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Dramatic Publishing

The Tangled Web

Drama by Laurie Brooks



The Tangled Web

Drama. By Laurie Brooks. *Cast: 3m., 2w., 1m. or w.* Seventeen-year-old Owen is in love with Sarah. Sarah is in love with Sean and his rich lifestyle. Sean used to love Sarah, but now he's moved on. With the help of a mysterious, Faustian source of inspiration, called the Host, Sarah comes up with a plan to secure her future and unwittingly draws everyone into her tangled web of lies. Owen's friend, Tommy, is complicit in Owen's inescapable fate, and Sarah's friend, Julie, must decide between loyalty and telling the truth. The four young characters are portrayed individually and as a chorus who, along with the Host, offer their cryptic and often sarcastic thoughts inside and outside the action. *The Tangled Web* uses theatrical techniques to investigate issues that surround the consequences of irresponsible sexual activity. It examines peer relationships, influences, and the boundaries of loyalty. How far would you go to obtain your heart's desire? In the special interactive forum that follows, the audience is given the opportunity to further explore the characters' choices and actions. *The Tangled Web* was commissioned, devised with and premiered by Graffiti Theatre Company, Cork, Ireland. This American version was commissioned and premiered by The Coterie, Kansas City, Mo., and received a prestigious AT&T FirstStage Award from the Theatre Communications Group. *Simple set. Suitable for touring. Approximate running time: 85 minutes.*

Photo: Graffiti Theatre Company, Cork, Ireland. (clockwise from left) James Babson, Ray Scannell, Zoe Desmond, Paul Penrose and Paula O'Donohue. Photo by Jörg Köster.

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THE TANGLED WEB

By
LAURIE BROOKS



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For Liz, forever

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Produced by special arrangement with
THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY of Woodstock, Illinois

The Tangled Web was commissioned, devised with and premiered by Graffiti Theatre Company, Cork, Ireland, Spring Tour 2000, with the following cast and production staff:

The Host: James Babson

Ensemble:

Pol Mac Peanrois
Zoe Desmond
Paula O'Donohue
Raymond Scannell

Directed by Emelie FitzGibbon

Set Design by Olan Wrynn

The American version of *The Tangled Web* was commissioned and premiered by The Coterie Theatre, Kansas City, Mo., March 2001. The Coterie Theatre commission of *The Tangled Web* was made possible through an AT&T *FirstStage* grant from the AT&T Foundation and Theatre Communications Group, with the following cast and production staff:

The Host: Brian Paulette

Ensemble:

Alicia Atkins
Richard Stubblefield
Andrew Johnson
Angela Wildflower Polk
Brian Hunter

Directed by Jeff Church

Scenic Design by Jeff McLaughlin

Costume Design by Georgiana Londre

Sound Design by David Kiehl

Videography by Zach Christman

Stage Manager Amy Abels Owen

THE TANGLED WEB

A Full-length Play

“Dream as if you’ll live forever. Live as if you’ll die tomorrow.” — James Dean

CHARACTERS:

THE HOST - Ultra cool, movie star-ish, like James Dean, also plays Sarah’s Mother and Dr. Hilliard.

ACTOR I plays Owen, 17 / Ensemble

ACTOR II plays Sarah, 17 / Ensemble

ACTOR III plays Tommy, 17 / Ensemble

ACTOR IV plays Sean, 17 / Ensemble

ACTOR V plays . . Julie, 17 / Owen’s mom / social worker / Ensemble

NOTES:

- This play is a cautionary tale that presents an anti-model of behavior. Sarah, although misguided in her choices, must not be played simply as the villain. Even though Sarah’s behavior is troubling, her motivations and choices are reasonable to her.

- The play is written to be staged in the round or on a thrust stage, with the audience as close to the playing area as possible. The set is non-realistic and includes a playing area with a doorframe and three runways that travel into the audience for use by the Ensemble. There are stools that can be moved to delineate playing spaces.

