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# **AFTER DARWIN**

**A Play in Two Acts**

**by**

**TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER**



**Dramatic Publishing**

**Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand**

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(AFTER DARWIN)

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*AFTER DARWIN* was first performed at Hampstead Theatre, London, on July 8, 1998 with the following cast:

Charles Darwin / Tom . . . . . JASON WATKINS  
Robert FitzRoy / Ian . . . . . MICHAEL FEAST  
Millie . . . . . INGEBORGA DAPKUNAITE  
Lawrence . . . . . COLIN SALMON

Director . . . . . LINDSAY POSNER  
Set Designer . . . . . JOANNA PARKER  
Lighting Designer . . . . . PETER MUMFORD  
Sound . . . . . JOHN A. LEONARD  
Assistant Director . . . . . ADAM RUSH

# **AFTER DARWIN**

**A Play in Two Acts  
For 3 Men and 1 Woman, doubling**

## **CHARACTERS**

**ROBERT FITZROY  
CHARLES DARWIN  
MILLIE  
IAN  
TOM  
LAWRENCE**



# ACT ONE

## SCENE ONE: "DESPAIR"

*30 April 1865. Seven a.m. A room that is elegant and spare. On a large table, a washing bowl, a cutthroat razor. ROBERT FITZROY wears full navy uniform minus the jacket, which hangs. CHARLES DARWIN, in rumpled clothes, sits on a chair to the side. FITZROY holds a Bible in his hand and brandishes it.*

FITZROY. This is the truth. "Woe unto thee, blind guide..." Natural selection? We cannot survive without The Book. You want a grim future, without purpose, mockery of all that is sacred, no moral light. "It had been better for that man if he had not been born." (*He looks at DARWIN.*) I harbored you in my cabin. I, FitzRoy of *The Beagle*, have brought destruction on the world—"Woe unto that man by whom the offence cometh." I only ever wanted to do what was right. I understood it, it was my inheritance—but perhaps there is no right, no good. Forgive me, God, for what I have done, for what I am about to do—if you are there.

*(He brandishes the razor at DARWIN, who does not react.)*

You were the mediocrity, I had the destiny—you scrambled my destiny, and the world. (*He turns away.*) Per-

haps God never looked. The fittest, so-called, grimacing their success. Thousands like you in this world sodden with vulgarity. No more like me. They laugh at me. No more now. I leave nothing behind. (*To DARWIN.*) But you never saw the pain of extinction. (*He draws the razor up to his throat to slit it.*)

### SCENE TWO: "HOPE"

*4 September 1831. The Beagle. CAPTAIN ROBERT FITZROY in full navy uniform, dazzling. CHARLES DARWIN in rumpled traveling clothes. The presence of wealth and elegance, very spare and neat. Chronometers.*

FITZROY. Tenerife, the Cape de Verde Islands, Rio de Janeiro, the Straits of Magellan, the Falkland Islands, the Galapagos Islands, do these names mean anything to you, Mr. Darwin?

DARWIN. I've read about Tenerife, Captain FitzRoy, I've dreamt of Rio.

FITZROY. We do not know the exact longitude of Rio. If *The Beagle* can chart these waters and coasts accurately, she will change the history of the world. I have twenty-two chronometers on board.

DARWIN. Twenty-two!

FITZROY. The Admiralty provided four, I bought the rest. No more shipwrecks, think of the lives saved...

DARWIN. Yes!

FITZROY. And then the souls... In Tierra del Fuego I encountered the most miserable and savage creatures. I captured four and had them educated in England.

DARWIN. Indeed, Captain FitzRoy... I heard of York Minster, Jemmy Button and Fuegia—euh—

FITZROY. Basket. The fourth, Boat Memory, died of the smallpox. I am particularly pleased with Jemmy Button, who seems naturally disposed to civilization— I am bringing all three back with a young missionary who will establish a settlement on that wild coast. I have an artist on board to record the flora, fauna, most remarkable in these parts.

DARWIN. Yes.

FITZROY. There lacks only a gentleman savant.

DARWIN. Yes!

FITZROY. To pursue researches in natural history, collecting, observing... A companion as well: the coast of South America is bleak. The previous captain of *The Beagle* shot himself, you heard?

DARWIN. No, I deeply regret—

FITZROY. When I took command of the ship, the crew were near mutiny... (*Pause. He studies DARWIN.*) Mr. Darwin, I regret I was not able to get a message to you in time, but the post of naturalist on *The Beagle* has already been filled...

DARWIN. Ah! Oh, no...

FITZROY. I have only now written the letter confirming my decision. I hope you are not too disappointed?

DARWIN. Bitterly! Forgive me, Captain, if it is too late, I must now... I won't take any more of your time. Ah!...

FITZROY. I was not under the impression you were so keen.

DARWIN. I came as soon as I could! (*Pause.*) My father opposed the idea. I could do nothing without his approval.

