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*Dramatic Publishing*

# DEGAS' LITTLE DANCER

A Play for Young Audiences

by

WESLEY MIDDLETON



**Dramatic Publishing**

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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*Degas' Little Dancer* was commissioned by Project Interact, Zachary Scott Theatre's professional touring company for young audiences (Austin, Texas).

*Degas' Little Dancer* was premiered by Project Interact in the spring of 2000, directed by Judy Matetzschk with the following cast:

Closier . . . . . PEYTON HAYSLIP  
Degas. . . . . J. DAMON GILLIAN  
Marie Gannon ('Rie). . . . . JOHANNA WATTS  
Dominique/Ensemble . . . . . KATE MEHAN  
Ballet Master/Auguste Degas/Ensemble . . MAURICE MOORE  
Ms. Gannon/Mme. Von Goethem/Danielle/Ensemble . . . . .  
AIMEE ZIVIN

Set Design: Kristine S. Laudadio  
Costume Design: Anne Marie Beard  
Sound Design: Dutch Rall  
Company Manager: Jason Faucet

*Degas' Little Dancer* was a finalist in the 1999-2000 Unpublished Play Reading Project, sponsored by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, and was nominated for Best Original Script by the Austin Theatre Critics Table Awards (May 2000). Project Interact's production of *Degas' Little Dancer* received the Austin Circle of Theaters' 1999-2000 B. Iden Payne Award for Outstanding Production of a Play for Children.

## PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

**A NOTE ON CASTING:** All roles besides 'RIE, DEGAS, and CLOSIER are ensemble roles. AUGUSTE DEGAS and the BALLET MASTER should be double-cast, as should MS. GANNON and MME. VON GOETHEM. The ballerinas, DOMINIQUE and DANIELLE, may double as passers-by in street scenes, the museum, etc. All ensemble roles may assist with scene transitions.

**A NOTE ON TRANSITIONS:** This play takes place in two centuries and many different locations. (All Paris scenes take place in 1880; all Chicago scenes take place in the present.) The action should shift from one place or time to another with a fluid, dance-like quality. Scenes should not so much begin and end as flow into one another. To preserve continuity, music should accompany transitions; blackouts should be avoided.

**A NOTE ON THE SET:** The set should be minimal, just enough to indicate period and place. Set pieces and props should transform easily, helping the flow of the action. (For example, 'Rie's kitchen table can become Degas' drawing table when the top is propped up.) If flats or backdrops are used, they should create a visual language that incorporates colors and images from Degas' work.

**A NOTE ON FRENCH:** Ms. Gannon; Closier, as the security guard; and 'Rie all speak a bit of French in the Chicago museum (Scene 2). In the Paris scenes, French is used to give the flavor and rhythm of the language. The audience should imagine that, while we hear these scenes mostly in English, they are taking place entirely in French. Therefore, none of the Paris characters should have a French accent except when speaking French. All French words are italicized, and should be given French pronunciation but should flow easily into the English, as if the character were speaking one language.

In most instances, when French is used, the actor will speak both the French word and its English translation. (Example: Scene 2, CLOSIER: "Go dance. *Allez danser, Marie.*") When this is not the case, the first time a French word or phrase is used, the English translation is given in parentheses as a reference for the actor and director.

**A NOTE ON CHANTING:** Throughout the play, the ensemble speaks a variety of chants, often accompanied by onstage characters. Whenever two or three chants are listed side by side, they are spoken simultaneously. The chants are usually spoken offstage, but may be spoken onstage as the ensemble assists with scene transitions. With the exception of the "discipline chant" used in scenes 4 and 10, the chant rhythm should be more musical than military. (A waltz rhythm tends to work well.)

**A NOTE ON POETIC LICENSE:** Some historical liberties were taken in order to shape the world of the play. While pastels became Degas' primary medium in 1880, he had started using them years before. It was important to the action of the play, however, that he begin using pastels through his work with 'Rie. Similarly, it was vital that 'Rie have a child's imagination—the kind that could propel her across a continent and a century to discover something new. Therefore, despite the title of the sculpture—*La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans* (The Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen) the model, in this play, is eleven.

