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Olive and the Bitter Herbs

by Charles Busch

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



**SAMUEL
FRENCH**

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**World Premiere produced in New York City by Primary Stages in
association with Daryl Roth and Bob Boyett. Opening night-
August 16, 2011.**

Olive and the Bitter Herbs was commissioned by Primary Stages.

OLIVE AND THE BITTER HERBS was first produced by Primary Stages - 59E59 Theatre (Andrew Leynse, Artistic Director) in New York City on July 26, 2011. The performance was directed by Mark Brokaw, with sets by Anna Louizos, costumes by Suzy Benzinger, lighting by Mary Louis Geiger, and sound and original music by John Gromada. The production stage manager was William H. Lang. The cast was as follows:

OLIVE	Marcia Jean Kurtz
WENDY	Julie Halston
TREY	Dan Butler
SYLVAN	Richard Masur
ROBERT	David Garrison

CHARACTERS

OLIVE

WENDY

TREY

ROBERT

SYLVAN

PROLOGUE

(Olive's apartment living room in the East Thirties in Manhattan. There is a large decorative mirror on one side of the room and another mirror hanging on an opposite wall over the desk. Two in the morning. The room is dark except for the street lights coming in through the window.)

(OLIVE, a woman in her seventies, enters from the bedroom in her night gown. She crosses the living room and exits into the kitchen. We see the spill from the kitchen light and hear her opening a cabinet. The kitchen light goes off. OLIVE leaves the kitchen holding a box of Ritz crackers. As she returns to her bedroom, her eyes meet her reflection in the large decorative mirror. Something attracts her attention. She squints not sure of what she's seeing. She moves closer to the mirror searching for something beyond her reflection.)

OLIVE. Don't go. Please, don't go. I'm not afraid.

(blackout)

ACT ONE

Scene One

(Four pm. WENDY, an energetic, upbeat woman around fifty, is straightening the spread on the sofa. OLIVE enters in her housedress and slippers. WENDY and OLIVE both speak with New York accents. OLIVE is a feisty curmudgeon. To her, the glass is more than half empty; it's drained. However, she is not full of rage or mean-spirited. Despite or because of her tough, nihilistic point of view, there is something compelling about her. She has earned her living as an actress for many years but there is nothing "actressy" or theatrical about her. At heart, she's still a former bookkeeper from Yonkers.)

OLIVE. I sent you next door to make their lives miserable, not invite them over.

WENDY. They seem like nice people. Cultivate them. What if you have an emergency in the middle of the night?

OLIVE. They're despicable human beings.

WENDY. You've never even spoken to them.

OLIVE. Wendy, you're not in this apartment twenty-four hours a day. You never hear them at their worst. These walls are wafer thin. The opera recordings. The entertaining till nine o'clock at night. The laughter. It's been like a Nazi persecution.

WENDY. We had a lovely chat just now and I found them to be utterly charming.

OLIVE. The smell from their baked cheese should only be permeating *your* walls. They must subsist on a steady diet of eggplant parmigian and potatoes gratin. (*pronounced: "grottin"*)

WENDY. Olive, you're not getting me riled up. You're making me salivate.

(WENDY gathers a pile of newspapers.)

OLIVE. Hey! I haven't done the puzzle yet.

WENDY. I'm putting the papers in a nice neat pile. Just a little sprucing up.

OLIVE. They won't be here long enough to appreciate your sprucing.

WENDY. I thought things would improve when the woman upstairs moved out.

OLIVE. That was an unendurable torture. The stomping around at all hours.

WENDY. And it turned out she was a tiny dwarf.

OLIVE. That little person had thighs like Mike Tyson. In this building I'm dismissed as a chronic complainer, a crank. If I owned this apartment and wasn't the sole surviving renter, believe you me, it would be a whole different ballgame. This morning I was getting the mail and I ran into the President of the co-op board, Carol Kandel. I was calmly telling her about my situation with the monsters next door, whereupon she accused me of character assassination. I told her she was a pretentious, overly botoxed, ageist pig.

WENDY. You didn't.

OLIVE. She fancies herself an interior decorator. What she's done to this lobby is a *shandeh*. A disgrace. This is an apartment house. Not a Tuscan villa. (*She winces in pain.*) Ow.

WENDY. What's wrong?

OLIVE. When I'm in a bad mood, I immediately feel it in my metatarsals.

WENDY. Olive, I made an appointment for you to see my podiatrist, Dr. Parvati Gupta-Kapoor. It's in your date book. Next Monday at one thirty. I'll go with you.

OLIVE. You and your doctors. I should just rent a permanent suite at Beth Israel. Oh, before you leave, fix the cable box again. Off with your head if I miss my NCIS.

(WENDY *instinctively rolls her eyes.*)

OLIVE. I saw that. You rolled your eyes. You're very testy today.

