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Dramatic Publishing

IRON KISSES



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Drama
by
James Still

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"*Iron Kisses* needs no insight or explanation—it's heartbreakingly funny and tenderly observant, yet wise and complex. By the end, we inherently know 'Happiness is what you can bear.'

We just need to hear it again."

—Marcia Morphy, *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*

IRON KISSES

Cast: Im., 1w. Iron Kisses is the story of an American family: a son who made up for being gay by being perfect; a daughter who treats her daughter the way her mother treated her; a mother who struggles to love her two children equally; and a father who started missing his son while he was still a little boy. In a revealing theatrical twist, two actors portray the siblings as well as their Midwestern mother and father as the complex nature of love, family and marriage in the 21st century is explored. Alternately heart-breaking and funny, this story is about the mysteries of family and about how the roles we play are as inescapable as they are comfortable. It's about people doing the best they can, how families evolve, how they grow up, and how they can surprise us—if we let them. "In many ways, *Iron Kisses* needs no insight or explanation—it's heartbreakingly funny and tenderly observant, yet wise and complex. By the end, we inherently know 'Happiness is what you can bear.' We just needed to hear it again." (*Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*) *Unit set. Approximate running time 90 minutes.*

*Front cover: Jacob Blumer and Mary Bacon in the Geva Production.
Photo: HuthPhoto. Cover design: Susan Carle.*

13 ISBN: 978-1-58342-395-0

10 ISBN: 1-58342-395-8

Code: R81



www.dramaticpublishing.com



Printed on Recycled Paper



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JAMES STILL

This excerpt contains adult/mature content and language.



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(IRON KISSES)

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Paradigm, 19 W. 44th St., Suite 1410,
New York NY 10036 - Phone: (212) 391-1112

ISBN: 978-1-58342-395-0

“I would argue that the future of our country hangs in the balance because the future of marriage hangs in the balance. Isn’t that the ultimate homeland security, standing up and defending marriage?”

— Senator Rick Santorum
on the Gay Marriage Amendment as
reported by the Associated Press
on July 14, 2004.

* * *

A Mother’s hardest to forgive.
Life is the fruit she longs to hand you,
Ripe on a plate. And while you live,
Relentlessly she understands you.

— Phyllis McGinley

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of the play must give credit to the author of the play in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the play and/or a production. The name of the author must also appear on a separate line, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and must appear in size of type not less than fifty percent the size of the title type. Biographical information on the author, if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. In all programs this notice must appear:

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“Originally produced by Geva Theatre Center,
Rochester, New York, on March 15, 2006.
Mark Cuddy, Artistic Director,
John Quinlivan, Managing Director.”

Work on IRON KISSES was supported by the New Harmony Project

The foregoing credits shall be in a size and type no less than twenty-five percent (25%) as that used for the title of the play.:

NOTES FROM THE WRITER

I've often described writing plays as a kind of "accepting an invitation." Sometimes that invitation has come from the simplest image, sometimes from the emerging story, sometimes from the structure of the story, and always from a character who simply refuses my refusals.

Iron Kisses is a play about a brother and sister who play everyone in their family. Mostly they play their parents (as well as themselves) and while on the face of it this choice might risk seeming like a gimmick, I love the pure theatricality of it, the truth in the little details, and the shifting perspectives and point of view. But it's also emotionally true, that idea that no matter how much we might try, family is profoundly inescapable.

At its heart, *Iron Kisses* is about a family struggling to recognize itself as it's breathlessly changing and evolving in ways unimaginable not just fifty years ago, but even ten years ago. It's about that nagging sense that we all, at one critical time or another, "become" our parents. But it's also about grief, about the ways we grieve, about our need to be with people we love when we're grieving, even if we don't know how to do it. Grief is lonely. It's also messy. By the time we get to the end of *Iron Kisses* and realize how the end of the play is also the beginning of the play—the characters' grief makes meaning out of everything that's come before.

While it's up to a director and the actors to make any production personal and fully realized on their own terms, not surprisingly I have some big fat opinions about how the play works best. In no particular order:

— The transitions that Billy and Barbara make as they go back and forth between playing both Mom and Dad should be simple and clear. Audiences get it. It's about essence...less really is more.

— I prefer that the play be produced without an intermission. It's designed to play straight through (at about 90 minutes) which not only serves the story but is also my love letter to actors who can remarkably transform themselves (and us) as storytellers and characters.

— Music can be very helpful throughout. It's delicate—but definitely worth the trouble.

