON enters from his bedroom, wearing a furry looking jacket and putting on a hat. He has fun with this. Makes bear noises. Eats blackberries.)

ELIZABETH *(seeing what he's wearing)*. Oh my ... what are you ... you little ...

(ELIZABETH playfully yanks hat off, swipes at him with it. He dodges. She chases.)

Sound of a car door closing. Power goes out, then on. The speaker says "Ready to connect" repeatedly. The game continues as PAUL enters. He holds a box marked "Elizabeth & Paul." The speaker is still going.

ELIZABETH and JACKSON see him and stop their “game.”)

ELIZABETH (*cont’d*). Paul!

(JACKSON turns off the speaker, retreats, takes off coat, etc.)

ELIZABETH (*cont’d, caught off-guard*). Hi ... oh ... oh ...

PAUL. The door was open.

ELIZABETH. So you can’t knock? It’s not your place until tomorrow.

PAUL. Actually, it is ... as of three months ago.

(Silence.)

ELIZABETH (*to JACKSON*). Say hi to your father.

(Silence.)

PAUL. I, uh, wanted to get this back to you.

(JACKSON approaches PAUL.)

JACKSON. I’ll take it.

(ELIZABETH refills her glass and enjoys the following confrontation.)

PAUL. Man ... you’re getting tall.

(JACKSON does not respond.)

PAUL (*cont’d*). Hope you’re takin’ care of numero uno, right? (*Raising his finger.*) Always gotta take care of yourself first, right? Numero uno ...

JACKSON. Box. (*Taking the box from PAUL.*) That’s it then, no more? Surprise visits ... here, or at the apartment?

PAUL. No. No more surprise ... and if I do drop by, I ... uh ... I guess I’ll call first, which of course means it wouldn’t be a surprise visit.

(Silence. Awkward pause. PAUL lets out uncomfortable laugh.)

PAUL (*cont'd, to ELIZABETH*). Uh ... you're almost all moved out ... I mean ... ready to move into ... into your new ... uhhhh ...

JACKSON. Apartment ... Dad, our little apartment. With one bedroom and a crappy little community pool. (*Raising finger, imitating his father.*) Not exactly “numero uno.”

(*JACKSON stares down his father. No one wants PAUL there.*)

PAUL. Damn it's cold in here.

ELIZABETH. I'm hot.

PAUL. It's gorgeous outside—

JACKSON. Mom needs money.

PAUL. You got the AC on? You should open some windows—

JACKSON. Mom needs money.

PAUL. What for now?

JACKSON. Food. Those bills.

PAUL. You should be set, at least for the next few months ... the office sent a check on Monday. They'll send another next month. I just got you the apartment. Had your furniture moved ... you're getting that advance from your editor.

(*JACKSON points to the urn.*)

PAUL (*cont'd*). Oh ... no, no, no ... I thought you had a contract.

ELIZABETH. My editor wants “more.” So I ... need more ... from ... you.

(*PAUL hauls out a wad of cash.*)

JACKSON. You should get Mom a credit card in her own name, Dad.

(*Sound of another car door. JACKSON crosses to the window and looks out.*)

JACKSON (*cont'd*). Oh good. A party.

(*JACKSON crosses to door, opens it to reveal SOFÍA, in yoga pants, very pregnant, holding a peace lily and keys. SOFÍA enters.*)

ELIZABETH. You!

PAUL. No ... no, Sofia, no, no ...

SOFÍA. A little drop in before yoga. And, Paul, like duh, you forgot her housewarming present. You can tuck this into your moving van, right? It's called a peace lily? I'm pretty sure it needs literally buckets of water.

JACKSON (*refilling the cereal bowl*). Really? It's like a freakin' drought out there!

(*SOFÍA sets the plant down next to the urn, which startles her.*)

ELIZABETH (*raising a glass in another toast to the urn*). My latest victim.

PAUL. Elizabeth's rejected manuscripts. She likes the symbolism.

ELIZABETH. The most recently deceased is "The Last of Paul."

SOFÍA (*to PAUL*). So it's not getting published? She's not getting the advance?

ELIZABETH. Dirt to dirt. Ashcrofts to ashes. Photos. Marriage certificate. Letters. *Ciao!*

(*ELIZABETH finishes her glass, pours more.*)

SOFÍA. That is like literally the weirdest thing ... anyway, Elizabeth, your leasing office sent the extra set of keys to the wrong Mrs. Ashcroft! I guess they automatically deliver them to the billing address.

JACKSON. I'll take those.

PAUL. You should be resting, Sofia.

SOFÍA. I'm fine ... other than yoga there's literally nothing to do. And we're all packed. We're heading to Ventana in Big Sur for our babymoon tomorrow? They've just reopened after months and months of quarantine. So it'll be super clean.

JACKSON. That's gotta cost—

SOFÍA (*ignoring JACKSON*). Aaaand there's literally going to be a full moon tomorrow night?

JACKSON. Full moon's tonight.

SOFÍA. Whatever ... *una luna llena*. Right, Paulie? Go on, say it. Go on ... like I taught you.

PAUL & SOFÍA. *Una luna llena.*

SOFÍA. We'll be there for all of next week while the contractors and all their workers fix up that bedroom for Eduardo. This place literally needs a ton of work ...

ELIZABETH. Business must be very good indeed, Paulie.

JACKSON (*to ELIZABETH*). Told ya.

SOFÍA. Can you believe it, even with all these fires people are still moving out of the cities ... this house is in a good spot.

JACKSON (*eating blackberries*). Not so sure about that. Never know when an invasive species is going to move in ... millions of years ago, this was all under water and there were whales and starfish swimming all around. Probably right here! Then mastodons and hyenas.

PAUL. Evolution, Jackson. It happens.

JACKSON. Invasion you mean. Indigenous people, who came from somewhere else themselves ... conquistadors, pilgrims, the English, the Germans, / the Irish—

PAUL. Manifest Destiny! We're adventurous ...

JACKSON. Invaders pushing people out of their homes ... did you know there's a giant First Nations' burial ground on the eleventh hole at the Orinda Country Club? Like, what happened there?!

PAUL. Ha! No, son ... that's myth.

JACKSON. It's not—

PAUL (*pretends to tee off*). It's called the graveyard hole because it swallows so many golf balls. Ha!

JACKSON. That's the myth!

(Cellphones ping. All look at their phones.)

SOFÍA. "Impacted areas have been updated?" Ohmygod. If the power thing goes all the way down to Big Sur I'm going to be sooo upset.

PAUL. The winds are going to / pick up later.

ELIZABETH. We all know about the winds. (*Opening the front door.*) I beg you. Both. Please. We got the box ... the plant ... the keys ... Jackson and I have work to do. Boxes, bills ...

SOFÍA (*to PAUL*). Have you?

PAUL (*to SOFÍA*). Not yet.

SOFÍA (to PAUL). Of course not ...

ELIZABETH (still holding the door open). Maybe even rewrites.

SOFÍA. You're going to make that apartment so adorable. I knew the minute I found it that it would be amazing for you and Jackson.

(Beat.)

PAUL. No, no ... no ... no ... JACKSON. Three, two, one ...

ELIZABETH (closing door). Wait wait wait ... I'm going to be living in a place YOU found? For my son and me?

SOFÍA. And it's gonna be like literally / perfect, right?

