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Dramatic Publishing

STRING OF PEARLS

By
MICHELE LOWE

This excerpt contains sexually explicit content



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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STRING OF PEARLS was produced by City Theatre Company (Tracy Brigden, artistic director; David Jobin, managing director) in Pittsburgh in October 2003. It was directed by Eric Simonson; the set design was by Loy Arcenas; the costume design was by Michael Olich; the lighting design was by Thomas C. Hase; the sound design was by Dave Bjornson and the stage manager was Patti Kelly. The cast was as follows:

WOMAN #1 Rebecca Harris
WOMAN #2 Helena Ruoti
WOMAN #3 Sheila McKenna
WOMAN #4 Sharon Washington

STRING OF PEARLS was produced by Primary Stages (Casey Childs, executive producer; Andrew Leynse, artistic director, Elliot Fox, managing director) in New York City in September 2004. It was directed by Eric Simonson; the set design was by Loy Arcenas; the costume design was by David Zinn, the lighting design was by D.M. Wood, the sound design was by Lindsay Jones and the stage manager was Emily N. Wells. The cast was as follows:

WOMAN #1 Ellen McLaughlin
WOMAN #2 Mary Testa
WOMAN #3 Antoinette LaVecchia
WOMAN #4 Sharon Washington

STRING OF PEARLS was commissioned and developed by The Cherry Lane Theatre, New York City; and received further development from New York Stage and Film, The Powerhouse Theatre at Vassar College.

Special thanks to Matt Williams and Pamela Perrell.

STRING OF PEARLS

An ensemble piece for 4 women playing 27 roles

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance)

AMY 35, a research scientist living in Saddle River
in the present
BETH 39, a housewife living in Saddle River in 1969
The same actress also plays Beth when she is 74
ELA 42, a divorced mother of two living near Milwaukee
in 1981
HELEN 40, a political consultant living in San Diego
in 1982
STEPHANIE 44, an architect/mother living in Boston
in 1982
JOSIANNE 30, a Tunisian hotel maid living in Escondido,
Calif., in 1982
DORA 53, a chaperone for the New York City Ballet
living in Manhattan in 1983
VICTORIA 40, a housewife living in Manhattan in 1995
ABBY 38, a money manager living in Manhattan
in the present
KYLE 46, a mortician's assistant living in New York City
in the present
CINDY . . 45, a gravedigger living in Nyack, N.Y., in the present
HALLIE Beth's housekeeper
ROBERTA Amy's friend
BEVERLY Poughkeepsie housewife
LINDA Beth's daughter
WANDA an old friend of Ela's
RANDY another old friend of Ela's

DENISE Ela’s sister-in-law
ZOE Stephanie’s 3-year-old-daughter
AUNT PATTY Josianne’s aunt
ERICA woman on the beach
JITTERS 20, a Latina art student going to Paris to study
FRENCH SALESWOMAN
GLORIA Abby’s mother
JEWELER
CHERYLE school cafeteria worker living in the Bronx
KYLE’S MOTHER

The Breakdown

Woman One

Amy, Wanda, Helen, Aunt Patty, Jitters, Abby

Woman Two

Beth, Randy, Denise, Josianne, Victoria, Kyle’s Mother

Woman Three

Hallie, Linda, Stephanie, Dora, Cheryle, Gloria, Jeweler, Cindy

Woman Four

Roberta, Beverly, Ela, Zoe, French Saleswoman, Erica, Kyle

AUTHOR’S NOTES

STRING OF PEARLS was originally conceived as a piece for four actresses to show their immeasurable talent. It is my hope that an imaginative and non-traditional casting policy be used when casting STRING OF PEARLS in order to affirm the participation of women of all ethnic backgrounds.

A FINAL NOTE: the character Josianne says “dollar” instead of “dollars.” It is not a misprint in the script.

STRING OF PEARLS

AT RISE: *Music. The stage is bare, dark. Lights up on BETH, 74.*

BETH (*to us*). My granddaughter Amy is marrying Kevin. She is living with me until the wedding. I have lived alone for thirty-five years. I am not used to seeing an extra plate in the sink or smelling sandalwood and vetiver in the hall or listening at night for someone's key in the door. I like it. I like it a lot.

(*HALLIE enters holding an open box.*)

HALLIE. The caterer's on the phone for Amy.

BETH. She went to work. Did the florist call?

HALLIE. Not yet. (*Off the box.*) More books.

BETH. Which ones?

HALLIE. *The Life and Lyrics of Sir Edward Dyer* and *The Joy of Pickling*.

BETH (*to us*). I'm thinking of doing some pickling.

HALLIE. Where do you want them?

BETH. Under the sink.

HALLIE. The sink?

BETH. What did I say?

HALLIE (*to us*). She's not getting enough sleep. She stays up all night reading.

BETH. I'm not tired.

HALLIE *(to us)*. She's seventy-four. *(HALLIE exits.)*

BETH. I'm fine. I'm just excited. *(To us.)* Amy works at the hospital every night until midnight. I wait up for her. I don't mean to. Yes, I do.

(AMY enters holding her finger.)