**A NOTE ON THE STATUE:** Don Harmes, a puppeteer in Austin, Texas, created a latex replica of *The Little Dancer* sculpture for the original production of the play. The figure stands 28 inches tall on a 3.5-inch tall base. The very tour-friendly replica may be rented at a reasonable rate. For more information, please contact Mr. Harmes at (512) 452-8803 or write him at 1605-A Coronado Hills Dr., Austin TX 78752.

# DEGAS' LITTLE DANCER

A Play for Young Audiences  
For 4 women, 2 men minimum  
Female roles (ballerinas) may be expanded

## CHARACTERS

MARIE GANNON ('RIE) . an aspiring ballerina, 11 years old  
EDGAR DEGAS . . . . . an artist, 46 years old  
ZOË CLOSIER.. Degas' housekeeper, Guardian of Art, 60  
AUGUSTE DEGAS . . . . . Edgar Degas' father  
MS. GANNON . . . . . 'Rie's contemporary mother  
MME. VON GOETHEM . . . . . 'Rie's 19th-century mother  
BALLET MASTER . . 'Rie's ballet teacher, both centuries  
DOMINIQUE and DANIELLE . . . . . ballerinas

THE SETTING: Paris, 1880 / Chicago, the present.

Approximate running time: 60 minutes

# DEGAS' LITTLE DANCER

## SCENE 1

*(Paris, 1880 / Chicago, the present.*

*'RIE and DEGAS are frozen in their separate worlds: DEGAS, in his Paris studio, with its drawing table, easels, and model's platform; 'RIE, in the cramped bedroom of her Chicago apartment, where she practices ballet. 'RIE and DEGAS' lines should flow seamlessly into each other—sometimes staggered, sometimes simultaneous, as indicated. During the action, the offstage ENSEMBLE whispers the two chants below continuously. They grow gradually louder until 'RIE and DEGAS join them at the end of the scene.)*

### ENSEMBLE 1.

The brush the form the color  
the shape the stroke the balance  
the shadow the light...

*(DEGAS, feisty, bearded, unkempt, is working on a painting of dancers. [La Classe de Ballet, 1880, is appropriate.] He dabs his brush in a new color of paint, looks at it closely.)*

### ENSEMBLE 2.

The brush the tilt the hop the  
twirl! The balance! The  
spring! The leap! The flight!

*('RIE, earnest, stubborn, with messy ponytailed hair, unwraps a pair of new pointe shoes from their tissue paper. She holds them up, admires them.)*

DEGAS.

'RIE.

*Magnifique.* (Magnificent.)

Wow!

New paint.

New shoes.

I will finish it. Soon.

I'll be on pointe!

I will finish. Be paid!  
Finally.

I'll be the best this time! The lead!

*Maintenant.*

Finally.

Now.

*(DEGAS looks at the painting. Steps closer to it. Looks harder. Focuses on a specific spot.)**( 'RIE puts lambswool in the toes of the shoes, slips them on her feet, ties the ribbons. She stands in first position, then does exercises, admiring the shoes.)*The shoes. The toes.  
*Un deux trois quatre cinq six sept huit...*New shoes—new toes!  
One two three four five six seven eight...*(DEGAS paints very quickly, makes a mistake.)**( 'RIE tries to turn on toe, but loses her balance.)**Non!*  
*Encore une fois.* (One more time!)No!  
One more time.

*(DEGAS opens his eyes, looks at the painting, tilts his head all the way to the left. He corrects the mistake, then continues to paint fervently.*

*('RIE opens her eyes, balances on pointe, turns once, successfully, then does a passionate improvisation.*

*DEGAS closes his eyes, rubs them.)*

*'RIE stretches up, breathes, closes her eyes.)*

I must stretch them. Stretch my eyes.

