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Pound

By

SEAN O'LEARY

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(POUND)

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Triumvirate Artists: Kathleen Butler, Daniel P. Butler and John Essay.”

Pound

CHARACTERS

EZRA POUND: Age 73. Lithe, aggressive and razor sharp.

ANN POLLEY: Age 30. A newly minted psychiatrist.

NURSE PRISCOMB: Age 60. An efficient but caring nurse.

ARCHIBALD MACLEISH: Age 60. The distinguished poet.

SETTING

The staff library at St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, D.C.,
in February 1958.

PRODUCTION NOTE

The intermission indicated on p. 47 is optional. This play may
be performed with or without an intermission.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

“Ezra Loomis Weston Pound, the American poet and critic, was a supremely discerning and energetic entrepreneur of the arts who did more than any other single figure to advance a “modern” movement in English and American literature. Pound promoted, and also occasionally helped to shape, the work of such widely different poets and novelists as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Robert Frost, D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot.” —*Encyclopedia Britannica*

Pound was also a primary influence on the “beat poets,” particularly Allen Ginsberg, who regarded him with something akin to awe. In short, Ezra Pound was largely responsible for setting the standards by which we came to judge literature in the 20th century.

However, during World War II, Pound lived in Italy, where he made propaganda broadcasts for Mussolini’s fascist government. As a result, he was charged with treason. But before he could be tried, Pound was judged to be mentally unfit to stand trial and was remanded to the custody of St. Elizabeths psychiatric hospital, where he would remain from 1945 until 1958 when the indictment was dismissed and he was released.

Near the end of his stay, this aggressive and manipulative man, who dominated St. Elizabeths much as he had the literary world in the first half of the 20th century, suddenly retreated into an emotional shell and, eventually, “The Great Silence”—a period of despair and seclusion from which he never fully recovered. This play imagines what might have happened in those last days at St. Elizabeths to irreversibly change the character of Ezra Pound.

Pound

ACT I

PROLOGUE

(ARCHIBALD MACLEISH enters from a darkened stage carrying two pieces of paper.)

MACLEISH. Good evening. I am not Ezra Pound. I am, or was, a friend of his as you'll see in due course. I'd like to relate to you a lesson Ez taught me. Over the years, he expounded upon it many times, and it's contained in a poem in which he reminds us that, while "the ant is a centaur in his dragon world," we are but "beaten dogs beneath the hail." He writes, "Learn of the scaled world what can be thy place." And, "Pull down thy vanity! I say pull down!"

A wise admonition. "Pull down thy vanity!" And yet, Ezra also wrote and broadcast over the airwaves something else for the world to hear.

(Reads from the other piece of paper.)

MACLEISH *(cont'd)*. "The big Jew has rotted every nation he has wormed into." "The kikes have sucked out your vitals. Nothing can save you from the Jew." "This filth." "This dirty bit of meat."

Now, how is it that a person capable of lyricism, of insight, and humility—"Pull down thy vanity!"—how can that person, who not only valued beauty and truth, but was their instrument, also be capable of this? *(Holds up the second piece of paper.)*

I asked an expert, Dr. Winfred Overholser. For twenty-five years, he was superintendent of what was once called St. Elizabeths Hospital for the criminally insane. His most famous resident was, of course, Ezra, who, during his twelve-year stay, was under indictment for treason and would have been tried and quite likely executed, but for Overholser, who, mostly without explanation, judged Ez to be mentally incompetent to participate in his own defense.

Whether Ez was competent or not is now a moot point since this all happened long ago. But, the question I just asked is not moot. How can a person capable of this ... (*Holds up the piece of paper with Pound's poem.*) also be capable of this? (*Holding up the piece of paper with Pound's screed against the Jews.*)

When I asked him shortly after Ez finally left St. E's, Overholser smiled in that way that used to drive prosecutors and even his own colleagues to distraction, and he said, "Well, you had to know Ez."