Finally: I started writing *Iron Kisses* while a writer in residence at The New Harmony Project in southern Indiana. One morning during my residency, I was at breakfast and shared a table with a handful of folks—including the four-year old son of one of the dramaturgs there that summer. The dramaturg (Diane) told me a story of how her son Corey had recently drawn a self-portrait which included hair of happiness. When I heard Corey's story, I felt something crack open inside my heart, I couldn't get back to my play soon enough, and within days I had finished the first scene of the play. With Corey's permission, I've included a copy of his self-portrait. Thank you, Corey.



Drawing by Corey Brewer Rigney

You and your story are proof that plays can reveal themselves in the most mysterious—and surprising ways.

— James Still

Deepest thanks to People's Light & Theatre Company for workshop and development support of *Iron Kisses*: David Bradley, Michael Cruz, Jeep, Shannon O'Donnell, Kathryn Petersen.

Thanks to The New Harmony Project for giving me a quiet place to start writing this play at the 2004 conference where I was a writer in residence.

More deep thanks to Marge Betley and Geva Theatre Center for providing workshop and development support as part of Hibernatus Interruptus. Special thanks to Peter Amster, Ryan Artzberger, Jen Kern and Frank Cavallo.

IRON KISSES premiered at Geva Theatre Center, Mark Cuddy, artistic director, in Rochester, New York, on March 17, 2006. Direction was by Stephanie Gilman, scenic design by Wilson Chin, costume design by Anne R. Emo, lighting design by S. Ryan Schmidt, sound design by Daniel Baker, original music by Matthew Suttor and the Broken Chord Collective and dramaturgy by Marge Betley. The stage manager was Alexandra M. Backus. The cast was:

BARBARA Mary Bacon
BILLY Jacob Blumer

* * * *

IRON KISSES was a winner of The Arch and Bruce Brown Foundation Prize for Playwriting.

IRON KISSES

A Play in One Act

CHARACTERS:

BILLY mid-30s to 40s

BARBARA mid-30s to 40s

SETTING: A small town in the Midwest and San Francisco.

TIME: Now.

Scene 1: Iron Kisses

Scene 2: The Long Division of My Mother

Scene 3: Happiness Is What You Can Bear

For Bonnie

IRON KISSES

SCENE ONE:

In the dark we hear the old Fifth Dimension recording of Laura Nyro’s “The Wedding Bell Blues,” or something similar. As the song builds, we begin to see slides from weddings, lots of different weddings from different eras—like a family scrapbook. Brides and grooms that sheepishly look toward the camera with hope and fear. Wedding dresses that mark the changing styles of a century. The pictures might include a bride and groom feeding each other wedding cake, the iconic image of the bride and groom kissing on the “You may kiss the bride” cue, the bride and groom flanked by both sets of parents, a line of bridesmaids, etc. Suddenly there is a photo of two men. They are arm in arm, smiling giddily, both in tuxes. It’s the 21st century. At first glance they might be mistaken for two groomsmen, two friends, two brothers even. But the photo dissolves very slowly into another photo: the same two men are kissing on the mouth. It’s romantic and tender. The Fifth Dimension are fading away—and the image blurs—but it never disappears completely. The photo of the two men kissing might remain in ghostly view throughout the rest of the scene.

Lights bloom onstage to reveal A MAN—he’s one of the kissing men in the photo. Onstage, he might be sitting in

a chair. He's holding a medium-sized beautiful wooden box. You know if he opens the box that the air will fill with the scents of long ago, with fingerprints, with hope.

He slowly opens the box and looks inside, pulling out a stamped, handwritten, opened envelope.

BILL'S MOM. Well...it's a wedding invitation. Anyone can see that. It came in the mail mixed up with a VISA bill, and a newsletter from my church, a couple of offers for unlimited night minutes if you switch to a different long-distance carrier, and a two-dollar coupon off a certain brand of cheese. I saw the wedding invitation right away because it was the only envelope with a hand-written address. Have you noticed how we just don't get that much handwritten mail anymore? Everyone's just so busy. *(She turns the wedding invitation over and over in her hands. Then, discovery:)* The stamp is one of those "LOVE" stamps. My son used to collect stamps. He'd say that getting a stamp from some far-away country made him feel like he'd get to go there someday. *(Beat. Looking at the wedding invitation.)* It was the handwriting that I recognized. It's my son's handwriting. *(From the wooden box, she pulls out a child's drawing, worn and fragile.)* He probably doesn't want me to tell you this, but for years I kept a picture that Billy drew for me when he was a little boy... For years it hung on our refrigerator, next to football and basketball schedules. It's Billy's self-portrait. All around the face there's these squiggly yellow lines, see, which I thought was supposed to be his hair. But Billy had dark hair so I asked him why he had drawn his self-portrait with yellow hair.

And Billy said, “That isn’t my hair, Mom. That’s my happiness.” He signed it, “To Mommy—Love, Billy.” *(She gives the drawing to someone sitting in the audience.)* You can just pass it around. I would like it back when you’ve looked at it though.