ELIZABETH (to PAUL, exploding). What ... *scheisse* is / all this?

JACKSON. And we have lift off.

SOFÍA (babytalk to her belly). Ooooo ... I bet I know what that means. Eduardo really doesn't like that nasty word, does he?

JACKSON. Approaching main engine / cut off ...

ELIZABETH. Jackson, don't move one more box. We're staying here.

JACKSON. MECO and / separation ...

PAUL (to SOFÍA). She's not serious.

(SOFÍA has her own little explosion, moves around the home, JACKSON follows her, acting like he's in zero gravity.)

SOFÍA (to PAUL). She can't ... we've got workers ... they're coming tomorrow!

PAUL (to ELIZABETH). You're not serious.

(SOFÍA stops, takes a "cleansing" breath. She crosses to ELIZABETH and, using armchair psychology, tries to explain.)

SOFÍA. I hear that you're, like ... uncomfortable. This is all, like, the "new normal?" ... And we're all, like, finding our new paths?

JACKSON. And we have ignition of the second stage.

ELIZABETH. Is it getting hotter in here? It feels hotter. Did anyone touch that AC?

PAUL. Sofia saw the listing in the rentals. It was in Spanish so we were lucky, you were lucky ... she's the only one in our office who can—

Tennessee Wet Rub

By
KIM E. RUYLE

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Tennessee Wet Rub was premiered by the Cottage Theatre (Cottage Grove, Ore.) in August 2024.

CAST:

HANK DUNWIDDIE..... Mark Allen
BERTHA DUNWIDDIE..... Kim Fairbairn
ARLETA EASTER..... Alana Merz
DUNK FREEMAN Clarence Miller
VERN Lucas Wieckowski

PRODUCTION:

Director Stanley Coleman
Stage Manager Randall Brous
Set Design Tony Rust
Costume Design Kali McDonald
Lighting Design Amanda Ferguson
Sound Design Jeffery Egbert
Dialect Coach..... Lynn Nelson
Dramaturg David Van Cleave

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*Tennessee Wet Rub* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by the Cottage Theatre in Cottage Grove, Ore.”

Tennessee Wet Rub

CHARACTERS

HANK DUNWIDDIE: White male, 60s. Speaks with a Tennessee mountain dialect, Appalachian English.

BERTHA DUNWIDDIE: White female, 60s. Hank's wife.

DUNK FREEMAN: Black male, early 20s. Highly intelligent and well-spoken. Confident, almost cocky, but very politically savvy and polite.

ARLETA EASTER: White female, teens. Demure. Wide-eyed naivety.

VERN: White male, 20.

TIME: January 30 – 31, 1951.

PLACE: While a snow and ice storm rages outside, we're safely inside Bertha's BBQ, a quaint establishment in the hills of northern Tennessee not far from the Kentucky border.

SETTING: A rustic BBQ restaurant. Better than a shack, but not by much. More of a solid cabin—the floor and walls are rough wood. Simple electric bulbs hang from the ceiling. A potbelly wood stove to one side. A couple of dining tables ringed by chairs. A counter with stools. A hand-lettered menu on the wall. Opposite the stove, a door leads upstairs to the proprietors' apartment. Another behind the counter leads to the kitchen. A back door near the stove opens to a path that leads offstage, presumably to the smokehouse in one direction and, in the other direction, to the privy, a sturdy outhouse shitter. Ideally, there's a faint aroma of barbecue in the theatre that grows in intensity through the third scene.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

Please love and respect these characters. They are not caricatures.

If desired to produce without an intermission, the act transition can be seamless.

The Appalachian dialogue is written with an eye dialect, a spelling to approximate pronunciation. Nevertheless, it is important to have dialect coaching for both Appalachian and Scottish dialects. To aid in interpretation of the Appalachian dialect, a brief glossary is provided at the end of the play

“We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.”

—Maya Angelou

Tennessee Wet Rub

ACT I

Scene 1

(Darkness. We hear wind whistling. A moment, then overhead light bulbs flicker a few times before burning steady to illuminate BERTHA's BBQ. As the whistle of the wind rises and falls, BERTHA DUNWIDDIE wraps her sweater tightly as she shivers and hugs herself. She's a sturdy woman. Sturdy build. Sturdy character. Sturdy as her shoes. For nearly five decades, her fortitude has sustained her as she's labored over a wood-fired barbecue pit, pitched platters slathered with meat and slaw, and scrubbed grease from stacks of plates.)

BERTHA stands downstage looking out front, steeling herself against the weather she sees through an apparent window in the fourth wall. But it's more than weather she sees. Her expression spells impending doom.

The back door bursts open admitting HANK DUNWIDDIE with a gust of chill wind. He wears his age well, no less sturdy than his wife, but he's no tree stump. More of a vigorous willow branch, tough, wiry, resilient. In one hand, HANK carries a meat hook that he hangs on a peg by the door.

HANK stomps his feet and hangs his cap over the meat hook before removing deerskin gloves. He shakes out his jacket and hangs it on another peg. HANK wears heavy boots, jeans held up by suspenders over a flannel shirt. On his belt hangs a custom holster holding a large meat cleaver.)

HANK. Jes ice. Pure ice comin' down. But I got 'er stoked. Good till ta'marr least. *(Pauses waiting for a response.)* Hear me? She's stoked till ta'marr.

BERTHA *(continuing to stare outside)*. Waste a wood. Nobody comin' out in this weather.

HANK. But still. Gotta keep ice out'n the stovepipe. Keep 'er warm.

(The lights flicker again. HANK takes notice and exits to the kitchen. He returns momentarily carrying two kerosene lanterns and places one on each of the dining tables but doesn't light them.)

HANK *(cont'd)*. All that ice. 'Bout fell on my ass comin' in ... lines gonna be down 'fore long.

BERTHA *(without turning)*. Language. *(Pause.)* We're in the end times, Hank. I feel it.

HANK. Aah, sugar. Ya said same thang last year we's havin' that cyclone. It's jes a lil ice.

BERTHA. This is diff'rent. I feel it. Don' you feel it? It ain't jes ice. It's a darkness descendin'.

HANK. We got wood. Food. Blankets. 'N we got kerosene. Darkness ain't no problem.

BERTHA. This ain't no reg'lar darkness. It's a *mean* darkness descendin'.

HANK. Threw a couple a racks in there. Smokehouse a cookin' now. Lessen three hours, ribs be ready. No cus'mers. Be perfect time t' spearmint.

BERTHA. No wet rub gonna stop what's comin'.

(HANK approaches and, from behind, wraps his arms around BERTHA, gives a lascivious smile.)

HANK. Could use a little darkness. Ya know? Not for spearmintin' with no recipe. But spearmintin' with you.

(BERTHA breaks free and moves behind the counter. From under the counter, she pulls out a large cast iron skillet and places it on the counter. From the skillet, BERTHA pulls an equally large black Bible and begins paging through.)

BERTHA. No time t' be playin' the devil! *(Reading, a sense of dread.)* "For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled."

HANK. Aah, sugar.

BERTHA. I tell ya, mister, they's a mean darkness comin'.

HANK. Keep on. Jes keep on. Maybe ya git yer wish.

(HANK sighs, begins stoking the wood stove. The electric lights suddenly extinguish leaving the room in near darkness, only illuminated by the glow from the wood stove. BERTHA gasps.)