- All six actors remain in the playing space throughout the play. The Host embodies the voices in the characters' heads, so he is present in every scene. They can hear but not see him, so he moves freely about the playing space, eavesdropping on intimate conversations, insinuating himself into the action. He laughs openly at mistakes, choices, self-delusions.
- The Ensemble wears wraparound sunglasses when they form, gathering near The Host. Ensemble lines are meant to be spoken individually and as a group.
- Much of the dialogue spoken by The Host and the Ensemble is written in spoken word but is intended to be played without musical accompaniment.
- Throughout the play, where indicated, a sound effect (such as a bell, drumbeat or hand clap) is used to begin the scenes. The sound effect is followed by still images built by the actors to define location, space, action and mood. These images are broken by The Host, who points at the characters in the scene, initiating the action.

THE TANGLED WEB

PROLOGUE

(THE HOST enters and addresses the audience. As the highlighted words are said, he places labels [each printed with one of the highlighted words] on random members of the audience.)

HOST.

Do you have a **dream**?

Don't tell me.

What do you **want** to be when you're twenty-three?

Think about it.

Do you know how you'll get there?

Would you take a **chance** in order to achieve that dream?

How far would you go?

Don't tell me.

Are you **ambitious**? Would you **risk** everything in order to **achieve** your ambitions? What would you be willing to do to open **doors** for yourself?

Don't tell me.

What about **love**? You want to be loved, don't you?

Would you **do anything** for love? What would you **give up**?

What about **sex**?

Don't tell me.

What about **friendship**? How far would you go for your friends? What would you **sacrifice**? Would you **lie** to **protect** them? Would you keep **secrets**?
Don't tell me.

(Enter ENSEMBLE.)

HOST. Take a chance. Look around. Any of these words fit into your dreams, your plans? Do you recognize anybody? Yourself? Don't tell me. I don't wanna know. Take a chance. The hell with the consequence.

THE PLAY

(ENSEMBLE forms.)

ENSEMBLE. Welcome to our time, the millennium prime,
Unravel the crime, see what you find, knock three times.
(Three loud knocks.) See who answers.

(STILL IMAGE: THE HOST framed in the doorway.)

HOST. What do you want? What do you need? Your heart's desire. Your hottest fire. Wanna conspire?

ENSEMBLE.

If only I had a car.
If only I could be free.
If only I had the look.
If only I had money.
If only I had respect.
If only I was thin.

If only I was buff.
If only I was smart.
If only I was strong.
If only I was beautiful.
If only I was cool.
Then I'd set the rules.

HOST. If you were set free. To do what you please? Who would you be?

ENSEMBLE.

Somebody.
Somebody with a car,
A boyfriend.
A girlfriend.
A family.
Anybody.
Anybody thin.
Buff.
Smart.
Respected.
Beautiful.
Cool.
Someone else.
Somebody with a life.

SARAH & OWEN. Anybody but me.

(SOUND EFFECT. STILL IMAGE: SARAH and OWEN kickboxing.)

HOST (*pointing*). Sarah and Owen.

(They kickbox, then disengage, laughing.)

SARAH. Where is he?

OWEN. What time was he supposed to be here?

SARAH. I don't know. He said he'd be here around eight.

OWEN. It's nearly ten.

SARAH. I hope he's all right.

OWEN. Probably out with his groupies.

SARAH. Shut up, Owen.

OWEN. He pisses me off. Always making you wait around for him. And then he never takes you anywhere. Like he doesn't have the money.

SARAH. That's not true.

OWEN. Wake up, Sarah. He's using you.

SARAH. He loves me, Owen.

OWEN. He's got a funny way of showing it.

SARAH. You're jealous, that's all.

OWEN. At least I'm not an asshole.

SARAH. Hey. If you're gonna talk trash about Sean I'm outa here.

OWEN. Okay. See ya. *(OWEN grabs SARAH's hat.)*

SARAH. Owen.

