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Dramatic Publishing

ANY FAMOUS LAST WORDS?

Comedy

by

NANCY PAHL GILSENAN



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ANY FAMOUS LAST WORDS?

A Full-Length Play
for Eight Women, Two Men, Extras

CHARACTERS

LUCY SISSON playwright
SADA ING poet
THE NURSE Mrs. Buxton
SISTER MARY XENIA nun
DR. KINTER ears, nose, and throat
PAM Lucy's daughter
ANGIE Lucy's daughter
SPENCE Lucy's husband
MRS. KRONENKRANTZ elderly Jewish lady
ELENA elderly black woman

EXTRAS: Three Nurses

TIME: The Present.

PLACE: A Hospital Room.

THE SET

Every scene of the play but the final scene is set in a two-bed hospital room. The entrance to the room from the hallway is downstage right. An entrance to the room's bathroom is upstage right. The stage right bed belongs to MRS. KRONENKRANTZ, the stage left bed to LUCY. Between the two beds is a table with various trays and water containers and a telephone. The stage left wall and upstage walls are solid, with no doors or windows.

The final scene of the play is a recovery room which can be represented by a single bed and a spotlight.

NOTES ON CHARACTERS

LUCY SISSON: a woman in her forties, whose dress and thinking are conventional. She is "nice," self-centered, and never quite thoughtful.

SADA ING: a Chinese-American woman in her thirties, whose dress and behavior are both uninhibited. She is sharp, occasionally witty, and makes a career of provoking others.

NURSE: a woman between 25-50 with a great deal of physical energy.

SISTER MARY XENIA: a nun in street clothing. She is about fifty, unpretentious and unperturbable.

DR. KINTER: an ear, nose, and throat specialist with no qualms.

PAM: Lucy Sisson's high-school-aged daughter who can not see beyond the end of her bassoon.

ANGIE: Lucy Sisson's college-aged daughter who

likes giving advice and enjoys being annoyed.

SPENCE: Lucy Sisson's husband, a statistical analyst, who does not do laundry.

MRS. KRONENKRANTZ: an elderly Jewish woman from Germany whose past is more vivid than the present.

ELENA: a poor black woman in her eighties, originally from South America. She can be tough, forgiving, and to the point.

Three additional NURSES are needed.

ACT ONE

SCENE: *A two-bed hospital room. LUCY, fully dressed in her street clothes, sits on the stage left bed filling out a form attached to a clipboard. SADA, dressed in black leotards, tights, purple mid-length skirt, and black cape, kneels facing the stage left wall. Her elbows jut out in midair. One hand rests on the top of the other. Her chin rests on her hands as if she has her arms resting on a windowsill and she is gazing outside. A few moments of silence pass, then LUCY speaks without looking up.*

LUCY. How many times do you urinate daily?

SADA (*without moving*). Hmm?

LUCY (*reading from the form, with disgust*). How many times do you urinate daily? As if I counted, like sit-ups, or loads of laundry. (*Looking at SADA.*) We are overexposed. Modern medicine has no couth. (*Pounding her fist on the clipboard.*) I refuse to be held accountable for my time in the bathroom!

SADA (*calmly, without making a motion*). Then leave it blank.

LUCY (*dismissing the suggestion*). You can't do that. They throw you out if you leave it blank.

SADA. They don't throw you out; they just don't like you.

LUCY. I hate it when people, especially the people in hospitals, don't like me. It's dangerous.

SADA (*turning her head to look at LUCY, but not moving the rest of her body*). Then you must

urinate daily, Lucy. That is the price you pay to keep them happy. (*She turns her head back to its original position.*)

LUCY (*with an edge of anger and a touch of shame*). You would leave this blank, wouldn't you?

SADA. I would not avoid the conflict. I would face it directly.

LUCY. You are a moralist, you know that?

SADA. And you are very popular.

LUCY. Damn you, Sada. (*Beat, as she studies SADA's position.*) What is it you're doing?

SADA (*without moving*). You tell me.

