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Dramatic Publishing

HEDY UNDERSTANDS ANXIETY

**An Original Play
by
ANGELA COUNTS**



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(HEDY UNDERSTANDS ANXIETY)

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Whenever the play is produced, the following notice must appear on all programs: *HEDY UNDERSTANDS ANXIETY* is the 1994 Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting Award winner of the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival XXVI, supported by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, in association with Penn State University and WPSX-TV.

All music referenced in this play is copyrighted. If it is desired to use these songs in any production of *HEDY UNDERSTANDS ANXIETY* each producer must individually obtain permission in writing from Motown Records for "I Need Your Lovin'" and "You Make Love Like Springtime" by Teena Marie; from Irving Music BMI for "I'll Take You There" by the Staple Singers; and from Atlantic Recording Corporation for "Respect" by Aretha Franklin.

PLACE:

MAXINE's brownstone and various motels and other locales across the Middle and Southern United States. Act One: U is the motel room, which should be generic enough in nature to suggest typical roadside motels: a bed with nightstands, etc. Scattered in the D area are black boxes that can be used as props (ie., chairs) in the flashback and dream sequences, and can also be used as Hedy's car.

TIME:

1990s and the past, as seen through flashback and dreams.

ACT ONE

SETTING: *Harlem, N.Y. Maxine's brownstone.*

AT RISE: *LIGHTS FADE UP. Scattered across the D area are packing boxes filled with neatly folded clothes, and other items to be donated to charity. A BOOM BOX plays, Teena Marie's "I Need Your Lovin'," a funky upbeat tune that was popular in the early 1980s. The GOODWILL MAN enters, takes a few steps and moves boxes offstage.*

HEDY enters dancing, with a suitcase in one hand and a straw hat in the other. She is like a bright sunburst moving to a lively Calypso band. She suddenly stops as she notices the trunk. POP MUSIC FADES OUT and a mournful GOSPEL FADES UP. Enter three shadowy figures: the FUNERAL DIRECTOR, a MOURNER, and the ghost of her grandmother MAXINE. The GOSPEL FADES OUT. HEDY crosses to the trunk, which in the light resembles a coffin.

VOICES (*chanting*). What say you, Hedy, Hedy...? What say you, Hedy, Hedy...?

ARMAND/FUNERAL DIRECTOR. What is the matter, Ms. Grier? Ms. Grier?

HEDY (*leaning over an imaginary coffin*). Who is this?

FUNERAL DIRECTOR (*telling HEDY the obvious*). Sister Maxine...God rest her soul...Mother of Isadora...Wife of Mr. Johnson...Grandmother of Hedy.

HEDY. Why is she all puffed up like this? My grandmother was a thin woman. Who's going to recognize her looking like this? What did you do, go crazy on the embalming fluid? (*The FUNERAL DIRECTOR exits. HEDY calls after him.*) Well? I want something done right now. Now, don't make me light up a cigarette on you, because this is more than the grieved should have to deal with. (*HEDY looks into the trunk again.*)

ISADORA/MOURNER. Isn't she beautiful?...They did such a lovely job.

HEDY. Isadora? That's Isadora. My mother...What the hell is going on?!(*HEDY slams the trunk shut.*)

MOURNER. You really ought to rest, child...Seeing your mother in that coffin...Shame. What caused you to think such a thing?...Your mother gone all these years.

HEDY. Without your sister Maxine what am I? Am I just like my mother, who you all turned your backs on? You neighbors. You friends. You family who never bothered to show, except on the occasion of bad news, holidays, or funerals. I've eaten your casseroles, read your Hallmark sympathy cards. So shoo fly. Don't bother me. My future has driven around this corner many times, blowing its horn and I just let it past me by. I'm outta here! Do you hear me, Maxine? I'm outta here! (*HEDY's frenzy "conjures" up MAXINE who speaks from the shadows, from some other-worldly place.*)

MAXINE. You don't have to yell. I can hear you, child. Enough to wake the dead.

HEDY (*into the coffin*). Maxine? Is that you? Maxine?

(*LIGHTS UP on the brownstone. GOODWILL MAN returns to pick up more boxes.*)

GOODWILL MAN. Nice old brownstone. Too bad you couldn't keep it. Whites buying up these Harlem properties like hot cakes.

HEDY. We sold to an *African-American* couple.

GOODWILL MAN. We? Who's the lucky man?

HEDY. I don't know. You tell me.

GOODWILL MAN. Maybe you're looking at him.

HEDY. I'm looking right through him.

GOODWILL MAN. Oh, so you gonna play me like that?

HEDY. I don't play. Besides, the man I'm looking for has got to be quick on his feet.

GOODWILL MAN. What's your hurry?

HEDY. I want out. Just like you want in. Right?

GOODWILL MAN. I like a woman with a sense of humor. You got a phone number where you headed?

HEDY. I'll let you know when I get there.

GOODWILL MAN. I better not hold my breath, huh? All right...I'll come back for that trunk.

HEDY (*protective*). The trunk stays with me.

GOODWILL MAN. I'll take it out to your car for you...free of charge.