OWEN. What? *(He puts the hat on.)*

SARAH. You look stupid. *(She tries to grab her hat. OWEN holds it out of reach.)* Give it to me.

OWEN. I like this hat. Think I'll keep it.

SARAH. Give it back.

OWEN. Nope. I'm having a bad hair day.

SARAH. Give it back, crackhead.

OWEN. Did you call me a crackhead?

SARAH. Yeah. Wanna take it outside?

OWEN. You gonna take me on?

SARAH. Don't go there if you don't wanna get hurt.

OWEN. Should I run now?

SARAH. You better. *(He runs. She chases. Tackles him.*

SARAH puts the hat on.)

OWEN. Looks better on you anyway.

SARAH. You got that right.

OWEN *(plays cameraman)*. Extreme closeup.

SARAH. Owen.

OWEN. Zoom in.

SARAH. Stop it.

OWEN *(closer and closer)*. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Beautiful.

SARAH. What am I gonna do with you?

OWEN. Kiss me?

SARAH. You're so...I don't know...you make me laugh.

OWEN. Oh, thanks.

SARAH. You know what I mean. *(She hugs him. He holds her.)*

OWEN. What do you mean?

SARAH. It's like I've known you forever.

OWEN. We were lovers in a past life.

SARAH. You always make me feel safe.

OWEN. I'll keep you safe.

SARAH. I wish.

OWEN. I could if you'd listen to me.

SARAH. Not that again. I made the deadline, didn't I?

OWEN. Yeah. To one school.

SARAH. I know I screwed up, okay? There's nothing I can do about it now. I called the admissions office.

OWEN. What'd they say?

SARAH. Don't call again. *(Pause.)* Where is he?

OWEN. Dump Sean and hook up with me.

SARAH. Me and Sean are a long-term investment, so you better get used to it.

OWEN. ...and he'll be here any minute.

SARAH. I'm really gonna give it to him this time.

OWEN. Right. Like last time. And the time before that.

(SOUND EFFECT. ENSEMBLE forms.)

ENSEMBLE.

Voices in your head, need to be fed. Credited, don't be no mean spirited.

Want it now, don't know how?

Yes, you do, listen to yourself, fool.

Go for the cool. Be the lord of misrule.

Consequences? Let down your defenses, have it now.

HOST. I know you.

ENSEMBLE. You know me. I'm locked inside.

HOST. Give me the key.

ENSEMBLE. Set yourself free.

HOST. I'll be your guide, that's no lie. Wanna fly?

(SOUND EFFECT. STILL IMAGE: SARAH alone in her bedroom.)

HOST *(pointing)*. Sarah's world.

ENSEMBLE. Her side of the bedroom. The other side occupied by two younger sisters. Small and dark, but it's hers. A place to hide. From everyone. To go inside. Anyone. She can plan. She can decide. But is she safe in this place?

(THE HOST gives SARAH a letter. She holds it for a moment, then opens it, reacts, tears the letter up, throws it.)

HOST. Uh-oh. Dead ended.

ENSEMBLE. Disappointed. Disenchanted.

HOST. Didn't get that scholarship you wanted. No money to go away. Now what? Junior college? Work? Live at home?

(SOUND EFFECT. STILL IMAGE: SARAH'S FAMILY. SOUNDSCAPE: Banging, kiddie music, doors slamming, children yelling and crying throughout next sequence.)

ENSEMBLE AS SARAH'S FAMILY. Sarah. Sarah. Sarah. Sarah. There's no milk. I want juice. She hit me. I hate you. I'm hungry. Shut up.

HOST AS SARAH'S MOTHER. Sarah! Damn it! Sarah!

SARAH. What!

HOST AS SARAH'S MOTHER. Where's my slippers? I can't find my slippers.

SARAH. They're under the sofa.

HOST AS SARAH'S MOTHER. I can never find anything around here.

HOST. Three o'clock in the afternoon. Mom's already sloshed.

