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Family Plays

PERSEPHONE

Comedy by
Ford Ainsworth



PERSEPHONE

"We won first place in the Nebraska State Finals!"

(Ann Bowman, Bruning High School Bruning, Neb.)

Comedy. By Ford Ainsworth. *Cast: 10 to 15 actors, flexible.* This one-act comedy retells the myth in which Hades, god of death, kidnaps Persephone, goddess of life and spring. But while Persephone is usually presented as the sad-eyed queen of the underworld, here she is a happy breath of spring that makes life glitter wherever she is—even in Hades. Her conflict with the dead, who are trying their best to rest in peace, makes one of the most imaginative as well as meaningful literary works of the decade. In Greek mythology, Persephone, the daughter of Demeter (Mother Earth), bit into a forbidden pomegranate and was sentenced to spend a month in the underworld for each of the six seeds she swallowed. That's why Earth has six months of bad weather (Demeter is crying for her daughter) and six months of happy, bright spring and summer. But according to this dramatization, when Persephone descended into Hades, she took along a happy breath of spring that made life glitter in the dark underworld. Some of the dead don't like the glitter. But the irresistible charm of Persephone infects even the darkly handsome King of the Dead and the crotchety old ferryman, Charon. A romantic comedy, the play visualizes the havoc that youthful innocence can create in the somber world of harsh realities. In addition to the comic conflicts surrounding the situation, however, there is a deeper theme of the relation of life and death. The myth presents Persephone, as life, mated to Hades, as death. This coupling is significant, since life and death are in fact inseparable, inevitably linked together. In this insoluble link there is also a hint of the nature of real love. The play is a comedy and should be played with the light, happy touch that comedy demands. Although it has its serious moments and dramatic episodes (which, of course, should be played seriously and dramatically), Persephone is essentially a happy, buoyant person, and since it is her play, the overall tone must be happy and buoyant. The play is suitable for all groups. *Set: the throne room of Hades. Time: the morning of the earth. A director's guide is available containing drawings of costumes and set, details on all technical aspects of staging and discussion of characterization, plot and theme. Approximate running time: 35 to 40 minutes. Code: PH6.*

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Persephone

PERSEPHONE

A One-Act Comedy

by

FORD AINSWORTH

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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FORD AINSWORTH

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(PERSEPHONE)

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PERSEPHONE

Characters of the Play

***The Prologue**, a male or female storyteller who obviously enjoys telling stories

The Gods:

Persephone, a beautiful, vivacious breath of spring

Hades, the darkly handsome King of the Dead

Hermes, the happy, wholesome messenger from Olympus

Demeter, the officious mother-in-law, goddess of earth

The Guardians of Hades:

Charon, the crotchety old ferryman

Cerberus, a watch-dog

***The Dead:**

Polydamus

Electra

Thyestes

Cassandra

Polyxena

Helen

Achilles

Eteocles

Time: The morning of the earth

Place: The throne room of Hades

*Cast size can be reduced by letting the Prologue double as Polydamus or Hermes, or by eliminating some of the Dead and giving their speeches to others. Names can be changed if it is necessary to use girls in some of the male roles (Thyesta and Ismene are traditional Greek feminine names).

NOTES ON THE PLAY

Persephone is “eternal spring . . . a warm breeze, always blowing . . . a bright sun, never dimming . . . a fragrant blossom, forever blooming. And when King Hades saw her dancing through the meadow with flowers in her hair and a picnic basket in her hand, the sight was more than he could handle! His eyes were accustomed to the dim shadows of his subterranean kingdom. His only companions were the silent dead in their ghostly shrouds . . . And here was Persephone, with the glitter of her beauty blinding his eyes and the music of her laughter filling his ears. . . . A lonely man and a beautiful girl – that’s the story.”

The tale of Persephone and Hades is one of the best known of the Greek myths. In this play, the eternal, unquenchable vitality and youth of Persephone are emphasized by setting her against the gloomy background of the world of the dead.