SCENE 1

(MACLEISH exits and as lights come up on the set, EZRA POUND enters carrying books. He is gaunt and his seventy-three years are evident in his face. His hair is gray, unruly and resolves itself in a narrow beard. He wears a flannel shirt, olive green workman's pants and bedroom slippers.

It is February of 1958 in the staff library at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C. An ornate room in the classical style with book-lined walls, leather furnishings and dark, varnished wood. A door leading to a hallway is UR; a closet door is UL and an alcove with a high, curtained window is UC. An easel stands in the alcove holding a large oil portrait of a distinguished looking man. Furnishings include a couch, a

large leather chair, a coffee table and a desk and chair. A half-dozen old-fashioned, wooden folding chairs have been set up in a semi-circle around the leather chair as though for visitors.

Upon entering, POUND goes directly to the desk with scarcely a look around. He unburdens himself, double-checking to be sure he has remembered everything. He unrolls the scroll and pauses for a moment to mentally rehearse his delivery but brings himself back, remembering that there are more preparations required. He takes stock of the room, touching the folding chairs as though to check them off a list. He then looks to an area behind the couch where he expects to find a rolling blackboard, but is disappointed. He walks to the spot and turns to look around the rest of the room. Seeing nothing, he gets visibly perturbed and surveys the room again, this time with rapid, angry glances. His eyes finally rest on the closet door. He crosses and opens it, but again finds nothing and his facial expression becomes frightening. He crosses to the other door and bellows into the hallway.)

POUND. Priscomb! Where the hell is my blackboard!?! *(He waits for a reply. When none comes, he bellows again.)*

PRISCOMB! *(Another pause, but no response. Seething, he turns and glares at the portrait.)* Shout with me you goddamn relic! *(Then, in disgust.)* AAAAGH!

(He turns from the portrait and then reconsiders. He turns back. Looking again at the portrait, an idea begins to form. He circles the portrait and smiles mischievously. He speaks to the portrait.)

POUND *(cont'd)*. You wouldn't approve of today's lesson, so pretend you and your fat ass are mooning us.

(POUND spins the portrait around to reveal a clean, white back and places it backward on the easel. He then uses a grease pencil to write a Nepali word on the exposed back:

शांति

He is working happily away when ANN POLLEY appears.)

ANN. Excuse me, are you Mr. Pound?

(POUND looks up but does not stop working, assuming that ANN is one of his expected visitors.)

POUND. Sit down and where are the others?

ANN. Excuse me?

POUND. Anywhere except the throne. *(Gestures to the overstuffed leather chair.)* Only one old assbones'll tolerate.

ANN. Excuse me ...

POUND. I'm not a priest. Stop asking me to excuse you. Where are the others? *(Goes back to drawing.)*

ANN. Mr. Pound, we haven't been introduced. I'm Ann ...

POUND. Carter will handle the introductions. I'll forget anyway. Where is he?

ANN. I'm afraid you're confused ...

POUND. I'm supposed to be.

ANN. Carter—these others you keep talking about ...

POUND. You'll like them. They're also confused.

ANN. There are no others ...

POUND. Are you sure you're in the right place?

ANN. Do you know who I am?

POUND. Don't know that either? You're in the right place.

ANN. No, I am a doctor.

POUND (*has finished his character and turns back to face ANN, guessing*). Literature? No. Economics.

ANN. Psychology.

(*POUND winces.*)

ANN (*cont'd*). I am *your* doctor.

POUND. You're not with Carter ... ?

ANN. While Dr. Overholser is on sabbatical. Nurse Priscomb should have told you.

POUND. Mixed up with the blue hair are you?

ANN. We're scheduled for the next hour.

POUND. I have visitors.

ANN. Well, I'm afraid not today.

POUND. Afraid not today?

(*POUND holds up an index finger indicating she should be silent and walks deliberately to the door.*)

POUND (*cont'd, bellowing*). PRISCOMB! Where are my visitors?

ANN (*shaken by POUND's sudden outburst, tries to be assertive*). Mr. Pound, stop!

POUND. PRISCOMB!

ANN. Mr. Pound, you will please sit down!