FITZROY. He fears for your safety?

DARWIN. He thinks I'm wayward.

FITZROY. So.

DARWIN. But Uncle Jos—that's my uncle Josiah Wedgwood—thought it would be a capital thing to do and convinced my father. My father wants me to take Holy Orders, but the pursuit of Natural History is very suitable to a clergyman and it would only be a delay... We answered all of his objections and my father agreed.

FITZROY. Your father is an excellent doctor. He once treated an aunt of mine and she lived until she was ninety-five.

DARWIN. He is most shrewd, yes—that is, he used to take me on his rounds, he wanted me to follow him into medicine.

FITZROY. And you did not feel compelled to obey his wishes?

DARWIN. I hate the sight of blood.

FITZROY. I could not have guaranteed your safety in South America, Mr. Darwin.

DARWIN. It's not my own blood I'm afraid of spilling, Captain FitzRoy, it's dissection. I shoot accurately, I assure you. I'm not very good at taxidermy though—and the lectures were so tedious! My father fears I have no application... (*He stops himself.*)

FITZROY. You have eminent friends at Cambridge.

DARWIN. I'm frightfully clever at catching beetles, Captain. Perhaps it's just as well for the Coleoptera of South America I'm not coming.

FITZROY. Professor John Henslow—his father was master of the royal dockyards at Chatham—

DARWIN. He's taught me everything I know about botany—

FITZROY. Adam Sedgwick—they say his geology lectures are always full... What made you so wish to come?

DARWIN. Alexander von Humboldt.

FITZROY. You've read him?

DARWIN. Everything. You too?

FITZROY. At naval college: (*Recites.*) "From my earliest youth I felt an ardent desire to travel into distant regions seldom visited by Europeans—" So did I.

DARWIN. It was Humboldt's description of Tenerife that first made me—

FITZROY. Yes! Climbing that volcano.

DARWIN. And then the Orinoco...

FITZROY. I lived on that canoe. We shall be far south of Humboldt's Venezuela, but there are great rivers in Brazil, Mr. Darwin— (*Pause.*) And do you admire Jane Austen?

DARWIN. I have not read her—yet.

FITZROY. I have all of her books on board.

DARWIN. I did read Coldstream and Foggo when I heard I might come on this voyage, I studied astronomy—I believe I can follow calculations for longitude and latitude, I even plunged into fearful descriptions of storms at sea...

FITZROY. I have fitted *The Beagle* with a lightning conductor, making her the safest vessel in the navy. The perils of ship life are more internal, Mr. Darwin: bad temper in the sailors, melancholy in ourselves... the soul of a man may seem to die. You seem to have a cheerful

temperament. It must make you a pleasant companion.

(Pause.) Your family are Whigs, are they not?

DARWIN. Especially the Wedgwoods.

FITZROY. The FitzRoys have always been Tories. We are opposing your reforms, Mr. Darwin, this dangerous tide of liberalism...

DARWIN. I find beetles and rocks occupy my thoughts. I am singularly ignorant of politics.

FITZROY. That is because you are still young. One grows fast in the navy. I went to sea at fourteen.

DARWIN. I lost my mother when I was seven and was perhaps spoiled by my sisters. I kept running away from school to be back with them.

FITZROY. My mother died when I was five. (Embarrassed pause.) I did invite a friend of mine on board, Mr. Darwin—I want a companion as much as a man of science, you understand—but he refused this morning. This letter is to another friend, a Tory—but he hasn't read Humboldt. (He tears up the letter.) I shall write to the Admiralty and ask them to agree to your joining *The Beagle*.

DARWIN. Captain! I am—overcome! *Gloria in excelsis*. Beetles of South America, here I come! Forgive me...

FITZROY. You may find your spirits constrained by the lack of space, but I shall do all in my power to make you comfortable. Come to the ship tomorrow. You'll need a good pair of pistols, I shall help you choose them, books, although you'll find my library extensive, I'll give you a list of clothes—

DARWIN. I shall follow your guidance in all matters... I have never been at sea before!

(FITZROY stiffens and studies DARWIN for a moment.)

FITZROY. Mr. Darwin, forgive me for the apparent impertinence of my question, but does your father have your nose?

DARWIN. I believe he does... Mine is somewhat smaller...

FITZROY. According to the laws of physiognomy, it indicates a certain weakness of temperament. Nothing I hear about your father confirms this.

DARWIN. No, my father is not weak. (*Pause.*) I've always hated my nose.

FITZROY. No matter. I have great faith in your friends and I myself am no mean judge of character. I shall be delighted to have you on *The Beagle* and you shall help me fulfill another purpose. William Buckland, as you know, has found conclusive evidence of the Flood in England.

DARWIN. Not quite conclusive—

FITZROY. We could establish such a proof in South America. Your mentor Henslow is a deeply religious man, I understand.

DARWIN. Deeply.