BERTHA. Dear Lord Jesus, no! It ain't my wish!

(HANK straightens with a smile and goes to light the kerosene lanterns.)

HANK. Like I tol' ya. Lines comin' down. It's jes the ice.

(The room now lit in the soft glow of kerosene lamps, BERTHA brings the skillet and Bible to a table, sits near a lantern and begins flipping again through the Bible.)

BERTHA *(reading, a sense of urgency)*. "For in those days shall be affliction such as was not from the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, neither shall be."

(HANK gives a heavy sigh and moves downstage to look out front.)

HANK. Blowin' white now. Changin' over t' snow.

(BERTHA rises, joins HANK. He puts an arm around her. And they stare outside at the blowing snow.)

BERTHA. Ain't white. It's a mean darkness what it is.

HANK *(chuckling)*. Looks white t' me, sugar. Blowin' sideways it is ... why y'all gotta be so—

BERTHA. Ya don' never take thangs serious! 'Cep yer recipes. Forty years dry rub's been good 'nough. Why y'all gotta be so obsessed?

HANK. Don' worry yer purty head 'bout it. Once I git the right recipe, wet rub's gonna put us on the map. I tell ya, my wet rub's gonna light up this place. *(On exiting to kitchen.)* Git some coffee. Want some?

(BERTHA gasps, terrified by something outside.)

BERTHA. Hank! They's sumpin out there!

(HANK enters with a coffee pot and two cups and chuckles as he places them on the counter.)

HANK. Whatchu see, sugar? A booger? Polar bear? Maybe one a them *abdominal* snowmen?

BERTHA. Sumpin dark! Right outside the window! I saw it movin'!

(A moment passes as HANK pours coffee and BERTHA continues to stare out the window with concern. The back door suddenly swings open, and a shivering ARLETA EASTER timidly enters. She's a wisp, not much more than a girl, pale as a ghost and shabbily dressed, no coat, only a light sweater and shoes ill-suited for snow and ice. She clutches a bundle wrapped in a blanket to her breast. HANK and BERTHA straighten, startled. A moment to take it in.)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). Whatchu doin', chile? Get on in here out'n the cold.

HANK. And shut that damn door!

BERTHA. Language.

(BERTHA scoots to shut the door with one hand and grabs a coat from a coat rack with her other. She wraps ARLETA with the coat and moves her to a table.)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). Git 'er some coffee. Dear Lord. You got a baby there?

ARLETA. Oh, no ... not really.

BERTHA. Whatchu mean, *not really*? Whatchu got there? In yer poke.

(ARLETA opens her blanket-wrapped bundle to reveal a heavy porcelain doll wearing a frilly dress with a small purse on a dainty chain. Carefully, she places the doll on a chair, positions her just so, and hangs the purse around her neck.)

BERTHA looks on with wide eyes a moment before pulling out a chair for ARLETA and taking a seat beside her. BERTHA takes ARLETA's hands and begins rubbing.)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). Yorn hands be freezin'. Whatchu doin' out in that cold?

ARLETA. I's sorry ... uh ... the front door was locked.

BERTHA. Ah, chile. With this wind, we dint een hear ya. (*Turning to HANK.*) Tol' ya I saw sumpin.

(*HANK joins them at the table with a cup of coffee for ARLETA. He looks at the doll, confusion clouding his face, then studies ARLETA.*)

ARLETA. Uh ... our car went in a ditch.

BERTHA. Are you / hurt?

HANK. Where? Whatchu / mean *our* car?

BERTHA. *They's somebody / else?*

HANK. Y'all dint leave a chile out there, didja? (*Nodding to the doll.*) I mean a real chile?

ARLETA. It's my ... uh ... my fiancé.

(*HANK jumps up and throws on his coat.*)

HANK. He hurt? Where is he?

ARLETA. No, sir. You don' gotta go outside. He's here ... there. Sir. He's out there.

(*HANK opens the back door to reveal DUNK FREEMAN standing on the threshold, no coat, wrapping and slapping his arms. He's tall, lean—and Black. HANK stares, then slams the door.*)

HANK. Sweet Jesus! *That be yer fiancé? A negro?* Gurl, whatchu thankin'?

(*ARLETA whimpers, and BERTHA leaps to her feet.*)

BERTHA. Mister, you open that door. Don't leave the boy standin' out there!

(*HANK hesitates, but BERTHA wins the stare down, and he opens the door. DUNK just stands there shivering. A beat as they regard each other.*)

HANK. Don' jes stan' there. Git on in here.

(DUNK slowly steps in, and HANK slams the door. An awkward pause as HANK and BERTHA suspiciously regard DUNK. ARLETA softly weeps.)

BERTHA. Don' stan' there, son. We're Christian people. Come on in. Git warm.

HANK. Now jes a minute. *(Hand to the holstered meat cleaver, shifts gaze from DUNK to ARLETA.)* Look at me, gurl. Has this boy hurt ya? You tell the truth now.

(ARLETA, tears streaming, shakes her head. She jumps up, runs to DUNK and embraces him. DUNK doesn't return the embrace. Instead, he stands there awkwardly and warily watches HANK.)

BERTHA. No! No, no. None a that in here.

(ARLETA releases the embrace but takes DUNK's hand.)

BERTHA *(cont'd)*. No touchin' now. You. Come have a seat. And you. Stay yonder by the stove.

HANK. Whatchu thankin', woman. We can't allow—

BERTHA. Hank! Grab 'nuther cup. Cain't ya see he's freezin'.

(BERTHA wins another stare down. HANK reluctantly removes, hangs his coat and shuffles to the kitchen.

ARLETA takes a seat at the table. DUNK relaxes a bit and warms his hands by the stove. BERTHA sits next to ARLETA as HANK returns, hands coffee to DUNK and stands aside, suspiciously eying DUNK.)

DUNK. Thank you, sir.

HANK. Y'all know yer breaking the law, and we cain't—

BERTHA. Hank! *(Turning to ARLETA.)* Who are you, gurl? Where y'all come from?

ARLETA. We're on our way to Detroit. Dunk's got uncles up there.

HANK. Dunk? Who's Dunk?

DUNK. That's me, sir.

HANK. What kinda name's *Dunk*?

DUNK. Jefferson Jasper Freeman. My family calls me JJ, but my friends call me Dunk. (*Allowing a slight smile.*) I don't play basketball, sir.

HANK. The hell that mean? (*Considering.*) Jasper? *Jasper*? Ya mean like, what? Y'all some kinda *colored* peckerwood? Who on God's earth gives a young'un a name like Jasper?

DUNK (*chuckling*). Colored peckerwood? Well, that's a new one. (*Then, quickly losing the smile.*) No, sir. It's Dunk. Dunk, just because I like donuts.

HANK. Good God.

BERTHA. Hank. (*Turning to ARLETA.*) And you?

ARLETA. My daddy's preacher at Jesus Name Pentecostal in Spartie.

BERTHA. So, y'all know the Lord Jesus.

ARLETA. Oh, yes, ma'am.

BERTHA. Look at me, chile. Straight on in my eyes. Don' be tellin' no stories now.

ARLETA. No, ma'am. I'm spirit-filled and warshed in the blood.

HANK. Then y'all know better than be runnin' with a colored.