HEDY. Don't have a car.

GOODWILL MAN. I know you not dragging that big old thing around New York.

HEDY. Now, how do you know what I'm going to do?

GOODWILL MAN. Sorry. Didn't mean to upset you.

HEDY. Upset me? Last man that upset me was Santa Claus.

GOODWILL MAN. I wasn't trying to say...Listen, I'm sorry...I don't know what I said wrong. I just saw you dancing in here...

HEDY. And you thought just what, now?

GOODWILL MAN (*angry*). Nothing. You got boxes to move and I'm going to move 'em. (*He picks up the box and turns to leave.*)

HEDY. I'm sorry. It's my fault. I woke up on the wrong side of the floor this morning. (*He turns back to HEDY, in honor of the truce.*)

GOODWILL MAN. That's okay. I'm wasting your time. You got to be going.

HEDY. I'm going to San Antonio because I found out where my mother lived before she died. Her address and everything...Maxine died...Left me this house...

GOODWILL MAN (*setting the box down and crossing to HEDY*). You all right?

HEDY. Yep. Pretty fabulous. I hadn't bothered to come near this trunk since I was a child. My grandmother forbid me to go through *her* things. But they weren't her things. They belonged to my mother.

GOODWILL MAN (*trying to get close*). Hey...You know, family can be like that sometime.

HEDY (*composing herself*). A house of lies. All the years I spent right here because I thought that old woman needed me.

GOODWILL MAN. So, what did you find in that trunk? I mean, only if you feel like telling me.

HEDY. I found the fucking phone book. Excuse my French... My grandmother's lovely old phone book. When I came back from the funeral home, after that weird episode...I ran upstairs...Yellowed pages falling out all over the floor, ink bleeding and there it was, Isadora Grier, located under "G" right after Goodman's Cleaners...

GOODWILL MAN (*confused*). Well...yeah...That can be hard...

HEDY (*mimicking MAXINE*). "Oh I don't know what ever became of your mother, Hedy. She just left one day twenty years ago, child...Got herself killed in a car accident and that was the last we heard about it." No funeral, no forwarding address...No more mother...just a sweet old woman who everybody loves.

GOODWILL MAN (*at a loss for words*). Lots of memories, huh?

HEDY. Memories? Not in this house. Every trace of my mother swept away and taken out with the trash. Every time I tried to sneak into the attic, Maxine would be right on my heels, pretending she was looking for some long lost treasure and just happened to find me trying to pry open this trunk. (*Beat.*) You ever traveled on the road?

GOODWILL MAN. No, not really. New York traffic jams is about as much road as I want to deal with. I know that phone book must mean something to you, but—

HEDY. My taxi's going to be here any minute.

GOODWILL MAN. Right. I'll take that trunk to the curb for you. Won't be but a minute. (*He exits with the box. HEDY gathers up the last of her belongings. A CAR HORN blows outside. She crosses R and looks out the door.*)

HEDY (*returning to the brownstone*). I almost expect to hear you, Maxine, calling from upstairs to bring you a softly boiled egg. Or yelling, "Hedy what happened to my Vicks VapoRub?" as if I had a secret plot to wipe all traces of Vicks VapoRub from the face of the earth. "Hedy!!! Hedy!!!" Had to yell my name every five minutes, just to test my patience. That woman had a one-track mind.

(*MAXINE enters dressed in her Sunday Best.*)

MAXINE. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you was happy to be leaving your granny...A dancing and a singing...

HEDY (*calling offstage*). I really need to get out of here. Now!

MAXINE. Your mama was no good, Hedy. Left her husband and her family.

HEDY (*to herself*). That's it. No more coffee. No more staying up all night.

MAXINE. Hush, child. Ain't no coffee in the world powerful enough to bring me back from the dead. (*HEDY frantically tries to get the trunk across the stage, but MAXINE stands in her way.*) Folks trying their best to make you feel guilty about leaving everything behind, and what do you do? You run 'em away with that Tina Turner devil music.

HEDY. Teena Marie. And how do you know what I'm doing?

MAXINE. Just a bunch of screeching about loving somebody or trying to get some love from a fool who don't deserve all the energy that went into singing the thing to begin with.

HEDY. Do you see a man around here? How about children? (*Calling out to her fictitious children.*) Hello? Any children here? Your mama's calling you. Here, children, children. Oh, husband, husband. Oh, beautiful life of mine, where are you?

MAXINE. I know you're looking to "fall in love."

HEDY. I'm not looking to fall in love.

MAXINE. If that's what you want, there's plenty of decent—

HEDY (*finishing MAXINE's familiar refrain*). ...Black men right here in New York. One right outside my door as a matter of fact...Taking his sweet time as if I have all day to be waiting on him just because I wanted to donate a few things when I could of left all this crap right here, or

thrown it out back with the rest of the garbage you've been collecting for God knows what.

MAXINE. Isadora's gone, Hedy.

HEDY. And so are you. I've got a taxi to catch. (*HEDY starts to exit.*)

MAXINE. You need to feel some guilt about abandoning the only home you've ever known to go looking for a dead woman who never deserved to be called your mother.

