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Digging Up Dessa

By

LAURA SCHELLHARDT

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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(DIGGING UP DESSA)

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The Gersh Agency
41 Madison Ave., 33rd Floor
New York, NY 10010 • Phone: (212) 997-1818

ISBN: 978-1-61959-204-9

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In addition, all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*Digging Up Dessa* was commissioned by The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and was first produced at the Kennedy Center during the 2017-2018 season.”

Digging Up Dessa received its premier production at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on Feb. 3, 2018, with the following cast and crew.

CAST:

Dessa Alina Collins Maldonado
Mary Anning Jackie René Robinson
Esther Alyssa Wilmoth Keegan
Nilo Chris Stinson
Esther/Mary Anning Understudy Emily Zickler
Nilo Understudy Kiernan McGowan
Dessa Understudy Guadalupe Campos

PRODUCTION:

Directors Rives Collins
Scenic Designer Deb Booth
Projection Designer Patrick Lord
Dramaturg Grace Overbeke
Artistic Director Kim Peter Kovac
Lighting Designer Martha Mountain
Sound Designer Kenny Neal
Casting Director Michelle Kozlak
Executive Director Mario Rossero
Costume Designer Jen Gillette
Properties Artisan Audrey Bodek
Production Stage Manager Karen Currie
Producing Director David Kilpatrick

Digging Up Dessa

CHARACTERS

DESSA: 12, a hunter of fossils, a realist, open ethnicity.

ESTHER: Dessa's mother, a writer of songs, an idealist, open ethnicity.

NILO (pronounced Neelo): 13, a popular boy with the potential to be more, an opportunist, white.

MARY ANNING: The 19th-century British paleontologist as imagined by a 12-year-old girl. Part bag lady, part Mary Poppins, a pragmatist, open ethnicity.

SETTING: In a space that is part Natural History Museum and part science lab. Everything is dark wood, glass cases, weathered maps, boxed treasures, handcrafted models, dusty relics and tools of the task at hand. It feels both of this time and of a time long past. From this space, all other locations emerge, unearth or unfurl.

TIME: Now with an eye towards then.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The play should move swiftly unless otherwise specified, with one scene bleeding into the next.

Ellipses (...) indicate a pause, a silence, or a shift.

The sound effects in the play should have the quality of a video game, specifically the most exciting video game a 13-year-old could imagine.

For Mary Poole,
because every girl needs a Mary in her life

Digging Up Dessa

1.

(From the shadows, DESSA speaks—)

DESSA. Anyone can be a scientist. That's a fact.

All you need is one question about the here and now and voila—

(A work lamp clicks on, revealing DESSA.)

DESSA. You're a scientist.

(DESSA aims the light at a glass case, in which there is a model of a car perched atop a stand, as if frozen in midair.)

DESSA. Of course, you have to follow that question wherever it leads you. Even if it leads you someplace you don't expect to go. That's the hard part. Following a question to its designated end.

(DESSA produces three model figurines—a man, a woman and a girl, placing them beside the glass case.)

DESSA. For example.

Let's say your question involves a family—a mother, a father, and a twelve-year-old girl. This family used to be three people but now it's only two.

Let's say your question is, "Why is this family that used to be three people now only two?"

To answer that question you'll have to recreate the past, and to recreate the past you need *fossils*—those things that are left behind. In this case, our fossils include:

A car. A broken guardrail. And tire tracks on a hill.

(DESSA produces a small guardrail and a model embankment with markings on one side. She places them beside the figurines. She carefully removes the lid of the display box, and lifts the car into the light.)

DESSA. Let's start with the car. It's an old one.

(The sound of a car revving up—)

DESSA. It's older than that—

(The sound of an older car revving up—)

DESSA. It's like ANCIENT, OK?

(The sound of an ANCIENT car revving up and pattering along.)

DESSA. This car does NOT do well in heavy rain, and yet weather reports from the last drive this car took suggest—

(The sound of heavy rain. DESSA raises her voice above the din, and picks up the scrap of metal.)

DESSA. This guardrail was found near the car. Though guardrails are meant to protect you, they'll break under too much force.

(DESSA fits the metal piece onto the top of the embankment.)

DESSA. The tire tracks. The tire tracks are trace fossils—marks made when one object makes contact with another. Trace fossils are important—they prove that something happened in *this* place at *this* time and in *this* case they prove that *this* car carrying *this* family was traveling too fast down a wet road—

(DESSA manipulates the car to enact the following scenario. The storm becomes a prolonged catching of breath—)

DESSA. That it rounded a curve in said road—
 That it slid off the road into said guardrail—
 Careening over the side—
 Spinning in confusion—
 Sliding down the hill—
 And landing—with its own sort of thunder—in the grass
 below ...
 This is how a family of three becomes—

(She catches her breath. She removes and pockets the male figurine. She clicks the display light off.)

DESSA. Any information science can't recreate is speculative. Science might tell us WHAT happened, but WHY it happened—we'll have to dig deeper for that. In this case, we'll have to study the other fossils left behind: My mother—

(DESSA references the mother figurine. ESTHER appears with her ukulele, frozen as if on scientific display.)