A romantic comedy, the play visualizes the havoc that youthful innocence can create in the somber world of harsh realities. In addition to the comic conflicts surrounding the situation, however, there is a deeper theme of the relation of life and death. The myth presents Persephone, as life, mated to Hades, as death. This coupling is significant, since life and death are in fact inseparable, inevitably linked together. In this insoluble link there is also a hint of the nature of real love.

This play is comedy and should be played with the light, happy touch that comedy demands. Although it has its serious moments and dramatic episodes (which, of course, should be played seriously and dramatically), Persephone is essentially a happy, buoyant person; and since it is her play, the overall tone must be happy and buoyant.

Ford Ainsworth is a veteran playwright who has been all too reluctant to make his plays accessible to other producers. He writes for his students – college and high school – and feels that a script has served its purpose when his students have produced it. This one was written for presentation in the University Interscholastic League One-Act Play Contest, where it was one of the top winners among nearly one thousand entries. Ainsworth has the rare ability to make historical and mythological characters come alive. His brilliant characterizations, his perceptive understanding of the depth as well as the humor of the myth, and his ability to tell a story through dialogue make this the kind of play that audiences go away saying, “fantastic,” “exquisite,” “a play that will live through the ages.”

We are proud that Mr. Ainsworth chose our company to publish his play. It is a privilege he rarely bestows.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Hand Props

Book of myths – Prologue
Bunch of grapes – Persephone
Picnic basket, containing a peach, grapes, picnic cloth, etc. – on floor beside throne
Brightly colored ribbon – in basket
Papier mache dog mask (any paper Halloween mask will do if audience doesn't get a close look at it) – Charon

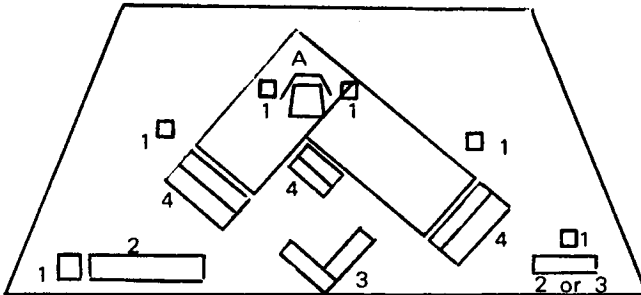
Sceptre – Hades
Streamers of dark cloth – Charon
Musty, faded gray towel – Eteocles
Pomegranate – Hades
Flowers – Hades; each of the Dead
Bones (supposedly human) – Hades
Parchment document (visa) – Hermes
Gnarled walking stick – Charon
Dog chain – Charon
Caduceus – Hermes

Pronunciation of Names

Persephone: *per - SEFF - uh - nee*
Demeter: *duh - MEET - er*
Hades: *HAY - deez*
Charon: *CARE - un*
Cerberus: *SIR - buh - rus*
Polydamus: *polly - DAM - us*
Hermes: *HER - meez*

Electra: *ee - LECK - truh*
Thyestes: *thigh - ESS - teez*
Cassandra: *kuh - SAN - druh*
Polyxena: *pollik - ZEN - uh*
Achilles: *uh - KILL - eez*
Eteocles: *ee - TEE - uh - kleez*

Ground Plan



AREA A: Two platforms make a V-shaped area up center. The throne is centrally placed on this elevation. A screen may be placed behind the throne, flanked by pillars or columns, perhaps supporting small Grecian urns. A swag drapery over the top of the screen and pillars will add to the effect. Step units may be placed before the throne and at the ends of the platforms.

1 – upright columns, pillars, or pylons

2 – fallen pillar

3 – small platforms or low benches (at the opening of the play, the Dead are huddled against the platforms and fallen pillars)

4 – step units

Other trim props may be added, but the set should be kept stark and harsh in its lines, except for the swag drape, which softens the throne to some extent. The set should be harmonious in color, with all set pieces, trim props, and the shrouds and veils of the Dead sprayed gray, dark brown, or some other somber color.