FITZROY. Do we not live in a great age? Our natural philosophers trace God's signature on Earth as our English ships mark the contours of the world. I shall prevent shipwrecks by mapping the coasts, but together, Mr. Darwin, we shall prevent spiritual shipwreck by mapping God's work.

DARWIN. I shall do all I can to be of help, Captain FitzRoy.

## SCENE THREE: "EMOTION"

*The present. MILLIE, TOM (DARWIN) and IAN (FITZROY). MILLIE comes on. She has been watching.*

MILLIE. Embrace!

*(Nobody moves.)*

Embrace: hug tight. You are both so happy, so full of hope and love for each other, you embrace.

IAN. Englishmen don't embrace, Millie, particularly not these Englishmen.

MILLIE. I don't mean homosexual, I mean emotion.

IAN. Emotion—

MILLIE. This great, this beautiful emotion of friendship, it's so obvious you embrace, isn't it, Tom?

TOM. It's just that—you see—we—I mean, they—may have trouble expressing—you know: English, all that—maybe we could just move towards each other—

MILLIE. Charles Darwin is young, enthusiastic, surely you want to embrace your beau ideal of a captain.

TOM. Whatever.

IAN. I have read everything there is about FitzRoy, which isn't much, I admit, but I can assure you he would not embrace or be embraced—he would never show what he feels.

MILLIE. Ian, you are creating him.

IAN. He is an historical character, I am finding him.

MILLIE. You say yourself he is unknown. He will evolve into what we make him here.

IAN. Why make him a fool? The phrenology business is bad enough, can't we get rid of it?

MILLIE. It's a famous anecdote.

IAN. I don't like it.

MILLIE. You don't like anything.

TOM. Ian likes the lines, Millie, he gets so angry when I get them wrong.

MILLIE. I see emotion in these lines.

IAN. You interpret.

MILLIE. I see two men who embrace.

IAN. Maybe in Bulgaria.

MILLIE. In Bulgaria, they would take a knife to their arms and mingle their blood. And they would not be young men on an exciting voyage around the world, they would be fighting in caves and forests against the Turks. And perhaps one would betray the other, so there would be fear and also anger against the oppressor and perhaps both would be tortured, mangled—dead!

IAN. And now that you've once again shamed us with the excitement of your history, you expect us to do as you want?

MILLIE. It is not my history anymore, this is my history.

IAN. Then you should learn to understand repression. It may not be as romantic as oppression but it works.

MILLIE. I do not want some gloomy English Chekhov here, Ian, I want light and tenderness. It is thought tenderness gave mammals an evolutionary advantage.

TOM. It did? I have tenderness—I think.

IAN. It is 1831. I am a captain in His Majesty's Navy, I am an aristocrat and I am English, I am not playing an evolving mammal!

MILLIE. FitzRoy is religious, he knows tenderness.

IAN. Not in the Church of England.

MILLIE. I do not see how we go on. (*She throws herself down at IAN's feet.*) I beg you, I entreat you, I supplicate, I fall on my knees before you—to express emotion.

IAN. This is no way to direct.

MILLIE. It is in Moscow.

TOM. I like this tenderness thing. Ian, we can try a little tenderness, can't we, repressed even, yeah?

#### SCENE FOUR: "TENDERNESS"

*January 1832. The Bay of Biscay. FitzRoy's cabin. A storm. The ship rolls. DARWIN stands, sways, very seasick. FITZROY arranges a hammock.*

FITZROY. Try this, Darwin, it may help.

*(DARWIN tries to get into the hammock. He has trouble. FITZROY holds it for him. DARWIN reels.)*

You must believe me when I say this is the worst storm I have encountered in the Bay of Biscay.

DARWIN. I fear I shall prove useless on this voyage.

FITZROY. We have not been at sea very long.

DARWIN. I was sick as soon as we left the Channel. Even the Fuegians laugh at me. Have you seen Jemmy Button mimicking my sickness?

FITZROY. He doesn't mean it unkindly. They're better mimics than our London actors.

*(DARWIN holds down a retch.)*

Perhaps if you lay down on my divan.

*(FITZROY gently leads DARWIN to the divan. DARWIN collapses.)*

DARWIN. This is intolerable.

FITZROY. Lieutenant Wickham tells me you are considering leaving *The Beagle*.

DARWIN. I cannot be much of a companion in this state, Captain, I might stay in Tenerife and then find a ship to take me home.

FITZROY. I heard in Portsmouth there is a quarantine in Tenerife. We may have to remain aboard.

DARWIN. I had so hoped to see it!

FITZROY. I am sorry to disappoint you, Darwin, but you will find much to see in the Cape de Verde Islands. My officers would be sorry to see their dear philosopher go. You have made yourself well liked. I should be sorry, too. Very sorry.

*(DARWIN wrestles with a bout of seasickness. FITZROY gently adjusts a pillow.)*

Let me read you the next chapter of *Persuasion*.