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Primrose Way

A Play in One Act

Ron Nicol

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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www.SamuelFrench.com
www.SamuelFrench-London.co.uk

FOR PRODUCTION ENQUIRIES

UNITED STATES AND CANADA

Info@SamuelFrench.com
1-866-598-8449

UNITED KINGDOM AND EUROPE

Theatre@SamuelFrench-London.co.uk
020-7255-4302

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CHARACTERS

Primrose, aged 60-70

Mother, middle age

Young Primrose, aged 11-20

Father (non-speaking)

The action takes place in three acting areas

Time—the present and the past

Mother not only represents herself but delights in playing a number of other characters who drift through Primrose's recollections during the play. The brief scene with Primrose's father can be played with an empty armchair if preferred.

For Norma and Alison

Also by Ron Nicol, published by Samuel French

The Snow Queen

PRIMROSE WAY

There are three acting areas. DR is a folding camp-chair and a battered shopping trolley filled with Primrose's treasures. DL a theatre dressing-room is suggested: a make-up mirror with lights around it, a dressing-table with make-up spread out, a script, photographs and cards; costumes on a wheeled clothes-hanger. UC there's an armchair, a couple of upright chairs, a small circular table, and a small settee facing upstage

There is a street atmosphere in the background: sounds of passing traffic, footsteps and conversations from theatre-going crowds, etc.

A pool of light comes up on Primrose sitting in the folding chair. She's of indeterminate age; it's difficult to tell because life's been hard and she seems much older than her years. She picks up a cigarette end from the floor, examines it, and places it carefully behind her ear. She takes off one of her boots, rearranges the newspaper inside it, and puts it on again. She sniffs, daintily picks her nose, examines what she's found, tries to flick it away, fails, and fastidiously wipes it on her blanket. She looks up

Primrose What're you staring at? Never seen anybody down on their luck before? Can't leave a body in peace? Bugger off! Go on! You don't watch out I'll tell you my life story. Oh yes, I will. Go on then, dare me. The story of Primrose Way. What'll you give me for the story of my life? What's it worth? "Not a lot." I can hear you. "Not a lot" you're saying. Don't blame you. Not much to look at, is it? Old dearie in a blanket. But the things I could tell you, my loves. If I wanted, that is. A tale or

two. But I won't. Don't feel like it. (*She sniffs*) Smells a bit, this blanket. (*She sniffs*) Couldn't be me, could it?

The street background begins to fade as she rises and removes the blanket. She's wearing a man's ragged overcoat and a collection of old sweaters and cardigans. She carefully folds her blanket, smoothing out all the creases, then suddenly hurls it into the trolley. If this prompts an audience reaction, Primrose could bow solemnly in acknowledgement. She stares out into the audience, picking out one or two people for closer scrutiny

Seen better audiences in my day. You can laugh. I don't mind. I've got used to it. Plenty of people laugh. They've always laughed at me. Way back. Long ago. Can't remember how long. Oh yes, you'd be surprised. They used to pay. Pay to have me make them laugh. I was a star once. (*To an unseen person off, coarsely*) Hey! What you staring at? I'm not talking to you! Bugger off!

The background noise has faded away

(*Turning to the audience, suddenly genteel*) Sorry about that, my loves. Slip of the tongue. I never swear, you see. Not usually. Mother was against it. "Wash your mouth out with soap, Primrose!" she'd say ..

Mother enters

A pool of light comes up c on Mother

Mother Wash your mouth out with soap! Yes, it's you I'm talking to, Primrose! I won't have swearing in this house! Wash your mouth out! (*She takes a mirror from her bag and checks her make-up*)

Primrose I was just a child and you know the things children say. Nothing nasty. Not really nasty. They don't really understand what they're saying anyway. You know. Bum. Bloody. That sort of thing. Oh yes, bugger. That was probably the worst. None

of these “F” and “C” words. Oh no. My words always began with B. It was fun saying them out loud. All those “B’s”. Like doing voice exercises ...

Young Primrose enters L and crosses to Mother

Young Primrose Buh — buh — buh! Bah — bah — bah! Boo — boo — boo! Bee — bee — bee!

Mother Articulate, Primrose! Use your *lips*. Let that sound *explode*.

Young Primrose Buh — buh — buh!

Primrose takes the cigarette end from behind her ear and holds it as if in a holder

Young Primrose } (together) Buh — buh — buh! Bum! Bloody! Bugger!
Primrose

Mother Primrose! Wash your mouth out! I won’t put up with language like that, I’m telling you. I don’t approve. No, I bloody well don’t! And what’s that?

Each Primrose puts her hand behind her back

Young Primrose } (together) Nothing.
Primrose

Mother In your hand. Behind your back! A bloody ciggie? Are you smoking a cigarette, Primrose?

Primrose Only tried it once and she caught me. Just my luck.

