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Dramatic Publishing

Still Life with Iris



Adventure/Fantasy/Drama
by
Steven Dietz



The Dramatic Publishing Company

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Still Life with Iris

Adventure/Fantasy/Drama. By Steven Dietz.

Cast: 5m., 4w. (flexible/doubling). Still Life with Iris is a fantastical adventure which centers on a little girl's search for the simplest of things: home. Iris lives with her mom in the land of Nocturno, a magical place in which the workers make, by night, all of the things we see in the world by day. In Nocturno memories do not reside in people's minds, but in their coats (called "PastCoats"). The rulers of Nocturno, the Great Goods, are determined to have the "best" of everything on their island and therefore take Iris away from her home and bring her to Great Island to be their daughter. To ease the pain of this separation, they remove her PastCoat leaving her with no memory of her home or her family. All that remains of Iris' past is a single button from her coat. Using this button as a clue, Iris joins with two friends she meets on her journey—Annabel Lee (a young woman from the sea) and Mozart (the composer, age 11)—and frees herself from the Great Goods. She returns to Nocturno, having found her past, and her home, once again. *Still Life with Iris* is the first play for young audiences to receive the Kennedy Center's Fund for New American Plays Award. *Small units brought on to open stage. Running time about 100 minutes.*

*Cover photo: Seattle Children's Theatre
world premiere production.*

Photo: Chris Bennion.

Cover design: Susan Carle.

ISBN 13: 978-0-87129-869-0



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www.DramaticPublishing.com

Code: SC4



Printed on Recycled Paper

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STILL LIFE WITH IRIS

A Play in Two Acts

by

STEVEN DIETZ



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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ISBN 0-87129-869-4

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All producers of *STILL LIFE WITH IRIS* 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:

“*STILL LIFE WITH IRIS* was originally commissioned and produced by Seattle Children’s Theatre. It was inspired by the Image Influenced Illusions of Steffan Soule and Cooper Edens from their book, *Dreams, Magic and Miracles*. Its development was supported by a major grant from the John F. Kennedy Center’s Fund for New American Plays, the first play for young audiences to receive such an award.”

For Linda Hartzell

PRODUCTION HISTORY

STILL LIFE WITH IRIS was commissioned and premiered by the Seattle Children's Theatre (Linda Hartzell, Artistic Director; Tom Pechar, Managing Director) in Seattle, Wash., on September 19, 1997. The production was directed by Linda Hartzell; set design by Robert Gardiner; lighting design by RJ Conn; costume design by Scott Gray; sound design by Steven M. Klein; the dramaturg was Deborah Lynn Frockt; and the stage manager was Kara L. Mullen. The cast was as follows:

Iris	JULYANA SOELISTYO
Mom/Miss Overlook.	SUE GUTHRIE
Mister Matternot/others	JOHN ABRAMSON
Leaf Monitor/Annabel Lee	ALLISON GREGORY
Mozart/others	JEFF CUMMINGS
Memory Mender/others	DAVID SCULLY
Elmer/Grotto Good/others	WILLIAM SALYERS
Hazel/Gretta Good/others	LESLIE LAW
Flower Painter/others	STEFFAN SOULE

This production featured the Image Influenced Illusions of Steffan Soule and Cooper Edens.

STILL LIFE WITH IRIS (in this published version) was subsequently produced by Childsplay, Inc. [Tempe, Ariz.] (David Saar, Artistic Director; Gary Bacal, Managing Director), in Tucson/Phoenix, Ariz., on March 14, 1998. The production was directed by David Saar; scenic design by Scott Weldin; costume design by Karen Ledger; lighting design by Rick Paulsen; sound design by Brian Jerome Peterson; magic design by Steffan Soule; and the stage manager was Marie Krueger-Jones. The cast was as follows:

Iris	KATIE McFADZEN
Mom/Miss Overlook	KRISTEN DRATHMAN
Mister Matternot/others	JERE LUISI
Leaf Monitor/Annabel Lee	DEBRA K. STEVENS
Mozart/others	JEFF GOODMAN
Memory Mender/others	DWAYNE HARTFORD
Elmer/Grotto Good	D. SCOTT WITHERS
Hazel/Gretta Good	CATHY DRESBACH
Flower Painter/others	DAVID JONES

This production was mounted in association with the Arizona Theatre Company (David Ira Goldstein, Artistic Director; Jessica L. Andrews, Managing Director) and with the support of the Flinn Foundation.