ENSEMBLE. Move over. Get away. I can't see the TV. You're in the way. Come here. Sarah!

SARAH. Leave me alone! I can't stand it here!

HOST. I know you.

ENSEMBLE. You know me. Open the door.

HOST. Give me the key.

ENSEMBLE. I'm locked inside, where you hide.

HOST. Listen to me.

ENSEMBLE. Set yourself free.

(SOUND EFFECT. STILL IMAGE: SARAH watches SEAN enter.)

HOST *(pointing)*. Sarah and Sean.

SARAH. Sean! Meet you at Coco's tonight?

SEAN. No. Got to study.

SARAH. On a Friday night? Want some help?

SEAN. Not that kind. I better not.

SARAH. What's the matter?

SEAN. Some of us actually have to study. Just because it comes easy for you.

SARAH. Just forget it.

SEAN. God, I'm sorry, Sarah. I heard about your scholarship.

SARAH. Yeah. Well.

SEAN. What happened?

SARAH. I didn't get it. End of story.

SEAN. What are you gonna do?

SARAH. Marry a rich doctor, I guess. *(She laughs. No response from SEAN.)*

SEAN. Don't you care?

SARAH. Of course I care. But I want to be with you anyway. Like we talked about. You and me. Forever.

SEAN. Yeah, sure.

SARAH. Tell you what. I'll come over around nine-thirty. That gives you time to study and then I'll distract you.

SEAN. You know what a pain my parents are about girls in my room.

SARAH. That never stopped us before. *(Pause.)* Oh, I get it. It's just one girl your parents don't want in your room. Is that it?

SEAN. They think we're getting too serious.

SARAH. Are we?

SEAN. Probably.

SARAH. Good.

SEAN. Sarah, don't. Not here.

SARAH. Let's cut. I want to be with you right now.

SEAN. You're crazy.

SARAH. I know.

SEAN. I can't leave school. I'll get in trouble.

SARAH. You never get in trouble. Come on.

SEAN. You're a bad influence.

SARAH. And you love it.

HOST. Thought she was set. Thought she was loved. Thought she was safe...at last. Overconfident. Of his love's development.

ENSEMBLE. Sean.

(SOUND EFFECT. STILL IMAGE: SARAH and SEAN. SARAH goes to him. He rejects her. She is persistent. He pushes her away.)

ENSEMBLE *(cont'd)*. Sean withdrawn. All her plans gone wrong. What a change he's undergone. She's taken aback. There's a crack in her armor.

HOST. Could it be worse?

ENSEMBLE. Pay attention to the verse. Her future in the trash, not enough cash for the transaction. Her world upside down, head turned around.

HOST. Beloved Sean, all gone. What'll she do? I have a clue. In fact a few.

ENSEMBLE. A visit, don't miss it, what is it? Watch this.

(SOUND EFFECT. STILL IMAGE: SARAH and JULIE in SARAH's room.)

HOST *(pointing)*. Sarah and Julie.

JULIE. Sarah, please stop crying. I hate it when you cry. Besides, it won't do any good.

SARAH. What am I gonna do?

JULIE. I don't know.

SARAH. He won't talk to me. He won't even look at me. Today when he saw me in the hall, he walked to class the opposite way. It's his parents. I know it.

JULIE. You think they told him he can't see you anymore?

SARAH. Those snobs. Think they're better than everyone else.

JULIE. They are. With all their money.

SARAH. If I was rich they'd like me.

JULIE. Yeah. I wish I was rich.

SARAH. I could be like them. Talk like they do. Go to those fund-raising dinners. Buy my clothes in designer shops.

JULIE. Forget it, Sarah, we'll never be like that.

SARAH. You can lie down and die if you want to but not me. I'm not spending my life shopping at discount stores, counting every penny, drinking beer every night until I don't care anymore. Waiting for a chance that never comes.

HOST. Did you say chance that never comes?

JULIE. You're not your mom, Sarah.

