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Dramatic Publishing

THE CLASSIC

A Play in Two Acts
by
RICHARD VETERE



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

SETTING: *The living room of the Forte house in Queens. There are scripts everywhere: on the chairs, the floor, the tables and other furniture, on the kitchen table in the background of the set and going up the stairs to the bedroom. There is a computer at L with a printer that is printing. Most of the scripts are in binders, but there is a large script, a novel, that sits in a blue box on the desk in a special light.*

AT RISE: *MICHAEL FORTE, an energetic, attractive man is pulling the last page out of the printer. He is dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. NED, appealing but tentative, sits on a chair in the middle of the floor holding a small script of his own.*

MICHAEL. That's it! It's done! (*NED beams as MICHAEL takes the last few pages of the printed script and places them with fanfare into the blue box. He closes the box and turns to NED.*) Ask me how I feel?

NED. How do you feel?

MICHAEL. Empty.

NED. Wow ...

MICHAEL. Empty but ... fulfilled.

NED. Is it always like this?

know what I mean? Sure, a nice sunset is a nice sunset, but a woman? Now there's something to look at. I mean ALL women, Ned. Old ones, young ones, pretty ones, not so pretty ones. Every ethnic group you can imagine. I love women. And I like to talk to them. They listen. Do men listen? Not on your life.

NED. Oh.

MICHAEL. Now, I'm an artist. It's true. I know I can be offbeat. And that makes it difficult for women to have feelings for me. But from women, we go to something entirely different. Do you have any kids?

NED. Two...

MICHAEL. See? It's what I mean. Kids. You can have them. But if you do, can you have this? (*He spreads his hands out showing NED the scripts.*)

NED. I don't understand.

MICHAEL. Carmela. She wants them. Kids. Oh, sure. She told me. But is that her fault? No. It's just something that happens to women.

NED. But I wanted kids.

MICHAEL (*ignoring him*). But what about my plays, my film scripts, my novel? Does she care about them? I don't think so. But I do. Do I care too much about them? I'm not sure. I wake up in the middle of the night wondering if I think too much about my work. So, from art we go to sperm.

NED. Oh.

MICHAEL. Sperm and idealism! And that's where the novel comes in.

NED (*uncomfortable*). Maybe I should check up on your car?

MICHAEL. The phone's right there. Remember, I needed an oil change, a tuneup, and tell them to check the gas filter. (*NED goes over to the phone and dials as MICHAEL checks the window again.*)

NED (*into phone*). It's Ned. How is Mr. Forte's car comin'? (*He listens. MICHAEL steps over and listens.*) Okay. (*He hangs up.*) They found a leak in the transmission.

MICHAEL (*depressed*). Oh, that's just great. When I hear bad news about my car it makes me feel like there's been a death in the family.

NED. I told them to check it out.

MICHAEL. Ned, tell me. How old do I look?

NED. I don't know... Forty something?

MICHAEL. What? Are you kidding? I look ten years younger than I am. It's a fact. Ask me why?

NED. Why?

MICHAEL. No kids.

NED. Oh.

MICHAEL. This isn't an insult but you look thirty-eight.

NED. I'm thirty-one...

MICHAEL. See! Two kids! It happens, Ned. Do you know why? I'll tell you why. Because there's a difference between sperm and a work of art. Now, sperm, it comes from the BODY, right? From your flesh and blood! It's your DNA! And in the right circumstance it can create a human being. Now, a work of art is created by the same person but it doesn't come from your DNA—it comes from your MIND. In other words, when you have a child, something of yourself is diminished, lost, and when you create a work of art, something of yourself is heightened: you create but you remain intact.

NED. I didn't know ...

MICHAEL. Now, I'm going to say this and I want you to take it with a grain of salt. Okay?

NED. Okay.

MICHAEL. Carmela? The girl I just hid from? She doesn't want me, she wants my sperm.

NED. Oh.

MICHAEL. Does she know this? I don't think so. Can I tell her? How? Is it too fundamental a thing to explain to someone who is going through it? Could be. Balzac said that "truth is perception." She sees me, but I see her wanting my sperm. So, I am a ... what?

NED (*trying to guess*). You are a ... ?

MICHAEL (*directly*). I AM A MALE IN JEOPARDY.

NED. Oh.

MICHAEL. That's why I have to escape. I have this talent to create and I have this sperm and because of it—I am an artist in peril. Because, let's say, I was to have children? What would become of my gift to write?

NED. But aren't some writers fathers?

MICHAEL. That's not the question. The question is this—what great writer ever spawned a great writer?

NED. I don't know offhand...

MICHAEL. You see, Ned, as I see it, anyone can father a child. All you need is sperm from the man. And just about anyone who is literate can put words to paper. But you have to have a special gift and work very hard your entire life to be considered a great author. And no one, simply no one, can be a great author and have a child who is a great author. It's never happened and it never will.

NED. Why not?

MICHAEL (*walks over to the blue box*). Idealism, that's why. You see, Ned. I have control over my work but I can't have control over my children. They become who they want to be. And in my family, it's been a tradition to disappoint: I disappointed my father and he disappointed his father. So, following that logic, it's better that I don't have kids so I can save myself from some disillusionment. Do you want to see my REAL family? Look around this room. THESE PAGES are my relatives, my brood, my hatchlings. So, you really want to be a writer, Ned?