Costumes

Persephone's glittering costume and personality are a striking contrast to the set. Hades may wear a black costume and dark beard. The Dead wear shrouds and veils. The other characters may wear traditional Greek mythological costumes.

PERSEPHONE

[The setting is the underworld throne room of Hades, god of the dead. The center of focus is the throne itself – grimy and dusty from eons of neglect. Radiating from the throne are upright and fallen columns or pillars, tattered and decayed.]

As the curtain rises, the stage is dimly lighted. We can see only the shadowy suggestion of the throne, where PERSEPHONE is seated. She is posed, immobile, holding a bunch of grapes. The dead are scattered about the throne room, sleeping in huddled poses. They are scarcely discernible from the sombre gray of their resting places. With their heads and faces covered by their shrouds and their bodies lost in the folds of their robes, they seem to be a part of the set rather than characters in the play. Only the downstage area is lighted, and the PROLOGUE, holding a book of myths, moves into this lighted area as he speaks.]

PROLOGUE. It's an old story, the story of Persephone. Very old. Of course it's not a true story. At least it's not factual. However, there's truth in it if you care to look for it. But Persephone was never a real girl who got freckles in summer and frostbite in winter. No, she was immortal, which means she is just as much alive today as she was thousands of years ago when her story was new.

And just who was Persephone? She was the only daughter of Demeter, the goddess of the earth. Demeter was responsible for all the things that grow on earth – trees, grasses, reeds, and grains. She couldn't watch Persephone every minute, and Persephone needed watching!

She was . . . eternal spring . . . a warm breeze, always blowing . . . a bright sun, never dimming . . . a fragrant blossom, forever blooming. In short, she was Persephone, and when King Hades saw her dancing through the meadow with flowers in her hair and a picnic basket in her hand, the sight was more than he could handle!

You see, Hades was King of the Underworld, the region of darkness, where the dead gathered for their final, eternal rest. His eyes were accustomed to the dim shadows of *[indicating the dim background with a gesture]* his subterranean kingdom. His only companions were the silent dead in their ghostly shrouds. The only sounds he ever heard were the long sighs of eternal sleep and the mournful howls of Cerberus, his three-headed watch dog. *[CERBERUS howls in the distance.]*

And here was Persephone, with the glitter of her beauty blinding his eyes and the music of her laughter filling his ears. A lonely man and a beautiful girl – that’s the story.

He couldn’t go back to his gloomy palace without her – and he didn’t. He kidnapped her, whisked her away in his chariot, and carried her off to the underworld. So there she is! *[He indicates the throne, which is suddenly illuminated by a brilliant shaft of light revealing Persephone in a radiant glow.]* A gleam of light in a world of shadows. A glittering girl on a dusty throne. Persephone!

[The PROLOGUE disappears. PERSEPHONE turns from the bunch of grapes and surveys the surrounding gloom for a moment. Then she places grapes in the picnic basket beside her. Rising, she cups her hand to her mouth and calls:]

PERSEPHONE. Haaaades! *[There is no answer.]* Haaaades!

POLYDAMUS. *[Sitting up drowsily]* What is it? What’s the matter?

PERSEPHONE. *[Crossing to him, delighted by her discovery]* There was no echo! Listen! Haaaades! *[There is no answer.]* You see? No echo!

POLYDAMUS. *[Not interested, hitching himself up to sit on edge of platform]* Why should there be? What do you want with an echo?

PERSEPHONE. It’s an answer. I’m tired of talking to myself. All caves have echoes. What’s the matter with this one?

POLYDAMUS. *[Patiently]* It’s not a cave. There’s no back wall to make the sound bounce. This is Hades, Kingdom of the Dead. It has no walls, no boundaries. It goes forever.