Fly. They'll fly. My feet will fly.

The brush the form the color the shape the stroke the balance the shadow the light...

The brush the tilt the hop the twirl! The balance! The spring! The leap! The flight!

*( 'RIE and DEGAS freeze. ZOË CLOSIER, Degas' housekeeper, enters. She is a sturdy woman of sixty with white-grey hair and an air of great authority. CLOSIER looks at 'RIE in her kitchen; then at DEGAS in his studio. She closes her eyes. She moves her hand in a fluid reaching gesture, up and out, as if she is asking for something. [This is the "reach gesture."] CLOSIER opens her eyes and looks at 'RIE and DEGAS. As CLOSIER exits, 'RIE and DEGAS unfreeze; DEGAS exits as the setting shifts around 'RIE. Music up to accompany the transition. [Music should accompany all transitions in the play.] )*

## SCENE 2

(*MS. GANNON joins 'RIE as a museum scene takes shape around them. They are at a temporary Impressionist exhibit at the museum of the Art Institute of Chicago. MS. GANNON carries a brochure. They walk for a moment, then stop in front of a painting by Renoir.*)

MS. GANNON. Oh—it's lovely.

Look at the light!

'RIE. The women are pink.

They remind me of pillows.

MS. GANNON. *Renoir's* a significant painter, Marie.

'RIE. It's 'Rie, Mom.

Please. Call me 'Rie.

MS. GANNON. Well, "'Rie," we should get moving.

'RIE. Mom!

MS. GANNON. You don't want to be late for ballet.

'RIE. But I want to see the dancers!

MS. GANNON. Downtown Chicago in rush hour—

'RIE. Please? Please, Mom? You said I would like them!

MS. GANNON. You have tryouts, remember?

'RIE. Please? Just five minutes!

(*MS. GANNON starts to speak.*)

Please please please? I'll eat all my green beans, I swear!

MS. GANNON (*smiles*). Five minutes.

'RIE. Hooray!

(*'RIE rushes into the next room, followed by MS. GANNON. CLOSIER is there, dressed as a modern security guard. The room is filled with Degas paintings of ballerinas.*)

'RIE. WOW! All the dancers! (*'RIE spins around, amazed, looking at the paintings.*)

MS. GANNON. Shh, Marie—

'RIE (*more quietly, looking from painting to painting*). The wings on that costume! The reach of her toe! The bend in her arm! The light through the window! (*'RIE pauses in front of a painting.*) Wow. They had a nice practice room.

MS. GANNON. Yes, in the Paris Opéra.

'RIE. Opéra... the opera house?

MS. GANNON. Yes, but the ballet was there too.

'RIE (*reading a sign*). "1872. Dance Class at the Opéra. Edgar Degas." (*She pronounces it incorrectly: Daygas.*)

MS. GANNON. Degas. Edgar Degas. (*She pronounces it correctly: Duh-gah. MS. GANNON notices a painting.*) Oh! That's the one I had as a poster. When I was your age. I used to think...

'RIE. What? You thought what?

MS. GANNON. Nothing. (*To 'RIE, pointedly, as before.*) Edgar Degas.

'RIE (*correctly*). Edgar Degas.

MS. GANNON. You must *pratiquer* your français.

'RIE. I know. (*'RIE dance-steps and whispers, singsong, practicing.*) Opéra, Edgar Degas... Opéra, Edgar Degas... Opéra, Edgar Degas... (*She spots the Little Dancer sculpture. She gasps and stops, mouth open. She pulls on her mother's sleeve, pointing.*) WOW, Mom! Look at her!

MS. GANNON (*with recognition*). *Oui*. It's *La Petite Danseuse*.

(*'RIE walks around the sculpture, then stands still and looks at it, intently. As she stares, she tilts her head, then her body, all the way to one side.*)

What are you doing?

'RIE. I'm trying to see!

She looks so real!

Real face—real skirt—real ribbon—

MS. GANNON (*opens the brochure*). Listen. *Écoute, Marie*.