POUND. PRISCOMB!

ANN. Mr. Pound, if you don't cooperate, I'll call for assistance.

POUND (*gestures for ANN to take his place at the door*).

Then you damn well better do it! ... And loud.

ANN (*crosses to the door but realizes she's being patronized and turns on POUND*). Mr. Pound ...

POUND (*ignoring her*). Aaaah! It's the long-tooth bitch.

Priscomb. She sent you, didn't she?

ANN. What?

POUND. Christ! The blue-haired bat. (*Turns away disgustedly from the confused ANN and starts collecting his things.*)

You can leave now.

ANN. Mr. Pound, I'm here ...

POUND. Get out!

ANN. Mr. Pound ...

POUND (*derisively*). Oh for Christ's sake, they're falling down laughing at you.

ANN. Who?

POUND. Your colleagues. You been had, snookered, taken to the cleaners and hung out to dry.

ANN. What are you talking about?

(*POUND chuckles snidely, incredulous at her naivete.*)

ANN (*cont'd*). Dr. Overholser personally assigned me to your case.

POUND. He does it to all the rookies. Let ol' Ez grind 'em up—show 'em what's what. Here. (*Crosses to the confused ANN, makes the sign of the cross over her and intones.*) *Pax vobiscum* and change the oil every three thousand miles. (*He waves her away and resumes collecting his things.*)

ANN. Dr. Overholser specifically told me ...

POUND. You said he was on sabbatical.

ANN. Before he left ...

POUND. Where'd he go?

ANN. Africa.

POUND. May he get et by a large carnivore.

ANN. Mr. Pound, we need to talk.

POUND. Why?

ANN. I've studied your case, and I'd like to help you.

POUND (*locks eyes with a threatening glare*). Help? Help me?

(ANN nods sheepishly.)

POUND (*cont'd*). Didn't they tell you? I'm incurable—certified by Overholser, the Grand Panjandrum himself.

ANN. You know, everyone doesn't agree ...

POUND. No, there are those who think I'm faking. Either way, no help for Ez. Get it?

ANN. You don't really ...

POUND (*gathering his things to leave*). All right. Stay if you like, and if you want to do some good, see about the blue hair.

ANN. Who?

POUND. You'll know her when you see her.

(POUND has gathered his things and turns the picture on the easel and marches victoriously to the door.)

ANN. Mr. Pound, please ...

(But POUND is gone. Not sure what to do, ANN wanders to the portrait and begins to turn it when she is surprised by PRISCOMB, who, as advertised, has bluish-tinted hair.)

PRISCOMB. Dr. Polley, were you finished with Mr. Pound?

ANN. Well ... not exactly.

PRISCOMB. I will get him.

(PRISCOMB turns to go, but ANN interrupts.)

ANN. No ... no, thank you, Nurse Priscomb. I, uh, think we've done as much as we can today.

PRISCOMB. Dr. Polley, patients ...

ANN. Ann, please?

PRISCOMB. Dr. Polley, patients are not allowed to leave sessions until dismissed by the doctor. I should ...

ANN. No, please. I think it's better if I start fresh with Mr. Pound another time. He was quite ... um ...

PRISCOMB. I understand.

(PRISCOMB begins straightening by returning folding chairs to the closet.)

ANN. I suppose I should have disciplined him.

PRISCOMB. You'll have to, if you want to work with him.

ANN. I'd like to help him. I guess I'm worried that a threat will make him even more obstinate.

PRISCOMB. Mr. Pound must be made to obey the rules like everyone else.

ANN. Yes, but I'm hoping for ... something more.

PRISCOMB. Doctor, it's not my place to say, but if you accomplish that much, it will be a major victory. *(She has finished putting the chairs away.)* May I go?

ANN *(ignoring PRISCOMB's request)*. No one around here expects Mr. Pound to ever leave, do they?

PRISCOMB. I really couldn't say.

ANN. The records say Mr. Pound receives almost no therapy. He's not on the master schedule.

PRISCOMB. I think you need to talk to Dr. Overholser.

