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Dramatic Publishing

STILL LIFE WITH IRIS

A Play by

STEVEN DIETZ

(One-act Version)



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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**And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,
And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,
And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze.**

John Keats

Still Life with Iris

(One-act Version)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 women, 5 men; pairings indicate actor doubling)

IRIS

MOM

MISS OVERLOOK

MAN / MISTER MATTERNOT

DAD

LEAF MONITOR

ANNABEL LEE

FLOWER PAINTER

MOZART

MEMORY MENDER

MISTER OTHERGUY

ELMER

HIS MOST EXCELLENT, GROTTO GOOD

HAZEL

HER MOST EXCELLENT, GRETTA GOOD

BOLT BENDER

MISTER HIMTOO

PRODUCTION NOTES

PASTCOATS

All of the inhabitants of Nocturno wear long, brightly colored coats, decorated—perhaps—with a variety of small cloth patches, beads or other mementos. Each coat contains the *past* of the person wearing it—and is known, therefore, as a “PastCoat.”

MUSIC

The music of Mozart—in all its richness, variance and breadth—underscores the play.

TRANSITIONS

The first line of every scene is intended to immediately follow the last line of the previous scene. This obviously requires a playing space that can quickly and *simply* represent a variety of locales. This also means that the first line of any scene can be played as an “entrance” by the speaking character.

Still Life with Iris

One-Act Version

(The MUSIC of Mozart fills the theatre as LIGHTS RISE on—

The Land of Nocturno. A tall sign reads: “WELCOME TO NOCTURNO.” Attached to the sign are arrows pointing to the following destinations: “Cloud Factory,” “Bird Assembly,” “Plant Plant,” “Rain Storage,” “Fruit Coloring,” “Fish School—swimming classes nightly.” Standing beneath the sign is a MAN in dark, somber attire. He wears a weathered sort of tool belt around his waist, containing numerous objects of practical need. Unlike the residents of Nocturno, he is not wearing a PastCoat [see description at end]. He also wears dark gloves on his hands at all times. IRIS enters. She sees the MAN reading the sign. She approaches him.)

IRIS. Are you curious or lost?

MAN. Pardon me?

IRIS. It’s better to be curious than lost, don’t you think?

Which are you?

MAN. I’m new.

IRIS. Yes, I know. I can tell by your coat.

MAN. I’m looking for someone.

IRIS. Well, at this time of night, everyone’s at work. Whatever you see in the world by day, it’s made here by night.

Like that fly on your nose— (*The MAN swats the [unseen] bug away.*) That fly was assembled right here in Nocturno. We crank those out by the millions and teach every one of them to fly. Plus: no two are the same. Our Bug Sculptors are very proud of that.

MAN. Like snowflakes, then—no two alike?

IRIS. Actually—and this is privileged information—the snowflakes are made in *pairs*. But we separate them and load them into clouds bound for different locations. Don't spread that around.

MAN. I won't.

IRIS. Who are you looking for?

(*HAZEL and ELMER, two kids similar in age to IRIS, rush on. HAZEL carries a large burlap sack which is marked: "Spots." ELMER carries a wooden box.*)

HAZEL. I know you took them.

ELMER. I didn't take them.

HAZEL. Where did you put them?

ELMER. I didn't take them.

HAZEL. I bet you're hiding them.

ELMER. I DID NOT TAKE THEM. Tell her, Iris—

IRIS. What is it, Elmer?

HAZEL. We're almost done with our chores—all that's left is to put the spots on the Ladybugs— (*ELMER removes two large Ladybugs from the box. They're each about the size of a cantaloupe. Bright orange. And without their spots.*)

ELMER. Why do Ladybugs need spots, anyway? I think they look fine without them.

HAZEL. And I reach into the Spot Sack and it's filled with these— (*She reaches into the sack and pulls out several long, black stripes—like those found on a zebra.*)

IRIS. Stripes.

ELMER. There must have been a mix-up.

HAZEL. We can't put stripes on the Ladybugs.

ELMER. Why not? And then we'll put the spots on the zebras.

HAZEL (*to IRIS*). You're lucky you don't have a brother. It's like this all the time.

ELMER. Can you help us, Iris? No one can find things like you can.

IRIS. I'll help you as soon as I— (*She turns to the MAN.*)

MAN (*interrupts her*). Your name is Iris.

IRIS. Yes. Why?

(The FLOWER PAINTER enters. He wears a beret and has a palette and brushes on a strap over his shoulder. He goes directly to ELMER, HAZEL and IRIS as, at the same instant, the MEMORY MENDER enters, opposite, pushing a cart inscribed "Memory Mender" in large letters. The cart holds large spools of thread, extra-large buttons, scissors, etc. His hat looks like a thimble. Upon their entrance, the MAN turns and starts to leave.)

MEMORY MENDER (*calling to the MAN*). You there, sir—let me take a look at that coat! Sir, did you hear me? (*But the MAN is gone. The MEMORY MENDER remains at a distance, busying himself with the objects on his cart.*)

FLOWER PAINTER. Elmer, Hazel—are you finished with your chores?

HAZEL. We have a problem.

IRIS. The spots are missing.