(*MS. GANNON reads from the brochure. 'RIE takes on the sculpture's pose, her eyes still fixed on the Little Dancer.*)

“The *Little Dancer, La Petite Danseuse*, Degas' only exhibited sculpture, is a simple wax figure molded on a wire frame. First displayed in 1881, the sculpture used real fabric and ribbon to create the dancer's costume. The realistic sculpture shocked certain critics, who called it “ugly,” and “disgraceful.” Others proclaimed it “the future of art.” *Degas* himself found sculpture to be a powerful new—

'RIE. Mom! I can do it perfectly!

Look! (*'RIE exaggerates the pose, closing her eyes.*)

Fourth position—head up—arms back—

I'm a real ballerina, as you can see! The tip of the top!

The best in *Paris*!

*(Eyes still closed, 'RIE hums a tune and starts to dance. MS. GANNON looks at her watch.)*

MS. GANNON. All right, Marie.

'RIE. I'm stretching my brain!

MS. GANNON. Start stretching your legs. It's time to go.

'RIE. But—

MS. GANNON. No. You cannot be late for ballet.

*('RIE starts to beg again. MS. GANNON holds up a finger.)*

I'm not going to argue.

I'll be in the hall. Be out in one minute if you want a ride.

*(MS. GANNON exits. 'RIE opens her eyes, looks back at the sculpture. Looks around. Talks to it.)*

'RIE. Hey, Little Dancer. Can you see me?

Were you perfect and famous? The best in *Paris*?

*('RIE moves to touch the sculpture in a stretch that is like the reach gesture. CLOSIER, as the guard, clears her throat loudly. 'RIE jumps.)*

CLOSIER. *Pardon.* Excuse me, *Mademoiselle*—

*Il ne faut pas toucher.*

Do not touch. Please.

'RIE *(frowns at her)*. So much French today!

CLOSIER. You don't like French?

'RIE. *Je dois practiquer.* I need to practice. (*About the sculpture.*) She was French, wasn't she?

CLOSIER. *Oui.* From *Paris*.

'RIE (*dreamily*). *Paris.*

MS. GANNON (*offstage*). Thirty seconds, Marie!

(*'RIE wrings her hands, then turns to CLOSIER.*)

'RIE. Did you ever feel like you really loved something and tried really hard, but still you should quit 'cause you'd never be perfect? Or did you ever feel if you went somewhere else, people might notice you, see you were the best—and *then* you'd be perfect and it would be great?

CLOSIER (*questioning*). Perfect?

'RIE. The best! Always the lead. (*Pause.*) We have tryouts today—at ballet. I always get parts like a cloud, or a tree.

CLOSIER (*nodding to the sculpture*). Do you think she was perfect, *Marie*?

'RIE. I don't know. Probably, yeah.

MS. GANNON (*offstage*). Twenty seconds, Marie!

CLOSIER. *C'est l'heure.* It is time.

(*'RIE takes a deep breath, looks at the sculpture.*)

'RIE. Goodbye, Little Dancer.

(*To CLOSIER.*) *Au revoir.*

CLOSIER. *Au revoir.* Goodbye, *Marie.*

(*'RIE stalls, not wanting to go.*)

'RIE. Maybe I'll see you again.

CLOSIER. Maybe. *Peut-être.*

(*'RIE exits. CLOSIER looks after her, does the reach gesture.*)

Go dance. *Allez danser, Marie.*

(*CLOSIER exits as the scene shifts to DEGAS' studio in Paris, 1880.*)

### SCENE 3

(*DEGAS paints. He starts to fall asleep then he jerks awake, groans, stares at the painting. He paints for a moment, then falls clumsily asleep as the brush falls out of his hand. He snores for a moment, then "wakes" into a dream. In the dream, he is himself as a boy, EDGAR, age eleven. [A prop, like a boy's cap or a teddy bear, will help to make this transition.] EDGAR stands in his father's study, staring at a painting: a huge battle scene. AUGUSTE, his father, stands in the doorway.*)

EDGAR. *C'est magnifique!*

AUGUSTE. You like it, my boy? I bought it today.