STILL LIFE WITH IRIS

A Full-length Play
For 4 Women, 5 Men

CHARACTERS

(Pairings indicate actor doubling)

IRIS

MOM

MISS OVERLOOK

MAN/MISTER MATTERNOT

THUNDER BOTTLER TWO

DAD

LEAF MONITOR

ANNABEL LEE

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE

MOZART

MEMORY MENDER

RAIN MAKER

MISTER OTHERGUY

RAY

ELMER

HIS MOST EXCELLENT, GROTTO GOOD

THIRD STRING

HAZEL

HER MOST EXCELLENT, GRETTA GOOD

CAPTAIN ALSO

FLOWER PAINTER

BOLT BENDER

MISTER HIMTOO

Approximate running time: 100 minutes

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,
And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze.

John Keats

ACT ONE

SCENE: *The MUSIC of Mozart fills the theatre as the audience arrives. MUSIC BUILDS as the theatre darkens, and then plays under as a shaft of LIGHT rises on a tall sign. The sign reads: "WELCOME TO NOCTURNO." Attached to the sign are arrows pointing in various directions. Written on the arrows are the following destinations: "Cloud Factory," "Bird Assembly," "Plant Plant," "Rain Storage," "Fruit Coloring," "Fish School—swimming classes nightly." Standing beneath the sign—his back to us—is a MAN in dark, somber attire. He wears dark gloves on his hands at all times. Unlike the residents of Nocturno, he is not wearing a PastCoat. He stands, reading the sign, as IRIS enters. She looks at the MAN'S back for a moment, then speaks to him.*

IRIS. Are you curious or lost?

MAN. Pardon me? *(When he turns, we see that he wears a weathered sort of tool belt around his waist, containing numerous objects of practical need. The MAN himself has an oddly sinister bearing.)*

IRIS. It's better to be curious than lost, don't you think?
Which are you?

MAN. I'm new.

IRIS. Yes, I know. I can tell by your coat. Why have you come?

MAN. I'm looking for someone.

IRIS. Well, at this time of night, everyone's at work.

MAN. Doing what?

IRIS. You name it. Whatever you see in the world by day, it's made here by night. Like that fly on your nose—*(The MAN swats the unseen bug away.)* That fly was assembled right here in Nocturno. We crank those out by the millions and teach every one of them to fly. Plus: no two are the same. Our Bug Sculptors are very proud of that.

MAN *(catching on)*. Just like snowflakes, then—no two alike?

IRIS. Actually—and this is privileged information—the snowflakes are made in *pairs*. But we separate them and load them into clouds bound for different locations. Don't spread that around.

MAN. I won't.

IRIS. So, you've never been here before?

MAN. Not that I remember.

IRIS. Oh, you'd remember. Unless you've got a tear in your coat. Who are you looking for?

(LIGHTS EXPAND to reveal the Land of Nocturno, as HAZEL and ELMER—siblings, similar in age to Iris—rush on. HAZEL carries a large burlap sack which is marked: "Spots." ELMER carries a wooden box.)

HAZEL. I know you took them.

ELMER. I didn't take them.

HAZEL. Where did you put them?

ELMER. I didn't take them.

HAZEL. I bet you're hiding them.

ELMER. I DIDN'T TAKE THEM. Tell her, Iris—

IRIS. What is it, Elmer?

HAZEL (*before ELMER can answer*). We're almost done with our chores—all that's left is to put the spots on the Ladybugs— (*ELMER removes two large Ladybugs from the box. They're each bright orange and about the size of a cantaloupe. They are without spots.*)

ELMER. But why do Ladybugs need spots, anyway? I think they look fine without them.

