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Dramatic Publishing

THREE THE HARD WAY

A Play in Two Acts
by
LINDA EISENSTEIN



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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PRODUCTION HISTORY

THREE THE HARD WAY premiered at Dobama Theatre, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, on March 10, 1995. The production was directed by Catherine Albers, lights and set design by Ron Newell, sound design by Corby Grubb, and costumes by Barbara Quill. It included the following cast:

Albert	MILES BARNES
Kathleen	SUE OTT ROWLANDS
Irene	AMANDA SHAFFER
Mary	VIRGINIA DRDA

THREE THE HARD WAY was the winner of the 1995 Gilmore Creek Playwriting Award.

It also won author Linda Eisenstein a 1995 Individual Artist Fellowship from the Ohio Arts Council.

THREE THE HARD WAY was a finalist for the Unicorn Theatre's National Playwrights' Award, and nominated for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize.

THREE THE HARD WAY

A Play in Two Acts
For 3 Women and 1 Man

CHARACTERS

ALBERT A dead man, 58 years old.
An excellent pool and craps player.

KATHLEEN . . . Albert's oldest daughter. Mid- to late 30s.
She knows how to control her face, if not her temper.

IRENE Albert's middle daughter. Early to mid-30s,
two and one half years younger than Kathleen.
Gambler and jokester, she has her own sense of style.

MARY Albert's youngest daughter. Late 20s-early 30s
six years younger than Kathleen.
Softer and probably rounder than the other two.

TIME: March, 1992.

SETTINGS: A nearly bare stage, that becomes and evokes parts of: a California pool hall; a cheap motel room in Reno, Nev.; a funeral parlor; a casino cocktail lounge; and memories of the characters.

Running time: Approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

SETTING: *A pool hall in Northern California.*

AT RISE: *It is evening. In the dark, the loud sound of a power break on a pool table. As lights come up, KATHLEEN is playing pool in silence, using a custom cue, with surgical precision. KATHLEEN is deadpan; when she gets angry, her only change is to hit the ball harder. ALBERT appears, in a pool of light, holding his cue. During the scene, KATHLEEN mostly pays attention to her position on the table, rarely looking at ALBERT. He watches her play and kibitzes. NOTE: Neither the pool game nor the pool table should be realistic. The table shimmers in light, the most important and magical place in the world. The actors use real cues and cue chalk but not real balls. All the emphasis should be on the actors' strokes and concentration. It should have the quality of an intense dream.*

ALBERT. Nice shot. (*KATHLEEN reacts to his presence.*)
Tough one.

KATHLEEN. I've been playing for shit these days.

ALBERT. I don't know why you go for the tough ones, though.

KATHLEEN. That's all there seems to be lately.

ALBERT. You always liked the tough shots. You're working too hard, Kathleen.

KATHLEEN. Tell me about it.

ALBERT. Listen to the old man. Go for the easy shots. You know the secret, don't you?

KATHLEEN. Yeah, yeah, I know.

ALBERT & KATHLEEN. Cue ball control.

ALBERT. That's right. Place the cue ball right and everything else comes naturally.

KATHLEEN. Easy for you to say.

ALBERT. Then the rest of it is easy as pie. Like shooting fish in a barrel.

KATHLEEN. I hated practicing that part. Cue ball control. I never had the patience for it.

ALBERT. Sure you do. You just like whacking 'em around. Making the pockets smoke with the fancy shots. The ones that made the boys too scared to come around.

KATHLEEN. Back off, Albert. I play the way I like. *(She misses a shot.)* Shit. *(She plays in silence for a moment or two.)*

ALBERT. So. Did you call Benny?

KATHLEEN. Benny. Jesus, Dad, you knew this. We're divorced.

ALBERT. I liked that boy.

KATHLEEN. Yeah, you sure did.

ALBERT. Now him, he wasn't afraid of you one bit.

KATHLEEN. Not nearly enough.

ALBERT. Whatever happened to him, anyway?

KATHLEEN. He moved to Florida.

ALBERT. No kidding. Miami?

KATHLEEN. Key West.

ALBERT. Boy sure could drink.

KATHLEEN. Yeah, he sure could.

ALBERT. Hell of a sax player, though. Beautiful tone. Best I've heard since Stan Getz.

KATHLEEN. Yeah, he was a player, all right.

ALBERT. Six in the corner. (*KATHLEEN sinks the six.*)
Ever think about getting back together with him?

KATHLEEN. No way, Dad.