LUCY. A window. You are gazing out a window. Right?

SADA. Very good.

LUCY. Why don't you find one with a higher sill? That must be killing your kneecaps.

SADA. I am trying to use my entire body. It's important for the beginning student to learn to use every muscle.

LUCY. Well, do you think every muscle is really that interested? I bet at least half of you is getting pretty bored right now.

SADA (*turning to look at LUCY*). You're embarrassed. You're afraid someone might walk in here and see me, and that embarrasses you.

LUCY. You have a reputation for humiliating people, Sada.

SADA. I have a reputation for integrity.

LUCY. Not everyone understands your eccentricities.

SADA. You mean my scruples. People do not understand what they do not have.

LUCY. Don't bait me, Sada. I am at risk here. The doctor said to stay calm.

SADA. I am not trying to upset you, believe me. I

am down here trying to understand an art. One should never practice an art until one fully understands it. Do we agree?

LUCY (*quickly*). Yes, Sada, we agree. Let me be the last person to criticize other people's art. God knows I have enough trouble practicing my own. Continue gazing out the window, please, at the sill of your choice. (*SADA continues gazing. LUCY continues filling out the form. SADA rises gracefully, turning to contemplate LUCY. She puts her hands together at her lips as if she is thinking very hard, then suddenly claps her hands together lightly and rapidly to get LUCY's attention. When LUCY looks up, SADA commences to mime the dialing of a telephone. She puts the invisible receiver to her ear. LUCY is confused, then guesses.*) Telephone. Right?

SADA. Leonard.

LUCY. Leonard?

SADA. Have you called Leonard?

LUCY. Have I called Leonard? (*Realizing.*) Oh! I haven't called Leonard, have I? I forgot all about tonight. I won't be there, will I?

SADA. You can see it next week.

LUCY. If it doesn't close.

SADA. It won't close.

LUCY. I'd like to be there to make sure it doesn't.

SADA. What could you do about it even if you were there?

LUCY. I could worry. A play is like a child, Sada.

SADA. What good does it do to worry?

LUCY (*giving up*). You would make a lousy mother, you know that. You have none of the instincts. Not one. (*The phone on the table near LUCY's bed begins to ring.*)

(The outside door of the room opens stage right as a nurse backs into the room carrying an empty tray. As she backs in, limping slightly, she makes a wide arc so that she eventually turns to face LUCY.)

NURSE *(as she backs into the room)*. Hello!

SADA *(answering the phone)*. Hello.

NURSE *(when she sees LUCY fully dressed, sitting on the bed)*. Oh, my! *(She now backs immediately into the bathroom which is upstage right.)*

SADA *(into the phone)*. Yes, this is 312. Lucy is right here.

NURSE *(backing out of the bathroom with the tray now full with items from the bathroom. To SADA.)* But she is busy. *(Completing another arc so that she once again faces LUCY.)*

SADA *(into phone)*. I am told by someone of the medical persuasion that she is busy. Can you hold on a moment? *(NURSE sets the tray down momentarily on the opposite bed, backs to the end of LUCY's bed.)*

NURSE *(cranking up LUCY's bed)*. You're not in bed, Mrs. Sisson.

LUCY. It's four o'clock in the afternoon.

NURSE. But you've checked in. *(She now walks to the head of the bed and fluffs LUCY's pillows.)*

LUCY. Yes, but I'm not sick.

NURSE *(finishing with the bed adjustments)*. Well, no, not yet. Still, it doesn't hurt to get ready. *(Taking each item off the tray she has placed on the other bed, setting them in LUCY's arms.)* Your gown. Your towel. Your tissue. Your urine cup.

LUCY *(as NURSE puts LUCY's clipboard and a*

water pitcher and glass from LUCY's table on her tray. Referring to the gown.) You want me to put this on now?

