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Dramatic Publishing



WHY DO WE LAUGH ?

A One-Act Play

By

STEPHEN GREGG



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY



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(WHY DO WE LAUGH?)

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WHY DO WE LAUGH?
A One-Act Play
for Four Men and Four Women

C H A R A C T E R S

ANDREW POWERS, age five
MEREDITH WILFRED, age six

ANDREW POWERS, age fifteen
MEREDITH WILFRED, age sixteen

ANDREW POWERS, age forty-four
MEREDITH POWERS, age forty-five

ANDREW POWERS, age sixty-six
MEREDITH POWERS, age sixty-seven

TIME: The Past and The Present
PLACE: Sometimes In Memory, Sometimes Not

PRODUCTION NOTES

A prop list follows although every prop can be pantomimed in order to simplify the production and add to the dream-like quality. Costumes may all be current or may be adjusted to account for the time period occupied by each of the younger couples.

Andrew, age five, and Meredith, age six:

Assorted toys.
Two crank telephones.

Andrew, age fifteen, and Meredith, age sixteen:

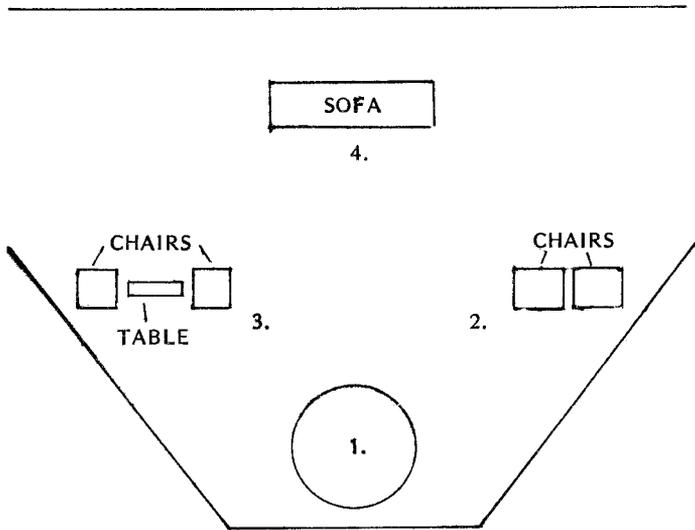
One nondigital wristwatch.
Schoolbooks.
Two telephones.

Andrew, age forty-four, and Meredith, age forty-five:

Two notebook/diaries and pens.

Andrew, sixty-six, and Meredith, age sixty-seven:

One photo album.
Magazines.
Knitting needles and yarn.



AREA 1 – represents a sandbox or playroom. The actors should be on the floor.

AREA 2 – is occupied by the teenagers. By moving the chairs the Scene may be shifted from two separate houses to a classroom.

AREA 3 – is occupied by the forty-four/forty-five-year-olds. A small table between the two chairs indicates a separation not present in the other couples' areas.

AREA 4 – is occupied by the oldest couple. They sit in a large sofa.

STAGE CHART

WHY DO WE LAUGH?

Production of this show may be as elaborate or as simple as desired. The four acting areas may be delineated with lights, platforms, clusters of furniture, or any combination thereof. The areas may be connected in some manner to indicate that the pairs are "joined to" each other. If the four areas are formed with lighting, the lights should be brightest on the area of focus and should only be dimmed, rather than extinguished completely, on the other areas. Only at the end do the lights go out.

All characters act independently of those characters in the other areas. Only during Andrew's memory sequences, at age sixty-six, do the characters interact. They should never leave the stage, but continue acting in their areas with simple actions such as reading, writing, knitting, etc., which will not distract the audience when they are not the center of attention.

SCENE: The lights come up on MEREDITH, age six, and ANDREW, age five, playing house.

MEREDITH: Then you come home and say, "What's for dinner?" and I say, "Dinner? I thought you were taking me out to

dinner,” and then we both laugh.

ANDREW: Why do we laugh?

MEREDITH: Because we just do. Then I say, “We’re having steak and carrots and potatoes and iced tea and . . .”

ANDREW: But why do we laugh?

MEREDITH: Just because. Now I’ll be cleaning and you go out and come in. (She mimes cleaning. ANDREW walks away a few steps, then turns back and rejoins her. In a stage whisper.) Dinner. (Then louder.) Dinner!

ANDREW (pausing, then smiling): Dinner? I thought you were taking me out to dinner.

MEREDITH: Andrew! (The lights dim.)

(The lights come up on MEREDITH, age sixteen, and ANDREW, age fifteen. MEREDITH is calling ANDREW on the phone.)

ANDREW: Hello?

MEREDITH: Hello. Is Andy there?

ANDREW: This is Andy.

MEREDITH: Andy, this is Meredith.

ANDREW (nervously): Oh, hi, Meredith.

MEREDITH: Hi. I’m calling about this letter you sent me.

ANDREW: Oh, the letter. It’s a poem.

MEREDITH: Well, that’s what I thought, but I can’t read most of it. Your handwriting is terrible. Anyway, why did you send me a poem?