PERSEPHONE. Nothing goes forever. Haaaades! *[This time there is an answering mournful howl from CERBERUS.]*

POLYDAMUS. Now you’ve set that dog to howling. Give it up. You can’t make an echo here.

PERSEPHONE. *[Looking right and left for a glimpse of Hades]* I’m not trying to make an echo any more. I’m calling my husband, Hades.

POLYDAMUS. *[Unbelieving]* Your husband? Hades is your husband?

PERSEPHONE. Of course! I’m Persephone, Queen of Hades. Haaaades!

POLYDAMUS. *[Covering his ears and shuddering away from the noise]* Then you don’t have to shout. He hears everything. He can hear you if you whisper.

ELECTRA. *[Rising slowly]* What’s all the racket about? I haven’t

had a single century of undisturbed rest since I got here. The blessing of the dead is sleep . . . peaceful sleep. Why don't you lie down and sleep?

PERSEPHONE. [*Gaily*] Because I'm not dead, that's why!

ELECTRA. [*Unbelieving*] Not dead? [*She crosses to Thyestes, moving away from the disturbing radiance of Persephone.*]

PERSEPHONE. [*Following*] I'm alive! I'm Persephone!

ELECTRA. [*Unimpressed*] Nonsense. If you were Persephone, you wouldn't be here. Persephone is eternal youth, eternal spring. She has no business among the dead. Persephone is life.

THYESTES. [*Yawning and rising slowly*] Life? What about life? Who's alive?

ELECTRA. [*Indicating Persephone*] She says she is.

THYESTES. [*Considering Persephone*] Impossible. The live ones can't get in here. Old Charon won't ferry them across the river.

POLYDAMUS. [*Pleased at his distinction*] You've got to be dead to get a ticket on his boat!

ELECTRA. Then there's that dog with three heads. What's his name?

PERSEPHONE. [*Interested*] Cerberus. And he really has only *one* head, you know. Those other two are just papier mâché masks strapped to his collar to make him look ferocious. But he's not fierce at all, really. He's very sweet. [*CERBERUS howls.*]

ELECTRA. [*Shuddering*] Sweet!

POLYDAMUS. [*Amused at the idea*] Sweet old Cerberus! He would tear a live one to shreds.

CASSANDRA. [*Rising to sit on bench*] Don't talk about the live ones. Forget them. They can't bother us here.

THYESTES. [*Complaining*] Well *she's* bothering us. And she's alive . . . or says she is.

CASSANDRA. [*Surprised*] Then what is she doing here?

POLYDAMUS. [*Doubtfully*] She *says* she's trying to locate her husband.

CASSANDRA. Oh. One of those. They do get in sometimes. [*She beckons to Persephone.*] Look, honey, if your husband is dead, he's no use to you. You're young enough to find another one, but if you think you just can't live without him, go on back to wherever you came from and die properly. Then you can sleep beside him forever . . . if you're still interested. Which you won't be. [*She yawns.*]

PERSEPHONE. [*Rising, amused*] My husband is not dead.

CASSANDRA. [*Sourly*] Then he is *not* here. Go away.

PERSEPHONE. Oh, he's here all right! Haaaades! [*They shudder away from the sound.*]

POLYDAMUS. [*To Cassandra*] She claims that Hades is her husband.

CASSANDRA. [*Very positive*] Hades is a bachelor . . . a confirmed bachelor. [*The other dead nod in agreement.*]

PERSEPHONE. [*Proudly*] Not any more, he's not. He abducted me!

CASSANDRA. Abducted you? Ha! Hades is a gentleman, shy and quiet. He would never abduct anybody.

POLYXENA. [*Wearily sitting up*] He did, though. I saw him. He dragged her in here howling like a timber wolf, clawing and biting like forty-thousand scalded cats! I never heard such a rumpus.

ELECTRA. [*Shocked*] Hades dragged her here? Himself?

CASSANDRA. Alive? I don't believe it!