AMY. Ow! I can't believe I did it again.

BETH. Kevin called—and so did Roberta.

AMY. Thanks, Gramma.

BETH. It's so crazy around here.

AMY. I need a Band-aid. *(AMY exits.)*

BETH *(to us)*. Amy is a doctor of some reputation. She is developing a new heart made of pig guts with a team at Mount Sinai. Amy's work is so complex, so demanding, so dangerous that the heart won't be ready for another ten years. And yet—

(AMY enters.)

AMY. Do you have any alcohol?

BETH *(to us)*. She can't sew. *(BETH exits.)*

AMY *(to us)*. I am sewing my wedding dress by hand. I work each morning from four to six. It is only half done. I am terrified that when I walk down the aisle the dress will come apart and I will have to get married naked.

(ROBERTA enters.)

ROBERTA. Do you want me to give you a shower?

AMY. A bridal shower? No.

ROBERTA. I could make it small—

AMY. No.

ROBERTA. A dozen girls at my apartment—

AMY. No, please, Roberta.

ROBERTA. When you come over for dinner next Tuesday—?

AMY. Yes?

ROBERTA. Act surprised.

(HALLIE enters.)

HALLIE. Are you going to throw your bouquet?

ROBERTA. Are you going to write your vows?

HALLIE. Are you going to hire a band?

(BETH enters.)

BETH. Are you going to wear my pearls with your dress?

AMY. What? *(HALLIE and ROBERTA exit.)*

BETH. The pearls.

AMY *(to us)*. It is the first time she mentions the pearls.

BETH. The ones I gave your mother.

AMY *(to us)*. My mother died when I was six.

BETH. The ones she wore to her wedding.

AMY. I don't have them.

BETH. Are you sure?

AMY. Mom didn't give them to me.

BETH. Maybe your father has them.

AMY. I don't think so, Gramma—

BETH. I'll call him. *(BETH exits.)*

AMY. Gramma, don't— *(To us.)* I am ignoring my father, I am barely speaking to my stepmother, I am enjoying

my brother Jonathan for the first time in my life. Kevin and I don't want children. We don't want a kitchen or plants. We have agreed to spend our energies on our work and on each other.

(BETH enters.)

BETH. Your father doesn't have them.

AMY *(to us)*. I have my mother's eyes, my mother's chin, and my mother's allergy to cats. I do not, however, have her pearls.

BETH. You need the pearls to get married.

AMY. The only thing I need to get married is Kevin. And the dress. *(AMY exits.)*

BETH *(to us)*. Amy retreats to her room. As the wedding draws near she speaks to me less, until the house is wrapped in silence. The replies flood the mailbox but she leaves them unopened. She reminds me of Ethan—absent, disconnected, nervous. Secretly I'm afraid she'll throw in the towel and elope. *(BETH exits.)*

(AMY enters.)

AMY. Gramma leaves a pile of my parents' wedding pictures on my pillow. I see the pearls for the first time. White, shiny, round as marbles.

(BETH enters.)

BETH. Maybe she loaned them to a friend.

AMY. Maybe she gave them back to you. *(To us.)* Cruel. I know.

BETH (*to us*). I clean out every closet, I open every box—

AMY (*to us*). I hear her in the middle of the night—

BETH (*to us*). I find my engagement ring. Too big for my hands. I'm shrinking, fading, turning to dust already.

AMY (*to us*). I resolve to be nice to her.

BETH. Maybe your brother knows where the pearls are.

AMY. I do not need the pearls to get married!

BETH (*to us*). She doesn't understand.

AMY. What do I say?

BETH (*to us*). How to explain?

AMY. They're lost.

BETH. If I could find them for you.

AMY. It doesn't matter—

BETH. If I could start at the beginning—

AMY. You won't find them.

BETH. Beginning with the first...

AMY (*to us*). Before they were my mother's they were hers.

BETH. First to receive them, first to wear them, first to give them away.

AMY (*to us*). She was thirty-nine. August 1969. (*AMY exits.*)

(We hear audio from the Apollo 11 moon landing as the lights change.)

NEIL ARMSTRONG (*voiceover*). "Houston, Tranquility Base here. The eagle has landed."

CHARLES DUKE (*voiceover*). "Roger, Tranquility. We copy you on the ground. You got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We're breathing again."

(BETH is now thirty-nine. It is 1969.)

BETH. Ethan quit playing tennis after he broke his foot. He rarely rode his bike. He sat for hours in front of the television watching the moon landing. He'd do anything not to come to bed. At ten o'clock he'd call his mother in Poughkeepsie. At midnight he'd read an entire *Time*, or *Life*, or *Look*. I'd wait up for him, but it was no use. I'd pass out and by six the next morning, he was gone. Linda would see him waving to her as he went down the hall. If I woke up in the middle of the night and I touched his belly or his thigh, he'd grunt and roll over. So I'd go downstairs and turn on Channel 9.

(Music up: Jimi Hendrix's "Are You Experienced?")

I'd see all these girls on the news half-naked, dancing, feathers in their hair, belts around the hips, shaking and swaying and all I could think was—these girls were having sex. Why wasn't I?