ELMER. I didn't take them.

FLOWER PAINTER. But, the world requires Ladybugs, and Ladybugs must have their spots—

IRIS. Maybe you could paint them on.

(ELMER holds the Ladybugs out to the FLOWER PAINTER.)

FLOWER PAINTER. Out of the question. I'm a Flower Painter—nothing more. I wouldn't know the first thing about painting spots on bugs.

ELMER *(happily)*. I guess our chores are done!

FLOWER PAINTER. It's not that simple, Elmer. Without us, the world would come to a standstill. If I abandoned my work, the flowers of the world would look like this—*(He produces a large flower with a long stem. It is a dull gray.)* Instead of like this—*(A FLOURISH OF MUSIC as he makes several strokes with his paint brush and produces [seemingly] the same flower—now bright yellow and red.)* Now, you are Spotters and you must do your work.

HAZEL. But we've looked everywhere—

FLOWER PAINTER. I'm sure Iris can find them. She's like her dad in that way. That man could find the moon on the blackest of nights.

ELMER. Then why has he never found his way back home?

HAZEL *(a reprimand)*. Elmer—

FLOWER PAINTER. No one knows why, and it's better left—

IRIS. Would you tell me if you knew? *(The FLOWER PAINTER stares at her.)* I was only a baby, then. Even my mom won't tell me why he left.

FLOWER PAINTER *(calmly, definitively)*. Because she *doesn't know*, Iris. No one does. It was the night of the Great Eclipse, and the moon was particularly hard to find. He went out to bring it in...and he's never returned.

IRIS. There's an eclipse tomorrow.

FLOWER PAINTER. The first one since that night. (*He starts off, saying his farewell.*) Now and again.

ELMER, HAZEL & IRIS. Now and again.

HAZEL. Sorry about my brother. He says stupid things.

ELMER. I didn't mean—

IRIS. It's not stupid. I think about it all the time.

(The LEAF MONITOR, Hazel and Elmer's mom, enters, carrying two large sacks with leaves protruding out of the tops of each. One is marked: "OLD." One is marked: "NEW." She also holds a clipboard.)

LEAF MONITOR. Hazel. Have you finished your chores?

HAZEL. Why don't you ever ask Elmer that question?

LEAF MONITOR. Because you're the *oldest*.

ELMER. And you always will be.

(HAZEL glares at ELMER.)

LEAF MONITOR *(consulting the clipboard)*. We need to balance these books. For every new leaf we put on a tree, an old one must fall. But, in all my years as the Leaf Monitor, I've never encountered this: I keep checking and double-checking, but I'm still *one leaf off*.

ELMER *(quickly)*. I didn't take it.

LEAF MONITOR. Where could the missing one be?

(The BOLT BENDER enters, carrying a piece of lightning, about four feet long. He's bending it in various ways, trying to get the right shape. Other lightning bolts poke out of a quiver he wears over his shoulder.)

IRIS. Almost day.

BOLT BENDER (*nods, greets them all*). Almost day, indeed—and I still can't get the lightning right. Even the best Bolt Bender gets tired of making the same old lightning bolt, over and over again.

IRIS. We're looking for a missing leaf.

BOLT BENDER. Well, if anyone can find it, Iris, it will be you.

LEAF MONITOR. I just hope it's not the BEST leaf.

HAZEL. Why not?

LEAF MONITOR. The BEST leaf must be sent to the Great Goods. You know that.

BOLT BENDER. And, believe me, you don't want to get on the bad side of the Great Goods.

HAZEL. Why not?

BOLT BENDER. If you disobey the Goods, your punishment is great.

HAZEL. Mom. (*She reaches into her PastCoat and brings out a large, beautiful autumn leaf.*) I didn't mean to offend the Goods. But, it was so pretty.

ELMER. It's the best leaf of them all.

(The LEAF MONITOR holds out her hand, and, reluctantly, HAZEL hands her the leaf.)

LEAF MONITOR. Someday, Hazel, when *you're* the Leaf Monitor—you'll understand. Now, finish up your chores. It's almost day.

BOLT BENDER (*still at work on the bolt*). Almost day, indeed.

(The LEAF MONITOR and the BOLT BENDER exit. As IRIS, HAZEL and ELMER prepare to run off, opposite, they are stopped by the MEMORY MENDER, who pushes

his cart in their path. He is a cranky but caring man, adamant about his work.)

MEMORY MENDER. Careful, now—or you’ll trip and rip your coats. And if you rip your coats I’ll have to sew ’em back up for you. And you know why, don’t you?

IRIS, ELMER & HAZEL (*they’ve heard this a million times*). Yes, we know why—

MEMORY MENDER (*quickly, quizzing them*). Hazel, who are the rulers of Nocturno, our home?

HAZEL. The Great Goods.

MEMORY MENDER. Iris, where do the Great Goods live?

IRIS. Across the water, on Great Island.

MEMORY MENDER. And Elmer, how deep is the water that surrounds Great Island?

ELMER. Umm...

IRIS. I know!

HAZEL. I know, too!

ELMER (*sharp, to the girls*). So do I.

MEMORY MENDER. Well?

ELMER It’s...umm...