NED. Yes, I was thinking...

MICHAEL. Then pursue the ideal life.

NED. Okay.

MICHAEL. Do you know who described the ideal life perfectly? Karl Marx. He said that a person should sit up all night in a cafe and talk about art and theater. He said that when someone OWNS things those THINGS take possession of him. So, the more you own, the more you disappear. Did you ever read William Carlos Williams's novel, *The White Elephant*? It's part of a trilogy. It's about a family and how they acquire things as they become successful over the years. The irony is: the more THINGS they acquire, the more they disappear. Now, I'm not, nor was I ever, a political being. I'm what you call a mystic realist. But I see what Marx means. Don't you agree?

NED. I own a house.

MICHAEL. Yes! But if you are going to be a writer you better start sitting up all night talking about life and art! Sell the house, Ned! Do you want to be a storyteller or a real estate mogul?

NED. I want to be a storyteller...

MICHAEL. Then accept the responsibility! Let other people own things! You don't have time for that. Your life isn't an episode of *Star Trek*. The world doesn't exist the way you want it to. It has its own shape, its own meanings! It needs to be explored.

NED (*confused*). But all I own is a one-story bungalow on 89th Street.

MICHAEL. Do you know what I own? A car. Baudelaire said a poet should do nothing all day long but look at the clouds and cultivate his sensibilities. So, tell me, when you wake up in the morning and the kids are crying and the wife is talking and the house needs painting and the car don't start, when does Ned find the time to enrich his emotions, his ego, his pride, his feelings?

NED. I don't have the time...

MICHAEL. Precisely. Remember what Shaw said. He said that an artist is a parasite on women and society. And I would like to add that a woman artist should be a parasite on men and society! Say it, Ned!

NED. But that is so against my nature.

MICHAEL. Do you respect me, Ned? Do you?

NED. Of course, I do.

MICHAEL. And do you know what I am doing all day today? I'm waiting for my car to be fixed. I'm waiting for my agent to show up. I'm waiting here for my mother to return home from her travels. That's how a writer makes a life, Ned. Cultivate. (*The DOORBELL RINGS.*) It's Carmela! She saw us. She knows I'm here! Take a deep breath, take a deep breath, Ned. (*He takes a deep breath.*) Ready?

NED. Ready.

(MICHAEL opens the door and HUGH McSHANE enters, carrying some scripts and papers. McSHANE is a debonair, articulate man, but there is a look in his eye that makes you think that something is just not right about him. He wears a conservative suit. MICHAEL is surprised to see him.)

MICHAEL. Yes?

HUGH McSHANE. I'm looking for Michael Forte? The playwright?

MICHAEL *(proudly)*. You found him. And your name?

HUGH McSHANE *(proudly)*. Hugh McShane.

MICHAEL *(turns to NED)*. Do you see, Ned? When you write and your work gets known, you will find yourself in this position. It is a responsibility to make yourself available to the public. Fame is a burden. *(To McSHANE with world-weary dignity.)* Are you a fledgling writer who needs some advice? Is there something I can do for you?

HUGH McSHANE *(handing MICHAEL three envelopes)*.

This is for you. This is for your attorney. And this is a copy of a letter which I sent last week to your agent, the publishing company that publishes your plays, and the film producer you are working for right now.

MICHAEL. I don't understand.

HUGH McSHANE. I am suing you for plagiarism.

MICHAEL. What? *(MICHAEL opens the envelopes and reads as he glares at McSHANE.)*

HUGH McSHANE. Last year, a small theatrical company, called the Raven's Cove Theater Company in upstate New York, produced a play called *In the Eye of the Dreamer*.

MICHAEL. Yeah, my play.

HUGH McSHANE. MY PLAY. I've been working on it for twenty years!

MICHAEL. What are you talking about? This is a joke, no?

HUGH McSHANE (*hands MICHAEL his card*). This is no joke. I'm an attorney.

MICHAEL (*playing along*). I'm confused here, pal. I thought you said you were a playwright?

HUGH McSHANE. I write for the love of it. I do not try and get productions of my work. That is BELOW me. It tarnishes the idealism of the art. But people like you, people who write for MONEY, it is your kind who steal, trick and bully your way to the top of the junk heap! So, when I heard about this production of *Dreamer* and went to see it—I was destroyed. There I was sitting in the audience, having paid for a ticket, and I was hearing my words, MY WORDS, but it was your name, your name on the playbill under "Written By"! That night, leaving the theater, I made an oath to myself, a pledge, that I would do everything in my power to bring the truth to light. So, here I am. I wanted to deliver these letters personally so I could see firsthand the look on your face now that you've been EXPOSED.

MICHAEL. This isn't a joke?

HUGH McSHANE. Oh, no, sir. I am deadly serious.

MICHAEL. You're a whacko, pal.

HUGH McSHANE. Try proving mental instability. I dare you.

MICHAEL. Who the hell do you think you are, walking into MY house, trying to steal MY play from ME?