DUNK. We're in love, sir. In Michigan we can—

HANK. It's a matter a right 'n' wrong!

DUNK. My daddy's a preacher, too, sir. I know right and wrong.

BERTHA. Yer daddy's OK with this?

DUNK. Ma'am, my daddy's fine with it.

BERTHA. I ast *her*.

ARLETA. My daddy's ... he's a good man.

BERTHA. But he knowed you're runnin' away?

ARLETA. He knowed ... we's in love.

(*HANK returns to the table and drops into a chair.*)

HANK. God almighty. What kinda gaumed-up sichiation we got here? A negro travelin' with a white gurl. She ain't nuthin but a chile.

BERTHA (*laying a calming hand on HANK's*). What's yer name?

ARLETA. Arleta.

DUNK. A person can't see a thing out there right now, but when it clears up, maybe I can get a push out of the ditch. If we can just wait out the storm, we'd be obliged.

HANK. I don't see how—

BERTHA. Course y'all can stay, least till the storm's over. We're Christian people. Dunwiddies. Hank and Bertha Dunwiddie.

DUNK. Pleased to meet you. And thank you for your hospitality.

ARLETA. We smelled the barbecue we got out'n the car. Wind carried that smell right to us. Then we thought we saw lights.

DUNK. My grandma makes the best barbecue in the world.

HANK. Says the jasper.

DUNK (*parrying with a warm grin*). Course, I haven't tasted yours, sir.

HANK. I got a couple a racks in the smokehouse now. Best dry rub in the state.

DUNK. I believe you, sir. And I believe my grandma does the best wet rub.

HANK. *Wet rub*? Hell, you say!

BERTHA. Language, mister.

DUNK. Thinking about grandma's wet rub barbecue and cornbread ... well, it sure does make a fellow hungry.

(HANK slowly rises from his chair and walks to the wood stove near DUNK, places a hand on his holstered meat cleaver and gives a suspicious stare that morphs to a stink eye. DUNK stares at the meat cleaver and considers his position.)

DUNK (*cont'd*). But any barbecue's good. It's all good.

(HANK folds his arms, continues to glare. DUNK shifts on his feet nervously.)

DUNK (*cont'd*). Sir ... do you ever use a mop sauce with your dry rub?

HANK. Hear that, Bertha? Jasper wants t' learn me all 'bout barbecue.

DUNK. No, sir. I didn't mean that. You're the expert. I only know about wet rub.

HANK (*suspicion giving way to intense curiosity*). Wet rub expert are ya? Mind. Don' be tellin' no stories now.

DUNK. Sir, it's not seemly to brag, and I give all the credit to my grandma. But speaking honestly and with all humility, I would say ... yes, sir. I am an expert when it comes to wet rub.

BERTHA. Don' go openin' that door, son, talkin' 'bout no wet rub.

(Too late. The door's open, and HANK can't hide his passion for barbecue and newfound interest in DUNK.)

HANK (*unable to contain enthusiasm in ensuing discussion*). They's in the smokehouse. Jes two racks. But I ain't rubbed 'em yet.

DUNK. Don't you have to rub before the heat?

HANK. Ain't gonna dry rub 'em.

Fixin' to spearmint with some wet rub.

BERTHA. Tell me 'bout the doll.

DUNK. But still it's important too

... what's in your base?

ARLETA. Cinderella. That's her

HANK. Ketchup. Corn syrup. I'm name.

spearmintin' with my recipe. Ain't

saying no more ... it's a secret.

BERTHA. She's special t' ya.

ARLETA. Yes, ma'am.

(BERTHA, annoyed, shifts in her seat and sighs.)

DUNK. How about mustard? Got the right kind of vinegar?

HANK. Boy, I got ever'thin'. Ever' spice. Ever'thin' I need fer my spearmints.

DUNK. When are they going to be ready? Shouldn't you be preparing the sauce now?

HANK. Don' go tellin' me how to sauce no ribs. I's jes fixin' t' mix up a batch when y'all showed up.

DUNK. Yes, sir. Would you like some help?

HANK. Don' need no hep.

DUNK. I used to help my grandma. Learned a lot from her.

HANK. Yer grandma, huh?

DUNK. Best wet rub in Tennessee. Recipe passed down from the plantation. Several generations.

HANK. What she use fer her sauce?

DUNK. Family secret. She kept it close to the vest, but I helped her out and know the formula by heart.

HANK. Do ya now? She use beer?

DUNK. Grandma? Oh, no sir. She said beer was ... *(Chuckling.)* She called it the devil's *piddle* ... but you shouldn't wait too long before basting. When will they be done?

BERTHA. Jes hadda open that door dint ya? Y'all got no idee what ya done stirred up gittin' the mister talkin' 'bout wet rub. *(Looking to ARLETA.)* Let's head on upstairs, chile. Let these boys talk their barbecue.

HANK *(lightly, slightly grinning)*. Naw. Y'all can stay here. I'll take the jasper into the kitchen. *(Turning to DUNK.)* Well, come on, then. Let's see whatchu really know 'bout wet rub.

(DUNK, catching HANK's enthusiasm, nods excitedly and follows HANK to the kitchen. When they're out of sight, BERTHA drills ARLETA.)

BERTHA. OK, chile. I want the story. The whole story.

ARLETA. I got her on my sixth birthday.

BERTHA. Not talkin' 'bout no doll. How'd ya meet *that* boy?

ARLETA. Oh. Well, they was a meetin' of all the county preachers. White folk. But fer this meetin', bein' all Christianly, they een 'vited the coloreds. The preachers. So, Dunk's daddy was there. My daddy, too, but he dint want t' leave me home, so he took me 'long, but I had t' wait outside. So, I's jes waitin'. But then, out yonder behind the church, I seen Dunk sittin' by hisself under a tree.

BERTHA. But ya knowed better than t' be talkin' to him, gettin' him in trouble.

ARLETA. Ast what he was readin'. They was *poyems* from some Scottish feller named Robert Burns.

BERTHA. *Poyems*? Have mercy. Our kinfolk come from Scotland, but I shore don' know 'bout no *poyems*. Mercy.

ARLETA. His voice is so ... don' ya jes love the way he talks? He read me some a them *poyems*. I mean, he can read 'em jes like he's from Scotland. Then he tells y'all what it all means cuz they got some gaumed-up speech in Scotland. Words gaumed-up. All

kinda si-gogglin ... but Dunk ... don' ya jes thank he's really sumpin'? (*Dreamy.*) I mean, don' ya thank he's really sumpin'? Really ... really ... sumpin'.

BERTHA. But 'cha knowed better.

ARLETA. Made me promise not to tell his daddy 'bout them poyems cuz he woun't approve.

BERTHA. So, *he lies to his daddy*? What / else that boy be lyin' 'bout?

ARLETA. Oh, no, ma'am. Dunk ain't no liar!

BERTHA. And don' be tellin' me yer daddy approves a y'all runnin' with a colored boy ... what 'bout yer mama?

ARLETA. I ain't got a mama. She died I's six. Jes after givin' me Cinderella.

BERTHA (*Pause, softening*). Aah, chile ... but you gotcha a sister t' hep ya?

ARLETA. Jes me 'n' my daddy.

BERTHA. I mean a sister in yer church family. A Christian woman t' give ya some guidance?