ALBERT. You two try counseling? They say it helps.

KATHLEEN. It's a little late, Dad. It's been four years.

ALBERT. I never believed in it, either. Bunch of meddling fools. That's what fathers are supposed to say, though. "Get counseling. Stay together." Fuck it, do what you want, it's your life. (*She plays for a moment or two in silence.*) Nice boy, though.

KATHLEEN. Yeah, he was.

ALBERT. Irreconcilable differences.

KATHLEEN. Yeah. I wanted to sleep with men and so did he. (*A pause while she shoots.*)

ALBERT. Good sax player, though.

KATHLEEN. Jesus, Dad, do you mind?!

ALBERT. Sorry.

KATHLEEN. I mean. I'm trying to play over here.

ALBERT. Well, sink the four then.

KATHLEEN (*looks at the table*). Why not the eight?

ALBERT. The four's the better shot. (*KATHLEEN aims for the eight—and misses.*)

KATHLEEN. Shit.

ALBERT. Stop trying so hard. (*KATHLEEN steps back from the table, frustrated, while ALBERT demonstrates. She affects not watching.*) Let me show you something. (*ALBERT picks up the cue ball and places it carefully.*) Here: see that angle? That's the shot you're looking for.

Not straight on, and not so oblique you have to shave it.
That's the ideal angle.

KATHLEEN. The ideal angle.

ALBERT. Lookie here. (*He shoots.*) See how that breaks off the other one? It just strolls over into position. (*He shoots again.*) See? Shot after shot, the same easy walk. Play this way, you don't have to make those tough-guy shots. Just easy ones. One right after the other.

KATHLEEN. Sure, Dad.

ALBERT. It doesn't have to be hard all the time. It's okay for it to be easy.

KATHLEEN. What's the point then? Where's the challenge?

ALBERT. Challenge? You don't think this way is a challenge? Listen: Willie Mosconi played this way for eight and a half hours, ran 526 balls, and only had to stop because he got tired. You know the kind of concentration and control it takes, to get 'em to line up like that for you? Christ—try doing that in the rest of your life. (*KATHLEEN snatches up the cue ball, glares at him for a beat—then places it down. She begins to practice her cue-ball control.*) Just trying to be helpful. Paternal. Give fatherly advice.

KATHLEEN. Right.

ALBERT. I know I don't quite have the hang of it. I never knew my own father, you know.

KATHLEEN. You've told me this before, Albert.

ALBERT. He died when I was four.

KATHLEEN. About a million times.

ALBERT. Consequently, I have no idea how a father is supposed to act.

KATHLEEN. No shit.

ALBERT. Much less with daughters. A complete mystery to me.

KATHLEEN. Boys would have been easier on you.

ALBERT. What makes you think that?

KATHLEEN. I don't know. I always assumed you wanted boys.

ALBERT. No. Hell, no. What man in his right mind wants boys? Boys all hate their fathers. Read your Freud. Boys want to kill their fathers and screw their mothers. I never wanted boys. What in the world would make you think that?

KATHLEEN. You didn't exactly raise us like girls.

ALBERT. What's that supposed to mean?

KATHLEEN. You didn't treat us like girls.

ALBERT. Like cream puffs, you mean? Like simpering morons, ready to keel over the minute someone says boo? Like Mary's friend, what's her name?

KATHLEEN. Patty's not a moron. She just acts... feminine.

ALBERT. Same thing.

KATHLEEN. Never mind. You wouldn't understand. You never did, Albert.

ALBERT. What's to understand?

KATHLEEN. For God's sake, Albert. For their eleventh birthdays, my friends all got Barbie. I got a cue case.

ALBERT. It was real leather.

KATHLEEN. It's not a joke, Dad. None of us ever had the faintest idea how to act like girls.

ALBERT. You're not girls—you're women.

KATHLEEN. The three of us? We're total freaks.

ALBERT. Most smart women are.

KATHLEEN. Mary—she doesn't even know how out of it she is. And Irene?

ALBERT. I regret my influence on Irene. Believe me.

KATHLEEN. She's even worse off than me. You really made a mess of us, Albert.

ALBERT. I was just trying to raise a family, the best way I knew how.

KATHLEEN. In a pool hall? Around gamblers and hustlers and pros? What kind of place is that for girls.

ALBERT. Actually, I thought of you three as people, not girls.