DESSA. Myself—

(DESSA references the girl figurine, then freezes momentarily, as if on scientific display.)

DESSA. And a paleontologist who died in 1847.

(MARY ANNING appears with a hammer and a small bag—frozen as if on scientific display. She calls out—)

MARY ANNING. My name is Mary Anning!

2.

(MARY ANNING and DESSA stand outside DESSA's apartment, surveying their new surroundings.)

DESSA. I know your name.

MARY ANNING (*calling to the sky*). MY NAME IS MARY ANNING!

DESSA. You keep shouting your name as if I don't know it. I knew it before you arrived.

MARY ANNING. I like the way it sounds in your modern air, where are we?

DESSA. This is where I live now.

MARY ANNING. So our new home then.

DESSA. It's not my home. It's just where Mom and I live now.

My backyard is an alley. My front yard is a construction site.

MARY ANNING. It's dusty.

DESSA. It's a disaster.

MARY ANNING. It's ideal.

DESSA. It's IDEAL?

MARY ANNING. Is that no longer a word? In my day ideal meant most suitable, and this is *most* suitable.

DESSA. Most suitable! My entire life is on a truck.

MARY ANNING. Your entire life?

DESSA. Yes—

MARY ANNING. No. You're exaggerating, that's hyperbole.

Be precise.

DESSA. My BELONGINGS—

MARY ANNING. Much better—

DESSA. Are on a truck barreling towards this city where I know no one—

MARY ANNING. Hyperbole.

DESSA. No one my age—

MARY ANNING. Fact, see the difference—

DESSA. Because my mother—

MARY ANNING. Half-truth—

DESSA. Because we had nowhere else to go—

MARY ANNING. Hyperbole.

DESSA. Because he *died*.

MARY ANNING. Yes, that's true—

DESSA. I know that's true! And it's not *ideal*—it's not *most suitable*—it's THE WORST! And so is every single part of this new life!

MARY ANNING. ... Hyperbole—

DESSA. HOW IS THAT HYPERBOLE?

MARY ANNING. Control your temper please. This is *dirt*, yes?

DESSA. Yes—

MARY ANNING. Freed from the earth by ... whatever that contraption is over there—

DESSA. A bulldozer—

MARY ANNING. A *bulldozer*, what a delightful word! A *bulldozer* will expose the layer of dirt below this one—and the layer of dirt below that—

DESSA. That's how it works, yes—

MARY ANNING. Eventually exposing *sediment*—

DESSA (*beginning to see*). Exposing ... sediment ...

MARY ANNING. And the treasure that's trapped within.

DESSA. You mean—

MARY ANNING. I mean fossils.

DESSA. ... In my front yard?

MARY ANNING. As I said. *Ideal*.

(*The strum of a ukulele.*)

3.

(ESTHER appears with her ukulele, staring at a box of playing cards. She sings—)

ESTHER *(singing)*. I deal with my right hand,
 You deal with your left,
 Some cards leave us laughing,
 Some leave us ... bereft
 But whether I deal with my right hand,
 or you deal with your left,
 We all play the hand we've been dealt.
(Calling off.) DESSA!

(As she sings, their small kitchen emerges around her. DESSA enters with a schoolbag and a sketchbook.

She sits and begins to sketch.)

ESTHER *(singing)*. This is a deck of cards—
 There's nothing else to say—
 Rectangles trapped in plastic—
 Kept for a rainy day—
 You probably don't need them—
 I'll convince you that you do—
 This is consumerism—
 EW EW EW—

DESSA. This is your new job?

ESTHER. Good morning to you too. I'm practicing—I'm "in process." The ad agency said "household objects," I'm writing jingles for "household objects."

DESSA. Wow, Mom. That's like—so important to the future of our species.

ESTHER. Hey. It's a job, OK? A little support please? We're both at the start of something new.

(*ESTHER reaches for DESSA, but DESSA pulls away.*)

ESTHER. You're sketching again! That's a good sign!

(*DESSA slams her sketchbook shut.*)

DESSA. When does our stuff arrive?

ESTHER. Soon. Maybe? The truck blew a tire I guess, so—

DESSA. All my equipment is on that truck. All my labels, and tools and my sketchbooks—

ESTHER. I know.

DESSA. There's work to do out there, and I'm not gonna be able to do it without—

ESTHER. Out where? I don't want you playing out front, / it's not safe—

DESSA. For the hundredth time, it's not "playing"—

ESTHER. I know I know—

DESSA & ESTHER. It's SCIENCE.

ESTHER. You know what, we're going to table this conversation. There's the table, we'll put the conversation on top of it. You have your first day of school, I have my first day of work—the truck is going to arrive today—I'm sending that request into the universe—THE TRUCK WILL ARRIVE TODAY!—And then maybe we can find you a safe place to science, OK? *Please say, "OK."*

DESSA (*reluctantly*). OK.