Primrose tosses the dog-end away, as does Young Primrose at the same moment

I tried it, you know, like you do. Saw the packet lying there with the end of a ciggie sticking out. Temptation. Thought I’d try one. Just a bit of devilment. There I was. Coughing. Spluttering. Spitting. Couldn’t get rid of the taste. Put me off it for life.

Young Primrose What's wrong? I'm a teenager, aren't I?

Mother Teenager my foot!

Young Primrose Nearly a teenager.

Mother Nowhere near.

Young Primrose A very young teenager?

Mother You're eleven years old, Primrose. Eleven years old!

Young Primrose It was awful. Made me sick.

Mother I should think so! Nasty disgusting habit, Primrose.
Bloody awful smell. Wash your mouth out with soap!

Primrose Obviously didn't know the difference between smoking and swearing, my mother. One was as bad as the other. "Wash your mouth out!" she'd say. Funny thing though — she was an awful one for smoking.

Young Primrose You smoke like a train, but I'm not allowed.

Young Primrose sticks out her tongue at Mother and turns her back

Mother Filthy habit! No child of mine's going to smoke. Stinks the place out. Nobody wants to kiss a gel who smokes. Had this leading man once. In rep. Never stopped. Smoking, I mean. Well, the other thing as well, but he never stopped bloody smoking. Smoked at rehearsal, in the dressing-room, in the wings. Never mind the no-smoking rule. Got an ASM to hold his fag while he was on. Well, we had this romantic scene. He had to kiss me, Primrose. Very romantic you'd've thought, but no. Like kissing a bloody ashtray! I was furious. Absolutely furious. Had to wash my mouth out, Primrose. *(She takes a whisky miniature from her bag and drinks)*

Primrose No soap for her — neat whisky, it was. Straight out of the bottle.

Mother My dear! Had his tongue halfway down my throat! Nearly choked me! Like kissing a bloody ashtray!

Primrose Bet he was saying the same about her. I never smoked again. Spoils your sense of taste. Spoils your clothes. Ruins your skin. I never smoke. What? Just now, my loves? Picked what up? You must be mistaken. I never smoke. Except when

a part calls for it, of course. Mind you, it's all no-smoking now, so it doesn't matter, does it?

Mother Like kissing a bloody ashtray!

Primrose Mother swore like a trooper. Never stopped. Every sentence sprinkled with B's. The "F" word. Oh yes, she used that a lot. The odd "C" even.

Young Primrose You won't let me swear at all.

Mother You shouldn't swear, Primrose. It's not lady-like.

Young Primrose You do.

Mother I'm not a lady though, am I? I'm a bloody *actress*.

The light c fades

Primrose I decided to become an actress because of that. How's that for ambition? Wanting to be an actress so I could swear. Course, it's all swearing now, isn't it? Stage. Television. Pictures. Not that I go a lot, you know. To the pictures, I mean. Do they still call it that? Films now, isn't it? Movies? You used to get in for nothing with an Equity card, you know, but mine's expired ...

The light c is brought up

Mother Remember that newspaper lady asked you why you went into the theatre? (*She takes a notebook from her bag and assumes character and voice as the Journalist*) So tell me, why did you become an actress, Miss Way?

Young Primrose So I could swear.

Mother Really?

Primrose Well, I didn't actually say that, but I wanted to. Should've done.

Young Primrose Actually, I'm following in my mother's footsteps.

Mother Oh yes?

Young Primrose I mean, I went into the theatre because of Mother. But now I never swear. Once I could, I didn't want to. Well, the occasional word now and then. When it's really called for.

Mother drops her journalist character

Mother Not very lady-like, Primrose. But then, I'm not a lady — I'm a bloody *actress*.

Young Primrose You're always saying that!

Young Primrose exits in a huff

Mother laughs

Primrose That piercing laugh. I remember that laugh so well. (*She rummages in her trolley*) No, nothing from Mother. Thought I had a photo. Some letters ... (*She rummages some more*) Not a thing. Shouldn't be surprised. She never wrote to me. Not once. Not even a card.

Mother What did you expect? I'll never forgive you for going on the stage. Blighting your life! (*She turns away, takes a mirror and a lipstick from her bag and repairs her make-up*)

Primrose Well, it's done that all right. My life's been well and truly blighted. Bloody well blighted. Blighted. Blasted. Buggered. Obliterated well and truly. And I'm a bum. That's what those Americans say, isn't it? A bum? A bag lady. An old bag. Buh — buh — buh! Bag — bag — bag. Bum — bum — bum. I told her. "I'm only following your example," I said. "Following in mother's footsteps." (*She rises and sings*)

"I'm following in Mother's footsteps,

I'm following my dear old ..."

Oh! Wait. It's Father's footsteps, isn't it?

She sings more confidently with a touch of the old music hall style. There's the distant echoing sound of piano accompaniment under her voice

"I'm following in Father's footsteps,

I'm following my dear old dad.

He's just in front with a fine big gal ..."

Mother Too fond of the fine big gals, that was your father's trouble, Primrose. Too many fine big gals!

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