HAZEL. And I reach into the Spot Sack and it's filled with these— (*HAZEL reaches into the sack and pulls out several long, black stripes—like those found on a zebra.*)

IRIS. Stripes.

ELMER. There must have been a mix-up.

HAZEL. We can't put stripes on the Ladybugs.

ELMER. Why not? And then we'll put the spots on the zebras.

HAZEL (*to IRIS*). You're lucky you don't have a brother. It's like this all the time.

ELMER. Can you help us, Iris? No one can find things like you can.

IRIS. I'll help you as soon as I— (*She turns to the MAN.*)

MAN (*interrupts her*). Your name is Iris.

IRIS. Yes. Why?

(The FLOWER PAINTER enters. He wears a beret and has a palette and brushes on a strap over his shoulder. He goes directly to ELMER, HAZEL and IRIS as, at the same instant, the MEMORY MENDER enters, opposite, pushing a cart inscribed "Memory Mender" in large letters. The cart holds large spools of thread, extra-large buttons, scissors, etc. His hat looks like a thimble. He is

a cranky but caring man, adamant about his work. Upon their entrance, the MAN turns and leaves.)

MEMORY MENDER (*calls out across the distance*). You there, sir—let me take a look at that coat! Sir, did you hear me? (*But the MAN is gone. The MEMORY MENDER remains at a distance, busying himself with the objects on his cart.*)

FLOWER PAINTER. Elmer, Hazel—are you finished with your chores?

HAZEL. We have a problem.

IRIS. The spots are missing.

ELMER. I didn't take them.

FLOWER PAINTER. Did you talk to the Spot Maker?

HAZEL. He sent them out, just like he always does.

FLOWER PAINTER. But, the world requires Ladybugs, and Ladybugs must have their spots—

IRIS. Maybe you could paint them on. (*ELMER holds the Ladybugs out to the FLOWER PAINTER.*)

FLOWER PAINTER. Out of the question. I'm a Flower Painter—nothing more. I wouldn't know the first thing about painting spots on bugs.

ELMER (*happily*). I guess our chores are done—

FLOWER PAINTER. It's not that simple, Elmer. Without us, the world would come to a standstill. If I abandoned my work, the flowers of the world would look like this— (*He produces a large, dull grey flower with a long stem.*) Instead of like this— (*A flourish of MUSIC as he makes several strokes with his paint brush and produces [seemingly] the same flower—now bright yellow and red.*) Now, you are Spotters and you must do your work.

HAZEL. But we've looked everywhere—

FLOWER PAINTER. I'm sure Iris can find them. She's like her dad in that way. That man could find the moon on the blackest of nights.

ELMER. Then why has he never found his way back home?

HAZEL (*a reprimand*). Elmer—

ELMER. He's been gone forever.

FLOWER PAINTER. No one knows why, Elmer, and I think it's better left—

IRIS. Would you tell me if you knew? (*The FLOWER PAINTER stares at her.*) I was only a baby, then. Even my mom won't tell me why he left.

FLOWER PAINTER (*calmly, definitively*). Because she *doesn't know*, Iris. No one does. It was the night of the Great Eclipse, and the moon was particularly hard to find. He went out to bring it in...and he's never returned.

IRIS. There's an eclipse tomorrow.

FLOWER PAINTER. The first one since that night. I doubt we'll get to enjoy it, though—

IRIS. Why not?

FLOWER PAINTER. The order just came and it's a big one.

HAZEL. An order for what?

FLOWER PAINTER. A *storm*.

ELMER. And it's a big one?

FLOWER PAINTER. Huge. (*He starts off, saying his farewell.*) Now and again.

ELMER, HAZEL, IRIS. Now and again.

HAZEL (*gently, to IRIS*). Sorry about my brother. He says stupid things.

ELMER. I didn't mean—

IRIS. It's not stupid. I think about it all the time, too.

ELMER. I know what would make you feel better, Iris.

HAZEL. Helping us find those spots.

ELMER. Better than that. The order has come and a storm must be assembled. Now, what does this mean to people like you and me?

IRIS. It means that somewhere in this town...right now... just *waiting for us*... is a big... fresh... wet... batch of...