(When she returns to her chair, she turns around and is someone else. Maybe he assumes a different posture, maybe a slightly different voice—but not with a lot of effort. It’s the story that’s important.)

BILL’S DAD *(holding the wedding invitation)*. When I got home from work that day, there was the usual stack of mail waiting for me on the kitchen table, just like any other day. My wife always puts the mail in order of how she thinks I’ll want to read it. And on the bottom of the pile there was this unopened envelope. It was from my son. *(He looks at the invitation.)* Billy—Bill—he always had very distinctive handwriting. Not feminine—just distinctive. When he was first learning how to write in cursive, must have been in the third or fourth grade, he used to spend hours on his handwriting. He’d fill up pages and pages with his cursive handwriting. If you asked him what he was doing, he’d just say, “Practicing.” One night after the kids had gone to bed and I was still up watching Johnny Carson on the TV, my wife came in with the funniest look on her face. She’d been picking up after the kids, in one hand she was holding Barbara’s baton, in the other hand was a notebook that Billy had been writing in that day... I remember the guests on Johnny Carson that night were Captain Kangaroo and Rock Hudson.

(He shifts in his seat again, becoming BILL'S MOM again.)

BILL'S MOM. I was never the kind of mom who went around snooping in their kids' private stuff, you know. But this was just a notebook, Billy was just a little boy, he liked to practice his handwriting. I don't even think I meant to look at it—maybe Billy wanted me to see it, or maybe God did—because it just fell open and I saw pages and pages of this notebook filled with Billy's perfect eight-year-old handwriting. It was the same phrase written over and over and over again. It said— *(Pausing, then slow, like she's reading a foreign language:)* "BILLY LOVES JASON." Pages and pages of that. *(Beat.)* "BILLY LOVES JASON." *(Beat.)* Well that was a long time ago. Unbelievably long time ago. *(Beat. Then very direct:)* I don't have a problem with Billy being gay—I really don't. It's the fact that he loves men that makes me uncomfortable.

(He shifts again, becoming BILL'S DAD.)

BILL'S DAD. When Billy told me about, you know, when he told me that he was—you know, homosexual, I asked him when it happened, you know, I asked him when he turned that way, when he knew. He told me he'd ALWAYS been "that way"—he'd always been gay. Billy told me that he can't remember NOT being gay, that he's been gay forever. "Even when you were a little kid?" "Dad, when you're a little kid, you don't ask yourself if you're gay, you just know who you love." The thing about that that I just find impossible to understand

is that I don't know how I didn't know. I mean, all those years watching him and thinking one thing—and then finding out later that it was something completely different all along. That HE—my son was—something completely different. I just never imagined it, not one of my own kids, I guess. It just doesn't seem possible that your child can keep a secret for such a long time. And then of course you wonder what else you might have missed, what other secrets the world is keeping from you.

BILL'S MOM. I used to have this dream, I had the same dream several times. It was a wedding. And Billy was the groom. And the bride was some girl—I didn't know her in the dream, she was just this nice girl with blonde hair. You knew they were going to have beautiful children. People always say that weddings are really for the parents. That's one of the things about all this gay marriage stuff—I don't think those gay weddings are for the PARENTS. I think it's for the people who are getting married! And that just scares me. My problem is that I really do like Billy—I do! I like who he is and how he turned out. Most parents only dream about having a son like Billy. You can imagine them saying stuff like, “My son is perfect, I wouldn't change a thing about him.” Well when we say that we don't really mean that our kids are perfect. We just mean that we're proud of how they turned out. And I AM proud of Billy, I am. And I wish I could say that I wouldn't change a thing about him. But secretly, I wish he was exactly the way he is—just not gay. I told Billy that one time when we were going through a difficult period with him, I told him I wish you could be exactly who you are—but not gay! I said I wasn't trying to hurt him, I was just being honest. He

told me that if I loved him, then I loved him because he IS gay, and that I couldn't have it both ways—because it's just WHO HE IS...and then he said he wasn't trying to hurt me he was just being honest. We didn't talk again after that for about six months.

BILL'S DAD. Billy and Michael have lived together for years. They—they met at the gym. They were both lifting weights. Billy says that on Monday they did backs and biceps; Wednesday was legs day; Friday was shoulders and triceps; and on Sunday they moved in together. They've been inseparable ever since. We've had them in our home, they visit us when they can. They're both very busy. Billy had brought a couple of his other friends home to meet us over the years. But I never cared for them much. It was difficult to find anything to talk about and I hate to admit it but it was always a relief when they'd leave. It was different with Michael. Michael made it impossible for us not to like him. We liked him from the moment we saw him. That surprised me. What surprised me more was that when I saw them together that first time—they looked like a couple. I don't know how to explain that, I don't think I've ever really known a couple—men, in a couple, I mean; a gay couple. I've never known one, or known that I knew one. But Billy and Michael—they just...that surprised me.