(*ARLETA shrugs, looks down. From the other table, BERTHA retrieves the Bible in the skillet, finds a reference.*)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). 'Fore y'all go gittin' married to a colored, ya gots t' consider what God's word says 'bout marriage.

ARLETA. Ya keep yer Bible in a skillet?

BERTHA. See what it says here in Ephesians?

(*ARLETA takes a moment, lips moving silently as she reads. She gives a nod.*)

BERTHA (*cont'd*). Is that colored boy gonna be able t' love ya like Christ loves the Church?

ARLETA. Dunk knows scripture 'bout as good as ary a preacher.

BERTHA. I don' know what t' thank 'bout it. They ain't nuthin agin marryin' a far'ner. Ruth and Boaz got married, and she became great grandma t' King David. I mean, they was far'ners but not colored. But I ain't really shore. Maybe that's why some the Jew people got kinky hair. But Jews gotta be white, cuz Jesus was

white. *(Pause, groaning.)* Tell truth, chile, I ain't shore what to thank 'bout what's right 'n' wrong. But I know the law. And, chile, y'all cain't be breakin' the law.

ARLETA. Why we're goin' to Michigan.

BERTHA. Sides, ain't y'all too young t' be gittin' married?

ARLETA. No ma'am. I'll be seventeen nex' cheer. Dunk says I'm a *bonnie wee thang*. That's from one a them poyems a that Robert Burns feller. But that don' mean I's too young t' marry.

BERTHA. Ah, chile.

(BERTHA rises, refills coffee cups and retakes a seat. She looks compassionately at ARLETA then pats her hand.)

BERTHA *(cont'd)*. Chile, chile, chile. That boy know he's gittin' sich a ... ? A *bonnie wee thang*, ya say?

ARLETA. I do thank y'all fer yer kindness. *(Pause.)* Why ya keep yer Bible in a skillet?

BERTHA. This here's my granny's Bible. And her skillet. I's a lil gurl, they's a far. A turble, turble far. All that was left of granny's house was this skillet and her Bible. It was shore 'nough a miracle. That far burned everthang in her house. But no far could touch God's word. And this here skillet.

(ARLETA solemnly takes the Bible, strokes its cover, gives a sniff.)

ARLETA. Don' een smell a smoke.

(She carefully returns the Bible to the skillet, gives a bit of a grin.)

ARLETA *(cont'd)*. Maybe got some barbecue smell, but shore 'nough a miracle.

(Silence as BERTHA studies ARLETA.)

BERTHA. Y'all gots money t' travel?

(ARLETA twitches, and her eyes dart to the purse hanging around the doll's neck. Then she catches herself.)

BERTHA *(cont'd)*. Y'all gots money in the purse, dontcha?

The China Shop

By
RICHARD MANLEY

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The China Shop was premiered by the Lincoln Community Playhouse (Lincoln, Neb.) in November 2024.

CAST:

MARY.....Victoria K. Lininger
LUCILLE.....Sandy Van Pelt
DERBY.....Chris Berger
ERNIE.....Scott Shomaker
CHRISTINE.....Rachel Barlow
UNCLE MAX.....Scott Glen

PRODUCTION:

Director & Scenic Design.....Jamie Bullins
Costume Design.....Maralee Maldavs
Lighting Design.....Obadiah Harvey
Tech Director.....Jeff Maldavs
Props.....Julie Enersen
Sound Design.....Barb Armstead
Charge Artist.....Dustin Witte

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The China Shop

CHARACTERS

MARY SCUNZIO: 40, an executive with a large ad agency.

LUCILLE FRENCH: Late 60s, publisher and editor-in-chief of a prestigious quarterly poetry magazine. Mary's mother.

DERBY WALTERS: Mid-40s, disheveled, poet.

ERNIE FRANK: Early 40s, attorney, neat and tidy.

CHRISTINE FRANK: 30s, Ernie's wife, a trophy.

UNCLE MAX: Late 60s, sophisticated. Ernie's uncle.

TIME: The present.

PLACE: A prewar New York co-op. All of the action takes place in two adjoining apartments, the hallway in front of those apartments and the waiting area for the elevator on that floor.

The stage is divided perpendicularly by a partition that serves as the wall between two well-furnished, prewar high-rise apartments. The front wall of the apartments faces downstage and is open to the audience—except for staging that suggests a front door.

The ethnicity of the cast is arbitrary.

The China Shop

ACT I

Scene 1

(The lights come up on the L apartment. DERBY WALTERS, disheveled and unkempt, sits reading in a period leather chair. Next to the chair are two tall stacks of books. It is mid-evening, and the room is darkened except for a strong reading light that hangs over DERBY's chair. He reads in silence for about thirty seconds with a pen in hand and a small journal on the arm of the chair. As he begins to make a note in his journal, the landline rings on a nearby table. He tries to ignore it and continues to write. The phone rings perhaps a dozen times before stopping.)

The light has come up R on the sixth or seventh ring [but dimmed on L], and we realize MARY SCUNZIO, who lives next door, is calling DERBY's apartment. She is fit and dressed for yoga, with a mat laid out on the floor. Her living room is decorated with an eclectic but interesting blend of arts and crafts. She continues to let it ring, while staring at the adjoining wall. Another call comes up on her cellphone. She hangs up from the first, checks the display to see who is calling and answers.)

MARY. Hi, this isn't a good time ... I'm about to do some yoga ... yes, Mother, that's the "downward facing dog business" ... no, it doesn't make me want to get a pet ... Mother, I ... listen ... lis ... yeah, maybe more people would do it if the stuff had prettier names ... Mom, really I gotta go ... I don't know, maybe later ... I love you too ...

(Beat—brief silence.)

MARY (*cont'd*). Mom, everything's OK? ... No, just checking, all right, good night.

(MARY ends call as the lights slowly come up on DERBY's apartment. We see him pacing with a book in hand. Hearing the muffled sound of what seems like shouting, MARY leans against the wall, trying to make sense of the commotion. DERBY's voice rises as the lights come all the way up and the scene shifts to his apartment. MARY strains to make out the words through her wall.)

DERBY. A thousand ties, perhaps there're more,
Are fastened to my casket door.
(He breaks off, irritated by his reading, and tries again.)
As of ... as of metaphoric gavel rapping,
Meting sentence on the sinner herein coffered ...

(The landline starts ringing as MARY calls again—DERBY pulls the jack from the phone, disconnecting the call.)

DERBY *(cont'd)*. As the gravesite penitently swallows
All the absolution offered.
My eternal doubt, my will be done,
The vanquished and the victor,
One.

(MARY leaves her apartment and goes to the door of his, knocking softly at first, but to no effect. After a moment, she knocks hard and long. DERBY goes to the door and opens it quickly and aggressively.)

MARY. Hey, you're not Jeffrey!

DERBY. Correct. You win the living room set and the big screen TV
... *(Starts to close the door.)*

MARY. What? *(Pushing it back open.)* Hold on, where's Jeffrey?

DERBY *(looking at his watch)*. I'm guessing he's in a taxi
somewhere between Charles de Gaulle airport and his apartment
in the 5th, disrupting or monetizing or some such on his iPhone
or iPod or—

MARY. iPad, he wouldn't be using an iPod.

DERBY. Thank you for the clarification, and now—

MARY *(holds the door)*. Wait! Then who're you? And why didn't
you answer his phone?