IRIS, HAZEL, ELMER (*a delicious whisper*). ...rain. (*They sigh with delight.*)

HAZEL. I bet the Rain Makers have been working non-stop—

ELMER. And it's just *sitting there*, and no one's—

HAZEL. Played in it, or—

ELMER. Tasted it, or—

IRIS. Race you there— (*As they begin to rush off they are stopped by the MEMORY MENDER, who pushes his cart in their path.*)

MEMORY MENDER. Careful, now—or you'll trip and rip your coats. And if you rip your coats I'll have to sew 'em back up for you. And you know why, don't you?

IRIS, ELMER, HAZEL (*having heard this a million times*). Yes, we know why—

MEMORY MENDER (*quickly, quizzing them*). Hazel, who are the rulers of Nocturno, our home?

HAZEL. The Great Goods.

MEMORY MENDER. Iris, where do the Great Goods live?

IRIS. Across the water, on Great Island.

MEMORY MENDER. And, Elmer, how deep is the water that surrounds Great Island?

ELMER. Umm—

IRIS. I know!

HAZEL. I know, too!

ELMER (*sharp, to the girls*). So do I.

MEMORY MENDER. Well?

ELMER. It's—umm—

MEMORY MENDER. You knew it when I asked you last week.

ELMER. It's—oh, I don't know. Why do I always get the hard questions?!

MEMORY MENDER. Let me see your coat. (*ELMER walks over to the MENDER, who discovers a tiny rip in the sleeve of ELMER's PastCoat. He sews it back up as he speaks.*) See there. A little rip in your coat and your memory is harmed. It makes me crazy. You've got to take care of your coat because your coat holds your *past*. Every stitch, every pocket, every button and sleeve—it's your whole life in there! Think you can just go out and get a past like you can get a glass of milk?! Think again. (*He is finished sewing Elmer's coat.*) There we are. Now, Elmer, how deep is the water that surrounds Great Island?

ELMER (*touching the new stitches in his coat*). Ninety-nine thousand and twenty-three feet.

MEMORY MENDER. Exactly. Now, don't trip and get a rip. (*To IRIS, referring to her coat.*) Iris, have your mom keep an eye on that button. It's getting loose.

IRIS. I will.

MEMORY MENDER (*taking IRIS aside*). And one thing more: The Fog Lifter is retiring today. After all these years, she can still set the fog down in the morning—but she just can't lift it up anymore. She'd like you to take her place, Iris.

IRIS (*honored*). Thank you.

MEMORY MENDER. Now and again.

IRIS, ELMER, HAZEL. Now and again.

(*MUSIC, as the MEMORY MENDER exits, pushing his cart, and LIGHTS SHIFT to reveal the LEAF MONITOR—Hazel and Elmer's mom—standing near a tree. She holds several large leaves and a clipboard. Near her are two large sacks with leaves protruding out of the tops of each. One is marked "OLD" and one is marked "NEW." IRIS, ELMER and HAZEL rush past her.*)

LEAF MONITOR. Hazel. (*HAZEL stops. ELMER and IRIS also stop, and stand behind her.*) Where are you going?

HAZEL (*innocently*). What, Mom?

LEAF MONITOR. You heard me. Where are you rushing off to? Did you finish your chores?

HAZEL. Why don't you ever ask Elmer that question?

LEAF MONITOR. Because you're the oldest.

ELMER. And you always will be. (*HAZEL glares at ELMER.*)

LEAF MONITOR. I need you to help me balance these books. I keep checking and double-checking, but I'm still *one leaf off*.

ELMER (*quickly*). I didn't take it.

LEAF MONITOR. In all my years as the Leaf Monitor, I've never encountered this. We must be certain that for every new leaf we put on a tree, an old one falls. (*To HAZEL.*) But where could the missing one be?

(*The THUNDER BOTTLEERS enter, pushing a tall crate on wheels which is marked: "THUNDER." Stacked inside*

the crate are bottles, sealed with bright red lids. Other bottles in the crate are empty and unsealed. The men are busy bottling the thunder, as follows: Holding a bottle to their mouths, they use a funnel of some kind and make a loud, vocal SOUND of thunder into the bottle. Then they quickly seal up the bottle with a red lid and place it inside the crate. They repeat this, throughout the following:)

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE. How many is that?