NURSE *(as she begins to back away from the beds and, holding the tray, makes an arc into the bathroom.) That's right. (She disappears into the bathroom for a split second, depositing the pitcher and cup, then backs out again with only the clipboard on the tray, making an arc toward the exit door.) All done here. (Nodding toward the phone.) Your call.*

SADA *(to LUCY). It's your producer. (LUCY takes the phone, but is too dazed to speak yet.)*

(NURSE backs out the door and then swings right back in again.)

NURSE *(gesturing toward the gown). You promise?*

LUCY *(looking at the gown, not happy). I promise.*

NURSE *(backing out of the room again). You're a good girl.*

LUCY *(disgusted with herself). I know.*

SADA. That's twice.

LUCY. Twice what?

SADA *(holding up the urine cup). Twice daily.*

LUCY. Damn you, Sada. *(Into the phone.) Hello, Leonard... How did you know I was here? ...What's Pam doing home from school at this time of day? She has band practice. ...Oh, that stupid uniform. I told Spence to pick it up at the cleaners for her. I bet he forgot again. Never marry a statistical analyst, Leonard. They are useless when it comes to getting anything from the cleaners. (As LUCY continues her conversation, SADA walks to the exit door and steps outside.)*

(When she re-enters, she is mimicking the NURSE, covering the same path with the same backward, limping walk, until she disappears out the door again.)

(When she enters again, it is to repeat the same routine, and give an even better imitation, if possible. She continues the mime throughout the conversation.)

LUCY. ...No, they will not let me out for good behavior. I have to stay overnight, Leonard. I can't be there for the opening. ...Just believe me, it's nothing serious. That's all I have to say. ...No, please don't come down, Leonard. Spence and the girls will be here later. And Sada's with me. It's really not that big a deal... No, it is *not* a woman's problem, Leonard. Why is it, every time a woman over forty goes into the hospital, men assume it's a hysterotomy? ...It's not serious, I swear. ...Because I don't want to tell you...I don't care that you're worried. ...Leonard! Listen to me, Leonard. *(Beat.)* It's a chicken bone...That's right. I said a chicken bone. It's caught in my throat. ...I am serious. I was making chicken enchiladas, and I swallowed a bone. ...I know I am talking normally. It does not affect my talking, Leonard. It's a very small bone. ...Because I am embarrassed by it, that's why. And I don't want the entire city to know about it. ...Not until tomorrow morning. They're going to use a tube or something. The doctor is sending a specialist in this afternoon to give me the blow-by-blow. ...Relax, Leonard. I am not in any danger. ...Good. Good. Tell the cast to

break a leg. Tell them to break two, if necessary. Tell them Sada has promised to go out at dawn and bring me the reviews. ...Yes, you may call me later if you need me. ...No, I will not worry about anything. Thank you. You are a dear, Leonard. Good-by. (*She hangs up the phone and concentrates on SADA and her unending trek.*) Sada!

SADA (*without stopping*). She favors her right leg slightly, did you notice? (*LUCY climbs down from the bed.*)

LUCY. Stop! (*Trying to compose herself so she will not strain her throat.*) You don't have to mimic the nurse.

SADA. Art imitates life. I'm afraid I don't have any choice. (*LUCY picks up the hospital gown, a flat piece of cloth with two arm holes and a string tie at the neck.*)

LUCY. I always thought art was a form of creation. I know the theater is.

SADA (*still making her trek*). Is it?

LUCY. Yes, it is. And so is poetry. (*Turning to watch SADA again.*) You know you are one of the most unconventional minds writing at the moment. I have heard the critics call your poems almost everything, but never unoriginal.

SADA. Then that proves what I have believed all along.

LUCY (*back to examining the gown*). What's that?

SADA. Even the critics, especially the critics, do not understand art.

LUCY (*referring to the gown*). Am I really supposed to wear this?

SADA. You have only to say *no*. I, myself, would prefer a lavender leotard in this god-awful environment.

LUCY. Stop dancing around, will you? Bad mime is annoying.

SADA (*halting her routine*). I'm trying to capture her.

LUCY. Who?

SADA. The nurse. I'm just taking her walk.