DERBY. Is there a written questionnaire, perhaps, which you could pick up in a month or two?

MARY. I'm serious, I live next door and there's all this yellin', but when I call to complain, the phone rings forever, but you're there ... or here. Who are you and what's goin' on?

DERBY (*beat, to look at her closely for the first time*). Why are you dressed as Pan?

MARY. Who?

DERBY. The Greek God of pastures and flocks.

MARY. I was doing yoga, answer my question.

DERBY. Derby Walters. I'm housesitting for Jeffrey while he's in France.

MARY. Derby?

DERBY. Assume my parents were fond of hats. Are we done?

MARY. Derby, Derby, oh yeah, I'm on the board, we approved Jeffrey's housesitting application about three months ago, I forgot.

DERBY. Thank you in retrospect and good ni—

MARY (*still holding the door*). But why not answer the phone?

DERBY. Obviously, I didn't want to speak with anyone and no one I know has this number.

MARY. So send it to Jeffrey's VM.

DERBY. VM?

MARY (*beat, incredulous*). VM ... voicemail.

DERBY. Of course, abbreviate whenever possible ... Jeffrey must have turned it off so I could record my own message. I'll rectify the oversight as soon as you go away.

MARY. Brilliant, but one more thing. Who were you yellin' at?

DERBY. Whom.

MARY. What?

DERBY. Not what, *whom*. At *whom* was I yelling.

MARY. I asked you first. (*Beat as he looks at her blankly.*) It's a joke.

DERBY. I wasn't yelling at anyone, Ms. ...

MARY. Scunzio.

DERBY. I was reciting poetry, Ms. Scunzio. I shall try to do so more quietly.

MARY. Why?

DERBY. Why? Based on your choice of the word “yelling” I would think that’s obvi—

MARY. No, I mean why are you reciting poetry?

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, I’m pressed for time, so ...

MARY. Right, sorry, try to keep the noise down ... bye.

(As they both close their doors from the inside, they pause to stare at the wall that separates their two apartments. Lights dim.)

Scene 2

(The next evening at about the same time. Same setting ... lights come up on DERBY’s apartment. MARY has just called DERBY’s landline, but she is calling from an offstage phone. He’s reading, making notes, as the phone rings once and the VM picks up.)

DERBY *(recorded VM greeting)*. Speak. *(Followed quickly by a beep, indicating it’s time for the caller to start talking.)*

MARY *(offstage—she is not seen to facilitate costume change)*. Hi, Mr. Walters, this is Scunzio again ... Mr. Walters? ... You there? *(Short pause followed by end of message beep.)* Wha? ... that’s your message, “Speak?” *(She ends the call.)* You can NOT be serious!

(The same activity again—it answers.)

DERBY *(recorded VM greeting)*. Speak. *(Beep.)*

MARY *(offstage)*. Walters, Scunzio.

(DERBY then picks up the phone—MARY assumes she’s still talking to the recording.)

MARY *(cont’d)*. Googled your name, ordered your book ... spoke.

(He hesitates, and she hangs up before he can respond. Lights down on MARY’s apartment as DERBY searches his boxes for a copy of that first and only book. He finds it and handles it with nostalgic love. He paces the floor with it in hand and finally sits beneath the reading lamp and begins to tear up as he reads slowly and silently. Lights out.)

Scene 3

(Early evening, ten days later. In the hallway, lights down on the apartments. MARY, dressed elegantly, with a coat over her arm and an envelope in one hand, closes her apartment door and then stoops to push the envelope under DERBY's door. She is walking toward the elevator as DERBY opens the door with the envelope in hand.)

DERBY. Ahh, the inquisitive Ms. Scunzio. What's this?

MARY. Didn't call, wanted to give you time to get your message down to less than five letters.

DERBY. Fewer than five letters. *(Holding the note in the air, he continues to stare at her.)*

MARY *(short beat, shaking her head and staring in disbelief, then turning away toward the elevator)*. I read your book, and I wanted to be sure you knew.

DERBY. That makes an even dozen of you.

MARY *(turns back to him for a moment)*. From what I read, there were a helluva lot more than that, anyway, I liked it.

DERBY *(beat)*. Thank you. *(Beat)* You look stunning, by the way, but I'm sure you know that as well as I.

MARY. I'm being feted tonight, stunning is required.

DERBY. How do you spell that?

MARY. Spell what?

DERBY. "I'm being F-E-T-I-D," or "I'm ... "

MARY *(laughing as she turns to walk toward the elevator)*. Feted, as in honored, but it's an award for copywriting, so maybe you can use both. Good night, Mr. Walters, and stop staring at my ass.

DERBY *(as she gets into the elevator and the door closes)*. I'm NOT staring at your ...

(Lights dim.)

Scene 4

(That night, several hours later, same hallway. MARY is returning from the awards dinner a little drunk, but far less than she pretends to be. She is holding two small, oddly shaped statuettes in one hand and struggling with the door key in the other. DERBY returns from having taken the recycling down the hall opposite the elevator.)

MARY (*giggling while she fumbles with the key*). Ahhhh, if it isn't his belligerrreny ... free of reci-all-a-bulls. (*DERBY ignores her and opens the door to his apartment.*) I read your second book too.

DERBY. There was no second book.

MARY (*puts her key in the door but doesn't open it*). Why not?

DERBY. What?

MARY. Why no book two, too?

DERBY. I thought you said you ...

MARY. It was a ruuuuse.

(As DERBY starts to enter his apartment, she rushes over and pushes him slightly back into the hall so that she can close his door. Balancing one hand on the door sill, she raises one foot in front of him.)

DERBY. What are you doing?

MARY. I'm about to rest my scrunched feet and thus bare my sole. (*She takes off that shoe and hangs it on a statuette.*) Lemme introduce my toes, the Longfellows. Ummmm, that's better.

(She starts to giggle and slides to a sitting position on the floor, leaning against his door. DERBY grabs the knob and opens the door. Her weight pushes it quickly open and she falls onto her back, her upper body and head on his floor, her legs in the hall.)

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, your behavior is outrageous.

MARY. I'm not *prone* to argue.

DERBY. I would like you to leave my apartment this instant.

MARY. Well, first of all, nothin's gonna happen "this instant." It'll take a buncha in-stants just for my brain to grab the attensshun of my appendixes ... appen-da-ges.

DERBY (*turns her key and opens her door*). Please get up and go home.

MARY (*struggles to her feet*). And next of all, this ain't *your* apartment, it's Jeffrey's, and he wouldn't ask me to leave. He'd invite me in and hope I was drunk enough for 'im to make a pass.

DERBY. Jeffrey is gay.

MARY. Yeah, well, I know that. I just mean he wouldn't be such a jerk.

DERBY (*tries to move her out of the way*). How tender, now ...

MARY. HOLD ON! I've got one more thing to say! (*Pause.*) Do you know what I do?

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, I ...

MARY. I'm the senior copywriting exec for the biggest goddamned ad agency in the city, and probably made more money last week than you made all last year.

DERBY. I'm sure that's true ... (*He tries again to guide her out.*)

MARY. BUT! ... Listen, LISTEN to me, (*A pause to gather herself, she recites from memory.*)

"She's eggshell frail.