THUNDER BOTTLER TWO. That's thirty-four thunders.

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE. And that's not enough?!

THUNDER BOTTLER TWO. The order was for a forty-thunder storm.

ELMER. I've never seen so much thunder.

THUNDER BOTTLER TWO. We've been bottling it up all night.

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE. Gonna be a monster. (*He thunders into a bottle.*)

THUNDER BOTTLER TWO. We gotta be ready. (*He thunders into a bottle.*)

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE. Word is the Color Mixer has outdone himself. For this storm, he's come up with a brand new shade of *stormy sky blue-black*.

IRIS. Really?

THUNDER BOTTLE TWO. Gonna be something. (*He thunders into a bottle.*)

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE. We gotta be ready. (*He thunders into a bottle.*)

LEAF MONITOR (*to BOTTLER ONE*). Keep an eye out for a missing leaf.

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE. Did you take it, Elmer?

ELMER. Why does everyone always—

LEAF MONITOR. Once the storm comes and they start *swirling*—I'm afraid I'll never find it.

THUNDER BOTTLER TWO. It's not the BEST leaf that's missing, I hope.

HAZEL. Why not?

LEAF MONITOR. The BEST leaf must be sent to the Great Goods. You know that.

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE. Have Iris help you—if it's lost, she'll find it.

(The BOLT BENDER enters, carrying a piece of lightning about four feet long. He's bending it in various ways, trying to get the right shape. Other lightning bolts poke out of a quiver he wears over his shoulder.)

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE *(greeting the BOLT BENDER)*. Almost day.

BOLT BENDER *(nods, greets them ALL)*. Almost day, indeed—and I can't get the lightning right. Even the best Bolt Bender gets tired of making the same old lightning bolt, over and over again.

IRIS. But when there's thunder, people expect lightning to go with it.

BOLT BENDER. But why couldn't it be something else?

ELMER. Like what?

BOLT BENDER. Open up one of those thunders and let's experiment. Instead of a *lightning bolt* lighting up the sky, maybe it's—*(The BOLT BENDER reaches into his quiver, as BOTTLER ONE opens up one of the sealed bottles of thunder. A huge, quick crack of thunder fills the theatre, as the BOLT BENDER produces a bolt in the shape of a cactus—or some other incongruous ob-*

ject—and holds it high above his head. If possible, it lights up.) —THIS!

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE. That's a possibility.

THUNDER BOTTLER TWO (*holding up the original lightning bolt*). The Great Goods would never approve. As long as they've been our rulers, the lightning has always looked like *this*. (*With seriousness.*) And, believe me, you don't want to get on the bad side of the Great Goods.

HAZEL. What can happen to you?

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE (*directly to HAZEL*). If you disobey the Goods, your punishment is great.

HAZEL. Mom. (*HAZEL reaches into her PastCoat and brings out a large, beautiful autumn leaf.*) I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend the Goods. But it was so pretty.

ELMER. It's the best leaf of them all. (*The LEAF MONITOR holds out her hand, and—reluctantly—HAZEL hands her the leaf. The LEAF MONITOR gently brushes a strand of hair from HAZEL's face.*)

LEAF MONITOR. Someday, Hazel, when you're the Leaf Monitor—you'll understand. Now, finish up your chores. It's almost day. (*The LEAF MONITOR exits, as the BOLT BENDER lifts the lightning bolt, saying—*)

BOLT BENDER (*as he leaves*). It's gonna be huge.

THUNDER BOTTLER ONE & TWO (*as they leave*). We gotta be ready. (*The BOTTLEERS thunder into their bottles and leave, along with the BOLT BENDER.*)

ELMER (*whispers to IRIS and HAZEL*). Come on, it's our last chance before the storm.

(The KIDS rush away and arrive at a very large rain barrel. It is wooden, with notches on its side [or a ladder] which enables it to be climbed. A large label on the