ESTHER. We're both gonna have to bend a little, badger, or something's gonna break.

DESSA. Something already broke.

ESTHER. I'm still here, Dessa. You and me—we're still here.

DESSA. And Mary.

ESTHER. Right.

DESSA. You're gonna have to accept Mary eventually.

Because if there's a "we" here—it's me and Mary. She's been here since the accident—

ESTHER. I know—

DESSA. She's the first person I saw when I woke up—

ESTHER. I believe you—

DESSA. No, you believe I suffered an "intracranial head injury resulting in visual hallucinations"—

ESTHER. I believe you believe she's here, and I'm glad you have someone to talk to, I just wish—could you maybe talk to me?

DESSA. I've gotta catch a bus.

ESTHER. We have to talk about what happened, Dessa. We were in a car accident. The doctor said we have to talk through the events—we have to say them *out loud*—

DESSA. We have to send them into the universe?

ESTHER. Yes!

DESSA. The universe is impartial, Mom. The universe doesn't care.

ESTHER. Well *I* care! And somewhere, deep inside, you do too.

DESSA. I feel confident in my recollection of the events, OK? *Please say, "OK."*

ESTHER (*reluctantly*). OK.

(*DESSA grabs her sketchbook and bag.*)

ESTHER. Wait! I almost forgot.

(*ESTHER retrieves a crumpled piece of paper and hands it to DESSA.*)

ESTHER. I know it's hard to be a new person in a new place, but maybe this'll help with the transition.

DESSA. They have a science fair?

ESTHER. Just like back home! And to launch that fair, they're taking you to the Natural History Museum! That seems like a sign, right?

DESSA. It's not a sign, Mom. It's just another thing that's gonna happen.

(DESSA heads out.)

ESTHER *(calling after her)*. But a good thing right? There are still good things!

4.

(The Natural History Museum. DESSA consults a map, while MARY ANNING gapes up up up at an exhibit.)

MARY ANNING. Oh. My. Soul.

DESSA *(looking at the map)*. This museum is *enormous*.

MARY ANNING *(looking at the exhibit)*. Is that what I think it is?

DESSA. It's down this way, I think?

MARY ANNING. Dessa.

DESSA *(turning the map around)*. Or is it this way?

MARY ANNING. *Dessa!* Look up, girl, look up!

(MARY ANNING directs DESSA's attention up up up to the enormous skeleton of a—)

DESSA. Woah. That, Mary Anning, is a Mammut Americanum—otherwise known as—

DESSA & MARY ANNING. A mastodon.

MARY ANNING. I've heard about these creatures, I've seen fragments. But to see a specimen in all its MAJESTIC GLORY—

DESSA (*reading the placard*). Its name is Ron.

MARY ANNING (*alarmed*). Its name is *what*?

DESSA. Ron Ron the Mastodon.

MARY ANNING. Why would they name it Ron when it's plain as a pipe stem she's female?

DESSA. It says the sex remains unknown but it's believed to be a juvenile male.

MARY ANNING. "*Believed to be*?" Science does not hang its hat on *belief*! Where's the proof?

DESSA. It *is* on the smaller side—

MARY ANNING. Yes, and do you know what else was on the smaller side of this species? FEMALES.

But do they consider that? NO. They just name it after the man who discovered it.

DESSA. Totally and we're gonna topple the patriarchy together, but FIRST—

MARY ANNING. Topple the patriarchy? Is that an expression now?

DESSA. There's something I want you to see—

MARY ANNING (*enjoying the term*). Topple the patriarchy. Delightful!

DESSA. Mary—

MARY ANNING. Or shall we *pummel* it instead—

DESSA. Look up, woman, look up!

(*DESSA directs MARY ANNING's attention up, up, up to a line of portraits on the wall.*)

MARY ANNING. What am I looking at?

DESSA. The pioneers of paleontology.

It's all the people who've contributed to the field—look there's George Cuvier—

MARY ANNING (*fondly*). Ah George—he named that creature over our heads. Named it Mastodon, I mean, not *Ron*.

DESSA. William Buckland—

MARY ANNING. He named the Megalosaurus. Men do like to name things. His wife Mary illustrated his discoveries, but they rarely mention the wife.

DESSA. It says he discovered dinosaur poop.

MARY ANNING. No, I discovered the poop. I am the discoverer of the poop.

DESSA. That's not what it says.

(MARY ANNING takes a closer look at the placard. DESSA considers the next portrait.)

DESSA. Gideon Mantell—

MARY ANNING. His wife Mary discovered the Iguanodon—does it say that?

DESSA (*troubled*). No, it does not.

MARY ANNING. It was my Ichthyosaur that inspired him to go into the field! Does it say THAT?

DESSA (*angry now*). No, it does NOT!

MARY ANNING. Unbelievable! All these men advanced by Marys and no Mary credited in any way—

DESSA. William Coneybeare—

MARY ANNING. That scoundrel—he took credit for my Plesiosaur—

DESSA. Sir Richard Owen—