HEDY. How can you talk like that?

MAXINE. It's the truth.

HEDY (*inspecting MAXINE*). I mean literally. What metaphysical qualities allow you to be standing here talking to me when you're dead?

(HEDY's fear turns to laughter. The GOODWILL MAN returns with a dolly.)

GOODWILL MAN. Your taxi man's on meter. Hey, look, I held you up. Let me help you out with your fare.

MAXINE. Give the trunk to charity.

HEDY. No.

GOODWILL MAN. Really, I want to.

MAXINE (*sits down on the trunk*). My poor little house. How could you sell it? Has money taken over your soul, child?

HEDY (*stage whisper to MAXINE*). I've got enough money to buy a car, and a little to tide me over until I get a job. That's all.

MAXINE. What kind of car? Don't tell me you sold my house for a car with a phone in it. 'Cause if you did—

HEDY. A small car, okay?!

GOODWILL MAN. I like small cars. In and out of traffic...Fifty miles to the gallon...

HEDY. I had to get out quickly. I didn't get rich off of selling the house.

MAXINE. Quickly? I ain't never seen you do anything quickly in your life.

GOODWILL MAN. Hey. Like Billie Holiday said, "Don't Explain"...or was that "No Regrets"?

HEDY. "God Bless the Child." That's me.

MAXINE. But the minute I take my last breath, you're on the phone to the real estate people. Are you deranged? Are you possessed?

HEDY (*ignoring MAXINE*). So, we all ready to go? Great. Let's go.

GOODWILL MAN. You sure you got everything? (*HEDY grabs her suitcase, boom box, straw hat. GOODWILL MAN tries to get the dolly under the trunk but it's too heavy. He pushes the trunk U with MAXINE still on it.*)

MAXINE. It's not my fault if you never lived the kind of life you wanted to live. You had every opportunity.

GOODWILL MAN. I'll come back for it. Damn thing's awful heavy. (*He exits with the rest of the boxes.*)

HEDY. I don't know what you're doing here, Maxine. I don't even know why I'm responding to you. All I know is I want peace and quiet. Now. I want it now. Not after I'm taken away in a straitjacket. I want it now!

MAXINE. You were always so melodramatic.

HEDY. And you were always so goddamn irritating, but I never had the heart to tell you.

MAXINE. Fine. You'll have to answer to your Maker just like I did...Talking to me like that after I sacrificed all these years—

HEDY: My Maker? My God, Maxine, what are you doing here?

MAXINE. I'm warning you, Hedy. Leave well enough alone.

Let me and Isadora rest in peace. Let sleeping dogs lay.

Let by-gones be by-gones...

HEDY. All right, already, with the clichés.

MAXINE. I hid that trunk, but I told you what you needed to know.

HEDY. Where is my mother buried, Maxine?

MAXINE. She was cremated. Just ashes—

HEDY. That you never bothered to send for. (*MAXINE approaches HEDY.*)

MAXINE. I sent for those ashes.

HEDY. But Isadora got lost in the postal system.

MAXINE. That man she ran off with probably took her ashes.

HEDY. Then I'll find *him*.

MAXINE. How?

HEDY. I've got her address. That's a start.

MAXINE. A start for what? That address is twenty years old.

HEDY. What drove her from Harlem, Maxine? (*No response.*) Then, I'll have to find out for myself.

MAXINE. Ain't nothing drive your mother from her family but the devil himself...and a crazy white man named Bud. That's what drove her.

HEDY. Bud?

MAXINE. You think your mother's life was a great, big adventure. If I ever thought any of that would've done you some good, I would have given that old trunk to you a long time ago.

HEDY. But you didn't.

MAXINE. Because I loved you. And I loved you even more when Isadora left you here. You were just a little girl—

HEDY. Yes, I know.

MAXINE. You don't ever want to hear nothing bad about your mother. The minute I say something—

HEDY. It's the past. Just like you said.

MAXINE. Hedy, please stay. You can get a place here in New York.

HEDY. You take care of this old house and don't let the new couple mistreat it.

MAXINE. Hedy, please don't go.

HEDY. I'm gone.

(The GOODWILL MAN returns with the clipboard. MAXINE exits.)

GOODWILL MAN *(handing HEDY the clipboard)*. All right. Just sign on the dotted line.

HEDY *(a sincere apology)*. You know, you're a very good man. And brave, too, to come back into this house.

GOODWILL MAN *(laying on his charm and sympathy)*. I can go through fire when I got something worth getting to. *(HEDY signs the form on the clipboard, and reaches into her purse to give him a tip.)* Goodwill. We don't take tips. *(He hands HEDY a business card.)* Hey, look...You take care of yourself and if you're ever back in New York—

HEDY. And I've gotten a little therapy?

GOODWILL MAN. ...And you need anything. Well, you know...Give me a call.

HEDY. I'll do that. And...Thanks. *(He exits.)* Anything you need, Hedy...*(HEDY looks at the card. A CAR HORN blows offstage. She tears up the card and puts it in her purse. She takes one last look around the brownstone and exits.)*