She weighs no more than gathered autumn leaves ... "

BUT, I said, a year from now, nobody's gonna remember anything I wrote, but those two lines from one of your poems are stuck in my head now, because doors opened, pictures ...

DERBY. What should that mean to me?

MARY. That, that, I don't know, it means somethin'.

DERBY. It means, it means nothing, I'm not writing for you, Ms. Scunzio, I'm writing only for me.

MARY. Mary.

DERBY. What?

MARY. Either it's my first name, Sherlock, or I'm gettin' the jump on Christmas.

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, why are you doing this?

MARY. Doing what?

DERBY. Sarcastically patronizing me. Are you hoping to impress your not-for-profit advisory board friends by sharing quips with a real poet. Ms. Scunzio, I have things to do.

MARY. Wait! Wait, that's not fair.

DERBY. Not fair to whom?

MARY. To whom, jeez, not fair to meem, that's whom. I didn't mean any of what you said. I loved what happened when I read that poem, that's all, and maybe I didn't say it the way I wanted, and I'm sorry you took it that way, but it's not as if your side of this was civilized.

DERBY. While drunk, you block the door to my apartment with your body, and I'm uncivilized?

MARY (*beat*). Well, there is *that*, but goddamn it, Derby, gimme a break! I'm trying to tell you about this very personal stuff, and you talk to me like I just delivered the wrong take-out order.

DERBY. A perfect metaphor! You brought your very personal things to the wrong door. I don't need any more than I already have.

MARY. Derby!

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, please.

MARY. All right, all right, here's the truth. I bought your out-of-print marvel in hard copy 'cause Google said it was a big deal when it came out, and I thought it'd look cool on my coffee table and make me sound *cultured* to drop your name in a client meeting and then throw in a coupla lines or whatever to make it seem like you and I talk about this stuff over glasses of a French Burgundy. (*DERBY seems about to talk.*) Shut up, Derby, or go inside if you want. This is as honest as I've been in a while, and it feels good, so I'm not stopping till I finish this little speech, even if I end up giving it to your goddamned door. So I read the blurbs on the back and the first poem, so that I'd have somethin' to quote, and then the next one, and the next, and then the whole damn book, and then I read it again. I didn't get all of it, but something happened to me anyway because of the sound of the words or a phrase called up something in my memory. When I read "she's eggshell frail, she weighs no more than gathered autumn leaves," I saw me as a little girl raking leaves with my dad and jumping on the pile, but it was layered over my grandmother's last year, when she was so bent over she could hardly see me and she sobbed every time I hugged her little curved body because she had so little time left, and I could feel every bone of her spine through her clothes. I cry every time I read that poem. It pisses me off. You shouldn't be allowed to write another book if you don't give a shit that you can do that to people you don't even know.

DERBY. Is there a reason why you're telling me this now?

MARY (*beat as she begins a stream of consciousness*). Because I just came from this award dinner, where I won two of these, (*Holding up the two statuettes.*) one for the copy in an ad that sold potato chips, and the other one for a cheap vodka that's gonna convince twenty-

five year olds they'll sound sophisticated saying the name, and while I'm repeating the lines from your poem in my head, the tears well up as they call my name, and I gotta go up on stage and say something, and they think I'm crying because of the award, so everybody's applauding and going "awwwww," and I want to scream. I want to quote the lines from your poem and say, "*Listen! Listen to these words*" ... (*Beat as she stares at him.*) It's all just bouncing off, isn't it? You ordered *foie gras* and I showed up with pizza.

DERBY. "Matches struck unexpectedly in the dark."

MARY. What?

DERBY. From a Virginia Woolf novel. The poems, for you, were "*matches, struck unexpectedly in the dark.*"

MARY (*a flash of recognition*). Yes, yes, exactly.

(*DERBY turns to go in.*)

MARY (*cont'd*). That's it? I just spilled my guts out here on the floor and you walk away?

DERBY (*more reflective, withdrawn*). Am I somehow responsible?

MARY. Unless somebody forced you to publish these things, yeah, you are.

DERBY. How?

MARY. By completing some kinda circle. You put *you* into the words and sent them out there in a book, and I read 'em and put *me* into 'em and came away with *somma you and somma me*, and you had to know that, maybe had to want that to happen when you put them in a book, you can't pretend something else.

DERBY (*long beat as he realizes she has opened a wound*). I, I can't do this right now.

(*DERBY exits quickly into his apartment, closing the door.*

Lights dim.)

Scene 5

(*MARY's apartment. Same night, a little later. MARY's phone rings several times offstage. She answers it offstage to facilitate costume change.*)

MARY (*offstage*). It's not a good time, Mother. (*Beat.*) That isn't true, there are times I'd welcome a call from you.

(MARY enters in a robe, holding the phone. She is also holding a roll of toilet paper slipped over one end of an award statuette, as if trying to determine a use for it. She places the base of the award against a wall, as though seeing how it would look as a bathroom fixture. On and off during the conversation, she continues to play with at least one of the statuettes—she has a shelf full of them. She walks to a side table where she pours a martini and tries stirring the drink with the inverted end of the statuette.)

MARY (*cont'd*). If there's an emergency, like if one of your slave-driven interns found your casket in the daytime and drove a wooden stake through your heart ... I'm in advertising ... I have to exaggerate, it's a law, you have to sign something ... I don't know ... you always seem to call when I'm pissed about somethin'.

(She goes to a cupboard and pulls out a new jar of olives, which she tries to open but cannot.)

MARY (*cont'd*). I am no more often pissed than the average affluent-but-unfulfilled, independent-but-alone, lustful-but-bored-by-most-men woman in this city.

(Bangs the edge of the jar with the statuette until the top loosens and then leaves it on the counter to pace.)

MARY (*cont'd*). No, I won't try to diagram that sentence ... this guy next door ... no Jeffrey's in France for three months ... this guy's housesitting ... his name's Derby, of all things, and, long story short, I talked to 'im for a few minutes, then Googled him later because he looked like a bum, but he has this old-money kinda name and Jeffrey's pretty fussy about his place ... found out about this one famous, out-of-print poetry book he wrote forever ago ... what? ... Derby Walters? ... Yeah, that's his name ... tell me you don't know him ... because it would piss me off ... I don't know why, but it would ... probably Freudian or Oedipusian or something, but whatever, it's definitely your

fault ... anyway, I ordered his one book online ... yes, Mom, I read a book of poetry ... so I told him how much the words stuck with me, unlike the shit I get paid to write all day, and he acts like I just stole his Sunday paper ... maybe I used a sledgehammer ... I like sledgehammers. What? ... But he's written one book in his fifty years, and that was a long time ago ... he's mid-forties? Are you sure? ... Anyway, he still hasn't written anything in years ... maybe he doesn't have anything else to say ... so his wife died ... it's been ten years ... people get over that kind of ... murdered? ... Jeez ... if I had known all that when I talked to him ... well, who do you think I learned my sledgehammer technique from? ... All right, from *whom* do you think ... I'm in advertising, "Whom" alienates the demographic ... by the way, why'd you call? ... Oh, I'm fine, and you? ... Great ... oh, yeah, the dinner ... I won two little fuckers.

(She goes back to the kitchen sink, where she tosses the remainder of her drink, then rinses the glass and dries it with a small cloth towel, which she tries draping over the statuette.)