MEMORY MENDER. You knew it when I asked you last week.

ELMER It’s—oh, I don’t know. Why do I always get the hard questions?!

MEMORY MENDER. Let me see your coat. (*ELMER walks over to the MEMORY MENDER who discovers a tiny rip in the sleeve of ELMER’S PastCoat. He sews it back up as he speaks.*) See there. A little rip in your coat and your memory is harmed. It makes me crazy. You’ve got to take care of your coat because your coat holds your *past*. Every stitch, every pocket, every button and sleeve—it’s your whole life in there! Think you can just go out and get a past like you can get a glass of milk?!

Think again. (*Finished sewing.*) There we are. Now, Elmer, how deep is the water that surrounds Great Island? ELMER (*touching the new stitches in his coat*). Ninety-nine thousand and twenty-three feet.

MEMORY MENDER. Exactly. Now, don't trip and get a rip. (*To IRIS, referring to her coat.*) Iris, have your mom keep an eye on that button. It's getting loose.

IRIS. I will.

MEMORY MENDER (*taking IRIS aside*). And one thing more: The Fog Lifter is retiring today. After all these years, she can still set the fog down in the morning—but she just can't lift it up, anymore. She'd like you, Iris, to take her place.

IRIS (*honored*). Thank you.

MEMORY MENDER. Now and again.

IRIS, ELMER & HAZEL. Now and again.

(The MEMORY MENDER exits, pushing his cart. ELMER and HAZEL wave goodbye to IRIS, as MUSIC CHANGES to what will become recognized as the "Still Life" music, and LIGHTS REVEAL Iris' Home. It consists, in total, of a white wooden table with three white chairs. On the table is a simple vase. Nothing else. IRIS arrives home. Just before entering the scene, she stops and watches as her MOM puts an iris in the vase on the table. She sets a steaming cup of cocoa on the table. She pulls IRIS' chair away from the table. She goes to the middle chair and touches it, looks down at it. Then, she moves to her own chair, pulls it away from the table, and sits. She looks at the iris in the vase, admiring it. IRIS enjoys this image for a moment, then enters.)

IRIS. Mom, guess what.

MOM (*smiles*). Hello, Iris, and what?

IRIS. They asked me to be the Fog Lifter.

MOM (*knowing this in advance*). It's a great honor. I'm very proud of you.

IRIS. Is it hard to do?

MOM. Can't be any harder than teaching the wind to whistle. Some days, Iris, I think that wind is just being stubborn.

IRIS. But once you've taught it, why doesn't it remember?

MOM. The wind has no memory. Just like us if we lost our PastCoats. So every storm, I've got to start from scratch. And, when it's a big storm, I've got to teach not only whistling—but *howling*.

IRIS. Did Dad used to help you?

MOM (*pause*). Yes, in fact, he did.

IRIS. Did he leave because of me?

MOM. Iris, I've told you, it's better forgotten—

IRIS. Because he didn't want to be my dad?

MOM (*gently*). No. (*Pause.*) The night of the Great Eclipse I came home...and there was nothing here but the wind...moving through the house, not making a sound. Your dad was gone. I've never known why.

IRIS. You haven't forgotten him. I know he's still part of your coat. (*Touches MOM's coat near her heart.*) Please, Mom. Tell me about him.

(*MOM looks at her, then speaks. A reverie.*)

MOM. Every night that man would rope the moon. And pull it down out of the sky. Then he'd give the signal...(*palm open, fingers spread, arm extended, she raises her hand slowly in front of her*)...to raise the sun into place. That was his job. He was the Day Breaker.

(*Silence, as IRIS smiles at the memory.*)

IRIS. There's another eclipse tomorrow.

MOM. Yes, there is.

IRIS. And who will find the moon?

MOM (*stares at Iris*). He left something for you, Iris. A leather pouch. He wore it every night while he worked.

IRIS. Why haven't you ever given it to me?

MOM. I was afraid it would make you sad. All these years, I've tried to protect you from that.

IRIS (*simply*). Please don't. Not anymore.

MOM (*stares at IRIS, then gently touches her face*). You're right. It's time it was yours. (*She starts to exit, as IRIS lifts her cocoa from the table.*) Careful. That's hot.

IRIS (*nods and sips her cocoa, then speaks to MOM off-stage*). Sometimes I get mad at him, Mom. Sometimes I wish I could find him and make him tell me why he left. I've waited so long for him to come home.

(*MUSIC UNDER, as from the direction MOM exited, the MAN we saw earlier enters. His name is MISTER MATTERNOT.*)

MISTER MATTERNOT. Your waiting is over, Iris.

IRIS (*turns and sees MISTER MATTERNOT*). Mom—?

MISTER MATTERNOT. You needn't call for your mother.

You needn't think of your father, anymore—

IRIS (*growing more frightened*). What are you doing here?

You were lost—you were looking for someone—

MISTER MATTERNOT (*approaches IRIS*). And I've found her.

IRIS. But, I don't know who you are— (*She tries to run off to find her MOM. MISTER MATTERNOT stands in her way.*) MOM!

MISTER MATTERNOT. You're special, Iris. I'm told you can find missing things.