End of excerpt. After-Play Interactive Forum

AFTER-PLAY INTERACTIVE FORUM

*At the end of the play the curtain call is held until the end of the forum. Instead, the audience is greeted by the facilitator, who introduces himself and invites the audience to participate in the forum.**

Part I - Agree and Disagree Statements

Facilitator: I'd like to read you a series of statements about the events we've just seen. If you agree with the statement, stand in support. If you disagree, stay seated in protest. There's no right or wrong, just your opinions.

(Facilitator responds to the audience with "thank you" or "looks like an equal split on that one" or other neutral comments, then asks the audience to sit before offering the next statement.)

1. Owen was an innocent victim in Sarah's scheme.
2. Sometimes it is right to lie, even to a friend.
3. Julie and Tommy played no part in what happened to Sarah and Owen.
4. It is Sean's own fault that his father controls his life.
5. Money is the key to achieving your dreams.
6. Julie is being a good friend to Sarah when she lies to Owen.
7. Tommy assisted Owen in taking advantage of Sarah in a weak moment.
8. Owen made a good decision to stay with Sarah and the baby.

Part II - Box of Blame

Facilitator: Now I'd like to ask the group to join us.

(The actors enter, still in role as the characters in the play, and stand in a group at center facing the audience.)

Facilitator: Let's remind everyone who you are.

(Actors state their character names.)

Facilitator *(to the audience):* Now, I'm curious to know how you feel about Julie's decision to keep Sarah's secret from Owen. We know that Julie made the choice, but there might have been others who contributed to that decision. We want you to think of this space in the center as the participation box, the box of involvement. Let's assume that everyone somehow contributed to Julie's decision, so everyone begins inside the box.

(Facilitator moves the characters inside the "box of blame" drawn on the stage.)

Facilitator: If you think that someone up here did *not* play a part in Julie's decision, tell us who and why.

(Facilitator moves anyone the audience believes was not involved, out of the box of blame.)

Facilitator: Do you all agree? You can argue them back into the box if you think they were involved.

(The group moves at the prompting of audience members who argue them in and out of the box. Facilitator reiterates that it is okay to disagree and repeats comments so that everyone can hear.)

Two other actions in the play may be explored, with the facilitator leading the audience as they move the characters in and out of the “box of blame.”

Facilitator: Sarah seduced Owen to get Sean back. Who wasn’t involved in this decision, and why?

Facilitator: Owen chose to stay with Sarah and the baby. Who wasn’t involved in this decision, and why?

Facilitator: Thank you so much for those ideas. I know there’s more to say but I’m going to give you another chance.

Part III - The Future

(Facilitator asks actors to sit around the stage.)

Facilitator: Now let’s think about the future. What do you think will happen to these people? Where do you think they’ll be and what will they be doing? I’d like to know what you think. I’m looking for a sentence or a phrase, so that everyone who wants to speak can have a turn. If you have an idea to share, stand and take turns telling us. I won’t even call on you, just go ahead when you’re ready.

(Audience members stand, waiting their turn to offer ideas about the future of the characters. The facilitator

steps back, allowing the audience to negotiate this section themselves.)

Facilitator: Thank you for those thoughts and ideas. I'd like to encourage you to continue this dialogue...

(One character interrupts, wants to speak. The character responds to an idea that has been offered from the audience. A different character is chosen prior to each performance. It is crucial that these responses not be didactic in nature but relate directly to that character's emotional response to what the audience has offered. Each character has several responses ready to share and chooses one in the moment, according to the preceding dialogue.)

Facilitator: Thank you. I'd like to encourage you to continue this discussion with your friends, family and professionals. When we share differing points of view we are all richer for the experience. And please, keep yourself safe. Give yourselves and the cast of *The Tangled Web* a big hand.

(Applause. The actors and facilitator shed their roles, take their curtain call, then exit.)

END OF FORUM

*For the purposes of this document, the pronoun "he" is used, but the facilitator may be any gender. In the premier production, the actor who played the Host facilitated the forum.