EDGAR. *C'est incroyable!* (It's incredible!)

AUGUSTE. *Oui, Edgar. Dis-moi—tell me—what do you see?*

EDGAR. The red of the horses—

The grey of the sky—

The flash of the light—

*(EDGAR, mesmerized, sits in a chair, tilting all the way to one side until he's upside down.)*

AUGUSTE *(looking at the painting)*. Edgar: what you see is history. This battle was famous. It changed the world.

EDGAR *(upside down)*. The brush the form the color the shape—

AUGUSTE *(seeing EDGAR)*. Edgar! Arrête! Stop! Stand up!

EDGAR. I'm trying to see!

AUGUSTE. To see, we stand still, using only our eyes.

EDGAR. I'm *stretching* my eyes!

AUGUSTE. That is not how we see!

*(EDGAR gradually shifts back into DEGAS, becoming a childlike adult by the end of the dream.)*

EDGAR. It is how I see! I see, *Papa!*

AUGUSTE. *Vous ne voyez rien*. You see nothing.

EDGAR. I see!

AUGUSTE. You're a grown man, *Edgar*.

EDGAR/DEGAS. I'm an artist, *Papa!*

AUGUSTE. You're a pauper, son!

EDGAR/DEGAS. You died and left me your debts!

AUGUSTE *(scornful)*. You can't even finish a painting.

*(AUGUSTE starts to fade out of the dream.)*

EDGAR. *Papa*, wait!

(AUGUSTE disappears. CLOSIER opens the studio door, peeks inside.)

DEGAS (waking, panicked, as his adult self). Papa!

CLOSIER. Monsieur?

(DEGAS looks at her, startled. Realizes where he is.)

DEGAS. I am working, *Mademoiselle!* Je travaille!

CLOSIER. Pardon. I was worried.

I'll get you some tea.

(CLOSIER starts to go.)

DEGAS. Non—please attendez, Zoë.

(CLOSIER waits.)

You dismissed the model?

CLOSIER. *Oui*. And gave her her last pay.

DEGAS (shakes his head). That ballerina—

CLOSIER. *Sophie*.

DEGAS. Waste of time. Waste of money! It's always the same. Those models. They fidget; they blur—(catching and correcting himself) they move; I yell; and they break down and cry!

CLOSIER (ironic). And they call you “*Monsieur Terrible*.”

DEGAS. Ha! They are terrible. Awful, Zoë!

CLOSIER. I'm sure you're right.

DEGAS. You cannot see.

---

CLOSIER. I see, *Monsieur*, that you don't have a model. I see that you need one to work.

DEGAS. What I need is peace and quiet, *Zoë*.

*(DEGAS turns to the painting on his easel, starts to dab paint on it, noncommittally. CLOSIER peers over her shoulder.)*

CLOSIER. Still that same painting?

*(DEGAS moves away from her, keeps painting.)*

DEGAS. *Oui, Zoë. Monsieur le Grandhomme* (Mr. Big Man) expects it next week.

CLOSIER. Why do you paint for that fat rich old man?

DEGAS. That "fat rich old man" lent my father some money.

CLOSIER. *Monsieur*, I hear what you say when you work. "The boring...the blurry...the blah!" But if you worked with a model—

DEGAS. *Non!* They slow me down, *Zoë!* They pose; they blur; I see—nothing. *Rien!*

CLOSIER. And how are your eyes?

DEGAS. Fine. They are *fine*. My eyes are just fine.

CLOSIER. The models, then, blur themselves out of spite?

DEGAS (*sharply*). Enough, *Zoë! Vraiment!* (Really!) *Ça suffit!* (That's enough!)

*(Pause.)*

CLOSIER. I'm sorry, *Monsieur*.

DEGAS (*forgiving her*). *Non, Zoë.*

You work for a mean poor old man.