KATHLEEN. I don't fit in. I walk down the hall at work and people actually jump out of my way. I figured something out the other day: I never even learned how to smile right. Must have been all those hours sighting down a cue. I was watching these girls at the office. They do this...thing with their face. Animate it, somehow. It has something to do with the eyes—blinking while you open them, maybe. *(She tries a feminine smile: raising her cheeks, while animating her face and widening and blinking her eyes.)*

ALBERT. Looks half-witted.

KATHLEEN *(continuing to smile this way)*. Men seem to like it. It's a lot of work, though. *(She drops it, becomes deadpan again.)* Gives me a headache.

ALBERT. Then don't do it.

KATHLEEN. I don't. That's my point. Most women have learned how to do this unconsciously. I have to work like a son of a bitch, just to keep it up long enough to get through a lunch meeting. *(She "does" the smile again.)*

ALBERT. Looks painful.

KATHLEEN *(dropping the smile)*. I've been practicing, daily.

ALBERT. You'd be better off working on your cue-ball control.

KATHLEEN. Yeah, well, we all know about your lifetime priorities. But I have a real job, thank you.

ALBERT. A likely story.

KATHLEEN. Hey—you know how much ad space I sold last month? Thirty-five thousand dollars.

ALBERT. Is that good?

KATHLEEN. For trade ads? In this economy? Hell, yes, it is. I beat everyone in the division.

ALBERT. This is face-to-face selling?

KATHLEEN. No, on the telephone.

ALBERT. Aha! There you go, then. I rest my case.

KATHLEEN. What case?

ALBERT. Do you smile on the phone, Kathleen? Make that half-witted little face while you're closing your sales?

KATHLEEN. No way.

ALBERT. I didn't think so. How do you do it, then?

KATHLEEN. You really want to know? It drives my co-workers crazy. As I talk? I do crossword puzzles.

ALBERT. See? Who says I didn't raise you right!

KATHLEEN (*smiling*). Yeah.

ALBERT. The difference between a hustler and a pro. A hustler is always sweating it. A pro can afford to make it look easy.

KATHLEEN. Playing the ideal angle.

ALBERT. Just letting one bounce off the next one. One after the other.

KATHLEEN. I wish to God it was that easy. (*Pause.*) How come we never actually talked this way? I would have liked a normal conversation now and again.

ALBERT. Well, we'll have one now.

KATHLEEN. Oh sure. Fat lot of good it does now. (*An awkward silence.*)

ALBERT. Let's see. So. How's life going for you, Kath?

KATHLEEN. At the moment? What do you think? Love life nil. Wrestling with the J.O.B. Trying to get my bank account back up past ground zero, after Irene's last escape.

ALBERT. How much she hit you up for?

KATHLEEN. None of your business. (*Softening a little.*) Sorry. I'm still feeling a little burned.

ALBERT. Tell me about it.

KATHLEEN. You too? That's funny. Somehow it never occurred to me that she'd come to you for money. (*ALBERT shrugs.*) Why did you give her money?

ALBERT. Why did you? (*They're both silent.*) Maybe the same reasons, then.

KATHLEEN. No, not the same. Definitely not.

ALBERT. Probably not, then. I give it to her because deep down, she's just like me. You give it to her to prove that deep down, she's nothing like you.

KATHLEEN (*begins unscrewing her cue, putting it away*). This is not working.

ALBERT. Ah, the end of the game.

KATHLEEN. Unfortunately, it's just beginning. (*Rubs her eyes.*) Jesus, I'm tired. And I still have hours more to drive.

ALBERT. When you're on the road and tired of driving, stop and find a pool hall. Best pit stop in the world.

KATHLEEN. I hate Reno. Why did you have to die in Reno?

ALBERT (*after a beat*). Funerals are a pain in the ass. I always avoided them, myself. Wakes are better, actually. At least there are things to eat and drink. I appreciate you making the trip.

KATHLEEN. Someone has to clean up your mess. I have to get going. Mary's probably been there for hours, worrying her head off. I wonder if she ever reached Irene.

ALBERT. You three have to hang together now, Kath.

KATHLEEN. Easier said than done.

ALBERT. Just don't try to do it the hard way. Take the easy shots. One at a time. (*ALBERT moves out of light.*)

KATHLEEN. It's funny. I check the corners of every pool hall I walk into. I always half-expect to find you there. Even now. Jesus. Maybe I always will. You think so, Albert? (*She turns, looks for ALBERT.*) Albert? (*He's gone.*) Daddy? (*She clicks her case closed.*) Goddamn it. Why aren't you here? You're supposed to be here.

BLACKOUT