POLYXENA. [*Angrily*] Well, he did, whether you believe it or not. I expect he has plenty of scratches and bruises to show for it.

PERSEPHONE. [*Indignantly, but teasing*] He does not! I only pretended to scratch.

POLYXENA. [*Hotly*] You weren't pretending when you stepped on me in the scuffle! If I were alive, I'd be a mass of bruises.

PERSEPHONE. Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . .

POLYXENA. Don't bother apologizing. Just go away. [*She lies down to sleep.*]

ELECTRA. [*To Thyestes*] But Hades is so gentle! He never disturbs anybody. What could have possessed him?

THYESTES. [*Settling down to rest*] It was the glitter, I expect. Hades is a king, after all. Even the King of Shadows can't resist glitter.

POLYDAMUS. [*Yawning and settling down to his original position*] I expect so. She does glitter.

ELECTRA. [*Adjusting her shroud and assuming her original position*] Yes. It hurts my eyes.

CASSANDRA. But that is his problem, not ours. Close your eyes. [*She settles into her original position.*]

THYESTES. Turn off the glitter. [*They settle down to sleep. HADES stands in the entrance, holding his sceptre in his hand.*]

PERSEPHONE. Wait! Don't go falling asleep again! Wake up! Wake up!

HADES. [*Commanding*] Leave them alone. Let them sleep! [*He moves to the throne.*]

PERSEPHONE. [*Delighted, running to him*] There you are! I looked everywhere for you. Come and see what I found! [*She sits on left arm of throne and takes basket on her lap.*] My picnic basket! Guess where I found it!

HADES. In my chariot.

PERSEPHONE. Yes! In your . . . how did you know?

HADES. [*Gently*] I put it there. I . . . I went back and picked it up.

PERSEPHONE. [*Highly pleased*] You did? [*She opens basket.*]

HADES. I thought you might . . . be hungry, and I have nothing to offer you. Nothing grows here. No fruit, no corn.

PERSEPHONE. Nothing? How awful! Have you tried mushrooms? They grow in the dark. Maybe we could grow mushrooms!

HADES. The dead need no food. [*With sudden concern for her safety*] But you must not wander around Hades alone. And stay away from the stables and stable yard. No one handles my horses but me. They are wild and dangerous.

PERSEPHONE. Not any more they're not.

HADES. [*Mystified*] They're not?

PERSEPHONE. I gave them each an apple from my picnic basket.

HADES. Really, Persephone, I wish you wouldn't . . .

PERSEPHONE. [*Excited*] They loved it! I plaited their forelocks and took a couple of ribbons off my basket and tied bows on them. You should see them!

HADES. I can well imagine! [*He turns away, uncertain how to deal with her.*]

PERSEPHONE. If I had more ribbons, I could do their manes and tails. [*She snatches a ribbon from basket, and leans over his shoulder and reaches around his neck to hold the ribbon in his beard.*] And maybe your beard to match! I have one more ribbon! Shall I try?

HADES. [*Brushing it away*] Stop it, Persephone!

PERSEPHONE. It would look charming! Sit down and have a grape. They're delicious! They're fresh from Mamma's garden!

HADES. No thank you. I'm not . . .

PERSEPHONE. You haven't tried one! [*She pops a grape in his mouth.*] There's nothing like Mamma's grapes. Sit down. [*He sits.*]

HADES. [*Uneasily*] Where else did you go? I hope you didn't disturb anyone else.

PERSEPHONE. I went down to the ferry. I had to talk to somebody, even if it was old Charon. [*She leans over and puts another grape in his mouth as he starts to speak.*] But he wasn't there.

HADES. Charon was with me, laying out a new sleeping area.

PERSEPHONE. Is he always so cross and surly?

HADES. [*Relaxing a bit*] I really hadn't noticed. [*He reaches for a grape.*]

PERSEPHONE. [*Laughing*] You ought to notice him sometime. He's so funny.