LUCY. What is this mime nonsense, Sada? Why don't you concentrate on your poetry?

SADA (*climbing onto LUCY's bed, lying back*). I would like to, Lucy. But this seems so much less destructive than writing. (*She begins now to watch LUCY examine the gown.*)

LUCY (*noticing SADA on the bed*). What are you doing on my bed?

SADA. Admiring you. Do you know, I admire you very much.

LUCY. You're under no obligation to humor me this afternoon, I hope you understand. This is a chicken bone we're dealing with here, not cancer. Is that clear?

SADA. I'm sincere. You are the most successful writer I know. You are the most successful writer most people know.

LUCY. Cut the flattery, please. I didn't ask you to stay with me for therapy. Just be yourself, Sada. (*Holding up the gown in frustration.*) I can't wear this. It doesn't have a back. Why in god's name don't they make these things with a back?

SADA. Because they are designed to keep you in bed. (*Taking the gown from LUCY.*) You are too embarrassed to get out. (*SADA puts the gown on over her clothes and then slips under the covers on the bed. Dramatically.*) The patient lives in fear of how she will appear; terrified to take a stride, (*SADA slips out of bed timidly.*) preoccupied on every side, with covering up the rear! (*She wheels around and demonstrates her exposed backside.*)

LUCY (*laughing, trying to stop, beginning a slight cough*). Stop it! You'll push the damned bone down even further. (*Recovering, enjoying herself despite what she says.*) Give me the gown. (*SADA hands it to her.*)

SADA. Why *did* you ask me to stay with you this afternoon, Lucy?

LUCY. Because you are the most outrageous person I could think of on short notice. And the most outlandish. And the most outspoken. I do not like hospitals and you are the perfect diversion. Now, you tell me, why did you agree to come? (*SADA collapses onto the floor, sitting cross-legged as if this is her most natural and sincere position and self.*)

SADA. Because I am barren. (*Beat, as LUCY stares at her.*) I have not written a line in six months. This is my dark period, Lucy. I am frozen. I am filled with fear. I am finally beginning to understand my art and do you know what I've discovered? I may not be a genius.

LUCY. Of course you're a genius. What else could you be? Even the critics who don't like your poetry think you're a genius.

SADA. They have very small minds.

LUCY. I've never heard you say that before.

SADA. I was deceived by their very large heads. I cannot write another line. I have learned, I am learning, the truth. My work, my art, (*Beat.*) my self is a fraud. (*Beat.*) I came, Lucy, because I envy you.

LUCY. I think it's only fair to tell you you're not making a whit of sense.

SADA. That is the prerogative of poets. (*Beat.*) You have a myriad of virtues: you're organized, productive, stable. You are tediously stable, do

you know that? You write volumes. You don't mind editing. You don't fight with your directors. But, most importantly, you never doubt. That is what I envy most. You seem so sure.

LUCY. Sure of what?

SADA. Your art.

LUCY. And you are not?

SADA. Not any more.

LUCY. I don't trust you, Sada. This is one of your rhetorical traps. I told you not to bait me.

SADA. I am caught myself. I want you to help me out.

LUCY. None of the qualities you listed makes a writer.

SADA. Yes. But you *are* a writer, Lucy. Do you know what makes you?

LUCY (*thinking, then*). My style.

SADA. Oh, please. Your style is pedestrian at best. No, it is your characters and their stories. Your characters are painfully authentic. They walk the earth.

LUCY. Do you expect me to be ashamed of that?

SADA. I think you should be wary.

LUCY (*annoyed*). Oh, hell, Sada, you *are* growing temperamental. Good characters are a sign of good writing!

SADA. Not if you understand the art. (*Carefully.*) If you understand the art, they may be a sign of fraud.

LUCY (*angry*). Oh, damn you, Sada. Now you are beginning to annoy me.

SADA. I thought you wanted me to keep your mind off the chicken bone.

LUCY (*with a sharp edge*). And this is how you plan to do it? Well then, go on, please. I am completely distracted.