ANN. And he conducts classes or something in the staff library. Who are these people?

PRISCOMB. Mr. Pound has followers.

ANN. Followers? Are they other residents at St. E's?

PRISCOMB. No. They're visitors, young people mostly. Dr. Overholser calls them "hangers-on."

ANN. Hangers-on? Is that a good thing for someone diagnosed with delusions of grandeur?

PRISCOMB. I have nothing to say about Mr. Pound's treatment or whom he's allowed to see.

ANN. No, of course not, Miss Priscomb.

PRISCOMB. May I go now?

ANN. Please, may we talk just a little? I would like your help.

(ANN indicates that she would like PRISCOMB to sit in POUND's chair; which PRISCOMB does reluctantly.)

ANN (*cont'd*). Thank you. I know I'm new and ... how long have you been here?

PRISCOMB. Thirteen years.

ANN. I'm sure you've seen lots like me come and go, but I do want to help Mr. Pound, and it doesn't seem like anyone is trying.

PRISCOMB. Doctor, I'm in no position ...

ANN. Is it because he's been labeled "incurable"? You know, even when delusional patients can't be cured, many can be helped to at least function.

PRISCOMB. I believe there are other considerations in Mr. Pound's case.

ANN. If you mean his legal situation ...

PRISCOMB. Among other things.

ANN. Like what?

PRISCOMB. Doctor, I'm just a nurse. You really should refer to Mr. Pound's file.

ANN. With your experience I'm sure you know a great deal more than can be captured in a chart. You must know him ... at a personal level I mean.

PRISCOMB. Everything I know is in the file.

ANN. Please, just a few questions?

PRISCOMB. Doctor, you can ask whatever you like, but it's all there.

ANN. No, it is not all there. If it were, he'd be cured or at least better off than he is. Look, you spend eight hours a day with this man. That's more than most husbands and wives.

PRISCOMB. Emptying bedpans, administering medication, changing sheets.

ANN. And talking. You interact with him. What does he say? What do you sense about him? What do you feel?

PRISCOMB. Mr. Pound is like everyone else. He cooperates when it's in his interest to do so.

ANN. And when it's not?

PRISCOMB. It's my job to make sure that it's always in his interest.

ANN. But, you must have an opinion, an ... uh ...

PRISCOMB. Doctor, when you've worked in a psychiatric hospital as long as I have, you learn that opinions are cheap. If you think you can work with Mr. Pound, I will help in any way I can, but for opinions, ask the doctors who've tried before you. Many are still here.

ANN. Yes, of course.

PRISCOMB. May I go now?

ANN. Yes. Thank you.

(PRISCOMB starts to leave.)

ANN (*cont'd*). Miss Priscomb, one more thing. Please schedule Mr. Pound to see me again on Tuesday at three.

(*PRISCOMB looks at her skeptically.*)

ANN (*cont'd*). And please explain to him that if he does not, I will suspend his visiting privileges.

PRISCOMB. Yes, Doctor. But he does have someone here to see him right now.

ANN. One of this group—these hangers-on?

PRISCOMB. No. It's Mr. MacLeish. He's also a writer ...

ANN. Do you mean Archibald MacLeish, the poet?

PRISCOMB. Yes. He and Mr. Pound are friends. He's trying to arrange for Mr. Pound's release.

ANN. Really?

PRISCOMB. He has been for quite a while.

ANN. I see. But he knows Mr. Pound well?

PRISCOMB. For thirty years.

ANN. Miss Priscomb, I'm not sure it's the best of times for Mr. Pound to have a visitor, but I would very much like to talk with Mr. MacLeish. Could you ask him to come in?

PRISCOMB. Yes, Doctor.

(*PRISCOMB exits. ANN strolls around the room thinking and stops at the portrait to consider it. MACLEISH enters.*)

MACLEISH. Dr. Polley?

ANN. Ann, please.

MACLEISH. And you can call me Archie. Everyone does, except Ez who calls me whatever he likes.

ANN. Yes, I understand.