ANDREW: Well . . . it’s an English assignment and I was wondering if you could correct it for spelling and grammar and things like that?

MEREDITH: I would if I could read it. Do you think you could make me another copy?

ANDREW: No, that's all right. I have it memorized. You can follow along on your copy.

MEREDITH: Well, all right.

ANDREW (after a pause): "Dear Meredith." That's not part of the poem. It just says that in the letter. "Dear Meredith, You are the sun in my sunshine,/ The grapes upon the vine./ In fact, that fits you well, my dear/ For your kisses are like wine./ You work real hard which —"

MEREDITH: Wait. You missed a line.

ANDREW: What?

MEREDITH: You missed a line. Off in the margin here it says . . . (She reads with difficulty.) . . . "I think, ha, ha! Your kisses are like wine I think, ha, ha!"

ANDREW: Oh, well . . . that's not part of the poem. That's just kind of a joke so you wouldn't be too bored reading it.

MEREDITH: Oh, sorry! Go ahead.

ANDREW: "You work real hard which I admire,/ Yet through it all you don't perspire,/ You —"

MEREDITH: Two mistakes here. Perspire is spelled p-e-r-s-p-i-r-e instead of p-i-r-s, and also you used the wrong kind of through. It should be t-h-r-o-u-g-h instead of t-h-r-e-w. I used to do that all the time. Go ahead.

ANDREW (to himself): "Through it all you don't perspire." (To MEREDITH.) "Your hair stays straight, your smile sweet./ By gosh, I think you're really neat." (He is more nervous than before.) "You're good at everything you do,/ Riding bikes and skating, too./ Knitting clothes and cooking rice —"

MEREDITH: Wait. (ANDREW grimaces.) There's something else off to the side here.

ANDREW: Oh, that's not important!

MEREDITH: Wait a minute. I want to read this. It says . . . (She reads with great difficulty.) . . . “And maybe same” . . . no . . . “and maybe *someday* people will be . . . throwing . . . rice at . . . will be throwing rice at us, ha, ha.” Andy?

ANDREW: Meredith, I have to go. It’s dinner time. Uh . . . “Knitting clothes and cooking rice,/ By gosh, I think you’re really, really nice.” Goodbye, Meredith.

MEREDITH: ‘Bye, Andy. (The lights dim.)

(The lights come up on MEREDITH, ages sixty-seven and sixteen, and ANDREW, age sixty-six. *All dates given in the following scene should be adjusted according to the date of play production.*)

MEREDITH, sixty-seven: Well, I just don’t like the idea. After all . . .

ANDREW, sixty-six: Meredith, I’m sixty-six years old. It’s not too early to be thinking of these things.

MEREDITH, sixty-seven: Any time is too early.

ANDREW, sixty-six: I’m saving someone else, maybe even you, the trouble. I do know my own life best. Will you listen to it, please? (MEREDITH, sixty-seven, nods, subdued. He reads.) “Andrew G. Powers, a life-long resident of Fieldsbury, Massachusetts, died yesterday, the blank of blank. Born November sixteenth, nineteen-fourteen, Mr. Powers was a healthy baby and most always very happy. He continued to be that way throughout most of his life. He attended Larrabee gra . . . (The lights come up on ANDREW, age five.)

MEREDITH, sixty-seven: Two T’s in attended. (ANDREW, sixty-six, looks at the paper and corrects his error. She remains pensive.)

ANDREW, sixty-six. "He attended Larrabee Grammar School and then went to Folk River Junior High School where he played baseball and hockey. (The lights come up on ANDREW, age fifteen.) At Fieldsbury High School, he studied hard and received good grades . . ." (To MEREDITH, sixty-seven.) Almost good grades. (He reads again.) ". . . while being active in baseball, basketball and drama. In nineteen thirty-eight, he married his longtime sweetheart, Meredith Wilfred, also from Fieldsbury. She bore him one son."

MEREDITH, sixty-seven, (interrupting): Bore.

ANDREW, sixty-six: What?

MEREDITH, sixty-seven: She bore him one son.

ANDREW, sixty-six: Oh. She bore him one son, Phillip, born on September twelfth, nineteen forty-one. During the period from nineteen thirty-seven . . . (The lights come up on ANDREW, age forty-four.) . . . to nineteen seventy-seven, Mr. Powers owned and operated an appliance store. He retired in order to spend more time with his wife, whose health at that time was not good. She recovered nicely and they were very happy up until his death yesterday, the blank of blank. Funeral services will be taken care of by blank mortuary. (He looks at MEREDITH, sixty-seven, and finds her staring at the floor.) Penny for your thoughts, dear. (The lights dim on ALL except MEREDITH, sixteen. ANDREW, sixty-six, freezes and MEREDITH, sixty-seven, stays seated and nods her head as MEREDITH, sixteen, speaks.)

MEREDITH, sixteen, (speaking on the telephone): Hello? Is Margaret there? (She pauses, then speaks excitedly.) Hi, Maggie! I had to call and tell you, but if I say it on this party line, the whole town will know by tomorrow. You know blank? No, not the one we talked about yesterday, the other one. The one that wore the different color socks today. He asked me to the . . . to what's coming up at school next week.