(BILL'S MOM jumps right in:)

BILL'S MOM. I was a little less impressed with Michael than my husband was. On the outside, I'm the one who's more outgoing. But on the inside, I'm pretty care-

ful. Especially when it comes to my children. I don't like watching them do things they're going to regret later. It's awful not being able to save 'em, not being able to help them save themselves. And I didn't trust Michael. I was worried that Billy was going to get hurt. You could see that Billy thought the world of him, the way he laughed at things Michael would say, or, the way he'd look in my direction full of hope-hope-hoping that I'd like Michael. That first night, the four of us were sitting around the table having dinner. I got up to see about dessert, and when I looked back, I could see that under the table—Billy and Michael were holding hands. I realized that even though I'd known about Billy—you know, that he's gay—I'd known that for years by then—but I had never thought about Billy touching another man—like, that, I mean, like—holding hands. I'd thought about other things—you know, sexual things—I'd thought about that, not the details, not what they DID, but I'd wondered about it, you know, about sex and Billy. I mean, not all the time, I didn't obsess about it, but when Billy told me he was gay I thought about—well I watch the news. You just—worry. And I guess I was so busy worrying that I never thought about Billy holding hands with another man. *(She stops. Beat.)* I didn't say very much the rest of that evening. I know Billy was disappointed that I was so quiet. I know he thought that I didn't like Michael. But I was trying to remember the last time that my husband held MY hand...

(BILL's MOM drifts off in thought. BILL's DAD picks up the story.)

BILL'S DAD. Something I never told Billy, although it was pretty obvious, is that I was nervous when we met them together that first time. With Billy's sister Barbara, I always pretended I didn't really like the guy because if I seemed to like him TOO much then she'd lose interest in him for sure. But if I acted like I didn't think much of the guy at all then she'd be telling us that she wanted to marry him. I got real good at just staying, you know, right in the middle. Right there, in the middle. But Billy is a different kind of kid—he never seemed to be so serious about someone before, the way he was with Michael. So I just didn't have much practice. It was like Billy was a teenager dating for the first time and we were the parents—which we should have known how to do, but it was different somehow. It was like we'd skipped over that part of Billy's life and I just didn't know what the rules were, I didn't know how I was supposed to act. I also didn't want to embarrass Billy in front of his friend and I didn't want them to embarrass me and Billy's mother either. It was very confusing. We were all grownups but it felt like none of us knew what we were doing. Michael said "please" and "thank you"—I remember that. He had a strong handshake, I remember that too. He didn't wear an earring which I was sorta happy about. He took a second piece of cake even though my wife had made better before. At one point I wondered about Michael's parents, who they were, what they did, whether or not they loved their son. And what they thought about MY son.

(BILL'S DAD gives up trying to explain it. BILL'S MOM resumes her side of things:)

BILL'S MOM. We live in a town where there's just not many people in our exact situation. I mean, folks don't celebrate "Gay Pride" here in the summer, it's not one of the big holidays. But they're proud of other things, they're proud of their kids. They go to baseball games and take the kids to the swimming pool. People work in their gardens and share tomatoes and zucchinis with each other. Farmers in their pickups wave with one finger. There are a lot of garage sales in the summer, kids sell lemonade at the side of the road. It's just all pretty normal. That's how Billy grew up too—he did all those things, he was in the middle of it, he belonged here. Sometimes it feels like Billy didn't just move away, sometimes it feels like he's dead. Not to me. But to the people in my town. They just gradually stopped asking about him. Every little thing I told them seemed to raise an eyebrow. I used to tell my husband that if folks here raised their eyebrows any higher they'd come right off their face. (*She is suddenly sitting in church.*) Sometimes in church I'll look around at the other people who still come. It's a lot of older folks. Most of the younger ones have moved away, and the ones that stay don't seem very interested in church. My daughter Barbara never comes to church. Even our ministers don't stay long, we get a new one every couple of years. I wonder if any of the people in my church are gay. I wonder if some of their kids are gay. I wonder what they'd do if somebody wanted to get married right here in our church, somebody who was gay. I'm a Methodist. But the story in my family goes that my grandparents were Catholic. That's Billy's great-grandparents. And when the Catholic church burned down they just walked across the street to

the only other church in their little town, and that's how we became Methodists. If God was testing them—I'm not sure if that meant they passed the test or not. I suppose it depends on whether God turns out to be a Catholic or a Methodist. But they proved they could CHANGE. They passed THAT test anyway.