MARY (*cont'd*). No, that *is* what they're called. It's in honor of what we copywriters do to the language. OK then, good night ... oh, I almost forgot ... at dawn, don't forget to lock the casket door from the inside ... yes, Mom, I love you too ... bye.

(Lights dim.)

Scene 6

(The next morning, outside of DERBY's apartment. DERBY is returning to his apartment with a cup of coffee in one hand, several books and the newspaper in the other. He is struggling to find his key without putting anything down. ERNIE FRANK passes him and then returns. He is holding some expensive bottled water.)

ERNIE. Mr. Walters? Darby Walters?

DERBY (*still struggling for the key*). Derby

ERNIE. I beg your pardon?

DERBY. Derby, my name is Derby Walters, not Darby, but how do you know who I am?

Author Biographies

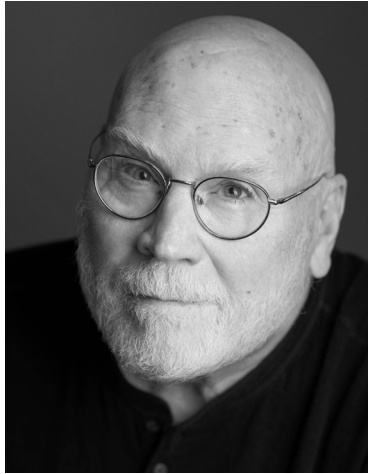


Photo: Becky Turner

William Cameron

William Cameron is a playwright, director, actor and educator. His plays have been performed around the country, including Theatre 40 in Los Angeles, the Harold Clurman Theatre in New York City, Source Theatre in Washington, D.C., and Curious Theatre Company in Denver. Cameron's plays include *Violet Sharp*, a prize-winning drama of the Lindbergh kidnapping (Concord Theatricals); *Truth Be Told* (Stanley Drama Award, 2020), a drama confronting the mass-shooting epidemic; *Every Livin' Soul* (Winner, Dayton Playhouse FutureFest 2022), a tale of Depression-era crime and redemption; and *Criminal Mischief* (AACT NewPlayFest 2024), a comedy about family dynamics. In his 31-year tenure as a professor of theatre and communication arts at Washington & Jefferson College, Cameron founded the college's first academic theatre program and directed more than 40 student productions. As an actor, he has appeared in numerous films, including *Hoffa*, *Lorenzo's Oil* and the 1990 remake of *Night of the Living Dead*.



Photo: Takeo Hori.

Catherine Castellani

Catherine Castellani's plays include *The Red Flags* (AACT NewPlayFest 2024), *The Misopeds* (Valdez Theatre Conference Play Lab 2024), *Level Up* (Valdez Theatre Conference Play Lab 2021), *The Bigsley Project* (2020 pandemic version on YouTube), *In Search of Lost Time* (Valdez Theatre Conference Play Lab 2018), *2Y20M* (HB Studio Residency 2018, Nora Salon 2017) and *Possession* (finalist, Marion International Fellowship 2017). Her 10-minute plays have been produced nationwide and published by Applause Books in *The Best Ten-Minute Plays 2016* (WORK). Her plays for young audiences, *There Is No E in Ski* and *The Silent Ones*, are published and licensed through YouthPLAYS. Castellani is a two-time MacDowell fellow and one-time Ucross Foundation resident. She studied at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Experimental Theatre Wing (New York and Paris programs) and is a member of the Dramatists Guild. For more information, visit: www.catherinecastellani.com.



Photo: Michael W. Bernstein.

Philip J. Kaplan

Philip J. Kaplan's full-length plays include *I Thought I Knew You*, which premiered at Stage Left Theater in Spokane, Wash., as a winner of the 2024 AACT NewPlayFest; *The Best Day of Your Life*, which premiered at Vintage Theatre in Aurora, Colo., and is published by Off The Wall Plays; *Bunnyboy*, which premiered at The Growing Stage in Netcong, N.J.; and *The Cupcake Conspiracy*, co-written with C.J. Ehrlich and produced by Rover Dramawerks in Plano, Texas, and the Florentine Players in Omaha, Neb. His one acts, 10-minute plays and monologues have been produced around the country and published in three volumes of *The Best 10-Minute Plays* (Smith & Kraus) and *The Best Men's Stage Monologues 2021* (Smith & Kraus). For more information, visit: philipkaplan.weebly.com.



Photo: Rosie Tracey

Pam Harbaugh

Pam Harbaugh was the theatre critic and arts writer for 25 years at *Florida Today* newspaper on Florida's Space Coast. Now a freelancer, she writes about the theatre for *Vero News* and *Florida Theatre On Stage*. Her play *Casserole* was one of six winners in the 2020 national competition sponsored by the American Association of Community Theatre. Her earlier play, *Snowfall*, a drama, was a winner at the New Works Festival at the Henegar Center in Melbourne, Fla. She served on the American Theatre Critics Association's Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award committee and was the resident director for the inaugural season of Theatre on the Edge, which was awarded Best New Theater Company by the *Orlando Weekly*. Harbaugh started a children's theatre program at the 13th Street Theatre in New York City and later founded the Junior Theatre Workshop and ran it for more than 25 years in Florida. She has directed throughout East Central Florida and currently directs for the South Beach Players, while continuing to write.



Photo: Barnes Portrait Design.

Kim E. Ruyle

Kim E. Ruyle's stories come from a unique perspective. A U.S. Army veteran with blue-collar roots, Ruyle went on to earn multiple graduate degrees. he has written nine full-length plays, seven of which have won awards and/or had multiple productions. In 2023, he received the inaugural Network Playwright Award from Chicago Dramatists.

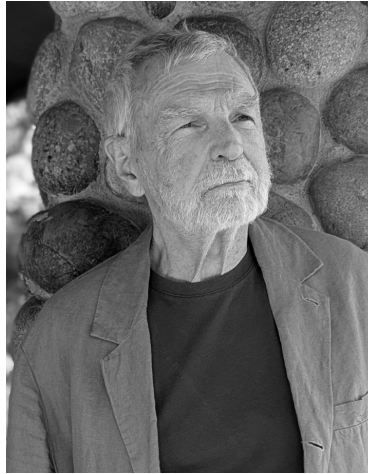


Photo: Daniel Manley.

Richard Manley

After two decades of success as a commercial writer, **Richard Manley** started a second career writing stage plays. Pulling from many years' worth of personal journals, Manley rediscovered his passion for the sound of language and its potential to provoke. When he returned to the U.S. from a sabbatical in Europe in 2008, he sold his business and structured a lifestyle that would allow him to write stage plays full time. Manley has written 12 full-length plays and four one acts, which have been produced off-Broadway and a dozen other cities. He has won, or been a finalist in, more than 40 national and international writing competitions, including the Ashland New Plays Festival, the STAGE International Script Competition, the John Gassner Memorial Playwriting Award (New England Theatre Conference), the Pillars Prize (Georgia College and State University), the Getchell New Play Award (Southeastern Theatre Conference), AACT NewPlayFest, Theatre for Young Audiences Playwriting Competition (University of Central Missouri), YETi Season 5 (Childsplay) and the Woodward/Newman Award (Constellation Stage & Screen). Manley's work has been published by Dramatic Publishing, Smith & Kraus, *Ponder Review*, *Spellbinder* literary and art magazine, and Applause Theatre & Cinema Books.