You know, the blank. (A long pause.) Since I was four or five. Our mothers are really good friends. I was awfully excited, but I tried not to show it and he was nervous and couldn't hide it. Not only that, but he had an attack of asthma right in the middle of it and had to go lie down after he asked me. It was really painful. I had to pretend like I didn't know what he was talking about, so I said, "Dance? What dance?" Oops! Well, they still don't know who it is. Anyway, I said, "Dance? What dance?" and then he wheezed a little and said . . . (She wheezes hard.) . . . "The dance next week." Then I said, "No, I'm not going to it. Why do you ask?" And then his asthma got worse. He might have faked that, I'm not sure. The rest of the asthma was real, though. I've seen it before and he's not that good an actor. And after about a minute he said . . . (She wheezes.) . . . "Do you want to go with me?" and then he held up his hand to say I'll talk to you later and left. He didn't even wait for an answer. (A pause.) Of course I'm going to say yes. I like Andy . . . I mean blank . . . Oh, no! (A pause.) I guess it doesn't matter. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Maggie. Right now I have to go tell my mother. (A pause.) Thanks, I'll need it. (A pause.) 'Bye. (The lights dim.)

(The lights come up on MEREDITH, age forty-five, and ANDREW, age forty-four. They are seated, staring into space.)

MEREDITH, forty-five: All right. I give in.

ANDREW, forty-four: That's it? You quit? I win?

MEREDITH, forty-five: Yes.

ANDREW, forty-four: I'm glad. Do you understand why?

MEREDITH, forty-five: Yes. I guess I just went a little crazy when I saw that black man fighting with Eddie Caldwell. I

just assumed it was the black man's fault, and then even when I found out the truth, and the policemen came, I just had to take Eddie's side. And when you defended the black man, I . . . well, I'm your wife. I was so humiliated, arguing with my own husband in front of all those people. (A pause.) But you were right. It's just that ever since we were young, we . . . well, you remember we had one black man live in town for a while when we were little.

ANDREW, forty-four: I remember.

MEREDITH, forty-five: His name was . . . well, I don't remember, but he was short and skinny and stooped over and we weren't supposed to go too near him. Whenever we saw him, you cried and cried. You were scared of him.

ANDREW, forty-four: No, I wasn't.

MEREDITH, forty-five: You weren't?

ANDREW, forty-four: No.

MEREDITH, forty-five: Then why did you cry?

ANDREW, forty-four: Because everyone else laughed. (MEREDITH, forty-five, looks at him strangely.) Don't you remember? Everyone, especially the adults, always made jokes about him, but he just smiled and you knew it was fake and . . . I never knew which was worse, the jokes to his face or the ones behind his back. But that's in the past. And so is this afternoon. (MEREDITH, forty-five, nods. He reflects.) We've been married twenty years and I've never won an argument with you before.

MEREDITH, forty-five: You've never been right before.

ANDREW, forty-four: Never?

MEREDITH, forty-five: Well, maybe once . . . (The lights come up on MEREDITH, six, and ANDREW, five.) . . . or twice. (The lights come up on MEREDITH, sixteen, and ANDREW, fifteen. They sit with their chairs facing straight out toward the audience and reach out to take imaginary

tests from an imaginary teacher.)

ANDREW, fifteen: Thank you, ma'am.

MEREDITH, sixteen: Thank you. (She and ANDREW, fifteen, begin their tests. MEREDITH becomes nervous. She glances over at Andrew's test. He notices her and covers his test with his arm. She looks at the "teacher" and then leans over and nudges Andrew's arm. He looks at her angrily and turns in his chair to help cover his paper. She strains to look over his arm. At that moment, MEREDITH, sixty-seven, says the word "Andrew" loudly in the darkness. MEREDITH, sixteen, and ANDREW, fifteen, look at the "teacher" and freeze.)

MEREDITH, six, (speaking into an obviously fake wooden telephone): Hello, I want to speak to the President. (A pause.) Mr. Wilson? This is your favorite niece, Meredith Wilfred from Fieldsbury, Massachusetts. I just called to tell you that you are really doing a good job even though you are sick and I hope you get better soon. But still there are some things I need to tell you. Can I come to your house on Tuesday? Good. (ANDREW, five, tugs on her arm.) Oh . . . and can I bring my friend Andrew? He doesn't live here, but he comes to play. You can send him home if you don't like him. 'Bye. (She hangs up, then speaks to ANDREW, five.) See, I told you so. (ANDREW, five, stands awed.)

ANDREW, five: Now can we play a game?

MEREDITH, six: No. The President said no.

ANDREW, five: Meredith, why does your nose wrinkle when you say no?

MEREDITH, six: Be quiet.

ANDREW, five, (leaning close to MEREDITH, six, and peering at her nose): But why?

MEREDITH, six: Be quiet. Let's say that whenever you say a word, I get to hit you.

ANDREW, five: No.