So after dinner one night, when Linda was out at a party, I tried to talk to Ethan about how I was feeling—but all that came out was "feather" and "halter-top" and he didn't know what I was talking about. So I gave up.

Then came the invitation to his twentieth high-school reunion. All of his friends from Poughkeepsie started calling and I guess they shamed him into it, because the next thing I knew, we were going, too. And when he gave me money for a dress—I took it as a sign. Maybe

he wanted to look at me like he used to. Maybe he wanted to have some fun, some feeling, some attachment—like we used to.

I went to Bonwit Teller and bought a flaming-red, sleeveless Anne Klein and I did one hundred sit-ups every night for two weeks.

(Music up: Goldberg Variations #6.)

The night of the party, he found this lovely station on the radio playing Bach and we glided, we swam up from Saddle River toward the country club, not saying a word, just the music between us.

When we got there the first people we ran into were Larry Bridges and his new wife who turned out to be Ethan's girlfriend from Camp Anawana—Beverly.

Beverly was exotic. She drank Brandy Alexanders. She danced. She wore a red dress, too, but next to hers my dress looked brown—almost gray. And she very clearly had something I did not. Beverly had a bosom. It was a nice round bouncy bosom, a melonish kind of loveliness. I wasn't jealous, I was more intrigued. How did one come to have such a bosom? Was it her mother? Did she have sisters? Were they all involved in the bosom business? Or was it just Beverly? I had never seen anything so flawlessly round and so perfectly white in my life. They could have been made of marble.

Ethan stood around and talked to the friends he had stayed in touch with. I said hello to a few people, but mostly I sat at the table, eyeing the fruit cup, waiting for everyone to sit down so we could eat and go home. The shine had quickly worn off the evening for me.

But not for Beverly. She was dancing, she was talking, she was getting around, and making friends with everybody. I lost track of her for a while until she came up behind me, dumped me out of my chair and dragged me over to the bar.

(BEVERLY enters.)

BEVERLY. He looks exactly the same.

BETH. Ethan?

BEVERLY. He still smolders.

BETH *(to us)*. I had never thought of Ethan in fiery terms before.

BEVERLY. Looking at him, you wouldn't know it—but he's not your average kind of guy, is he?

BETH *(to us)*. What was she getting at?

BEVERLY. It just goes to show you—you only know the true nature of a person when you—well you must know.

BETH *(to us)*. No, I didn't know.

BEVERLY. Ethan's the first boy who ever gave me a pearl necklace.

BETH *(to us)*. Who was she kidding? He was from *Poughkeepsie*, his father was an accountant. Pearls? Come on.

BEVERLY. You mean he's never given you one?

BETH. Ethan gives me pens for Mother's Day. One year he gave me a broiler pan for my birthday.

BEVERLY (*intrigued*). Well, you go right home tonight, and you tell him you want a pearl necklace. You demand that he give it to you. You insist. Besides, you look like you could use it. (*BEVERLY exits.*)

BETH. We went home that night and I drank three cups of Maxwell House while he read the *Wall Street Journal*. When he finally came upstairs, it was after three—but I was up and pumping on twenty-two pistons. As soon as he got into bed, I jumped on top of him and said, Ethan Brown—did you really give that girl Beverly from Camp Anawana a string of pearls?! And suddenly I felt him in between my thighs, get hard like a rock. And I—I started experiencing the most incredible tingling sensation around my chest.

So I said it again:

A string of pearls Ethan, you gave it to her? And now he's so hard, I'm thinking, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. And he looks right at me, right in my eyes and he whispers: You want a string of pearls?

And I think if *talking* about it is going to get him this hard, imagine what he's going to be like when he gives it to me.

So I say, OOOh, yes, Ethan. You bad boy, you never gave me a string of pearls. I want a string of pearls, give it to me. Wham! He rolls me over, pins me down and rips off my nightgown. His penis is coming out of his pajamas. He throws off his bottoms and pushes me down toward the end of the bed. And the whole time

he's saying, You want a string of pearls? You want a string of pearls?

And I'm saying, Yes, Ethan, yes, gimme a string of pearls and the next thing I know he puts his penis between my breasts and whispers,

Squeeeeeeze it.

OH. OK.

So I squeeze my breasts around his penis.

Now I'm a 34 double A. The only time I ever used a bra was when I was pregnant with Linda. But something happened that night, I swear to God. I touched my breasts and they'd grown. I had mango breasts, beachy Gaugin breasts, breasts like you see in a Renoir painting or a B-movie. I must have been a 40D. Something—something miraculous was happening. He was growing, I was growing, and now he's pumping between my breasts and I'm getting so turned on and he's saying: Yeah, yeah, yeah, oh, baby, oh, oh, oh, uh-hUH, baby, OH OH OHHH!!

And with no warning whatsoever he comes all over my neck. Then he leans over and whispers: "String of pearls."

(Lights up on BEVERLY.)

BEVERLY. When he did it to me I was fourteen.

BETH. Too young.

BEVERLY. Too messy.

BETH. Too surprising.