WENDY. Just tired. I was all morning with Doris Blau. Poor thing broke her shoulder. Oh, she's a wonderful actress.

OLIVE. She can't act.

WENDY. She won a Tony Award.

OLIVE. She stinks.

WENDY. You should give her a call. She'd appreciate it.

OLIVE. We no longer speak.

WENDY. You're not speaking to half the membership of Actor's Equity. I've never known anyone with more feuds.

OLIVE. There's something in my body chemistry that provokes people to hurt me. The one time I attended the Cleo Awards, a total stranger came up to me on the red carpet and stole my wiglet. I've never picked a fight with anyone in my entire life.

WENDY. You've never picked a fight?

(WENDY *steps into the tiny kitchen barely offstage. They continue their conversation.*)

OLIVE. Not in my entire life. Now how many times do you want me to repeat that?

(WENDY *reappears with a bottle of Windex and a piece of paper towel.*)

WENDY. There's not a single person on the face of the earth who hasn't started a fight at some point.

OLIVE. I haven't but you're trying to start one right now.

WENDY. I'm just completely flummoxed by that outrageous statement.

(WENDY *starts to spray Windex on one of the mirrors.*)

OLIVE. Well, remain flummoxed. What the hell are you doing to that mirror?

WENDY. Giving it a breast reduction. What do you think I'm doing?

OLIVE. Put that thing down.

WENDY. Didn't Carmen dust this when she was here yesterday? This mirror is my favorite thing in the apartment. I feel as if it's somehow beckoning me. Come closer, Wendy, come closer. The frame is like a proscenium arch and within it I am, for once, the star of my own life.

OLIVE. (*alarmed*) Get away from that mirror! If I want it dusted, I'll dust it myself!

WENDY. All right. All right. You see your attitude? You're combative.

(WENDY returns to the kitchen to put away the Windex.)

OLIVE. You're confusing anger with vocal color; a sign of good theatrical training.

(WENDY comes back.)

WENDY. You know, Olive, I've always assumed you never had any formal acting lessons.

OLIVE. Well, you assumed wrong.

WENDY. Hey, maybe you should teach a course in commercial acting. You were in one of the classic commercials of all time.

OLIVE. That's the most idiotic notion you've come up with yet.

WENDY. I worry about you, Olive. I shouldn't. You're not my relative. You're not my responsibility. But I can't help getting involved. It's important to share your life with others. I feel a genuine sense of failure that I've never known the joy of marriage. I turned down several proposals. They didn't feel right.

OLIVE. We're all alone, kid. Don't fight it.

WENDY. I fight it by keeping busy. (*She points to a small notebook on the desk.*) I filled up that notebook with wonderful suggestions. I bet you've never even opened it. Number four; a Yoga class. A good one. Number five

was certainly worthy of consideration. People tell me you used to be very involved in local Democratic politics.

OLIVE. Never again. The only change I believe in now are four quarters to a dollar.

WENDY. Olive, human beings *are* capable of change. It's essential. When people are static they deteriorate. Now, you've had a series of minor strokes –.

OLIVE. Hold on a minute, sister. I had two and they weren't strokes. They were episodes.

WENDY. Okay. Episodes. And thank God, you're doing marvelously. But taking a Coumadin blood thinner isn't enough. You need to pull yourself out of the mire. Embrace life.

OLIVE. ENOUGH ALL READY! I'm not helping anyone's cockamamie campaign for city council, I'm not gonna teach and I'm not sticking my ass in the air taking yoga for seniors.

(The door bell rings.)

OLIVE. SHUT UP!

WENDY. What do you want me to do?

OLIVE. Let them in if you want. I could care less.

(WENDY opens the door.)

WENDY. Hello! It's been a lifetime! Fifteen minutes! Come in.

(ROBERT and TREY enter. ROBERT is an attractive man around sixty and TREY, a sour pickle, drinking from a beer bottle, is somewhat younger. He's OLIVE's equal in negativity. OLIVE becomes distracted by something she sees in the mirror.)

WENDY. I feel like I'm brokering a Mid-East treaty.

ROBERT. We're both very glad to be making this first step. Aren't we, Trey?

TREY. Greatest fantasy come true.

WENDY. Come in, sit down.

ROBERT. Such a different lay-out than ours.

TREY. No, it's the same. This is what our place would look like if we did nothing to it.

WENDY. I know you've seen each other in the hall but I'd like to officially introduce you to Olive.

ROBERT. I'm Robert and this is Trey.

(OLIVE is still pre-occupied with the reflection in the mirror.)

WENDY. Olive, this is Robert and Trey?

TREY. Is she all right?

OLIVE. *(returning to them)* Yes, she's all right. You're Robert and Trey. I got it.

WENDY. You seemed distracted by something.

OLIVE. So now we're supposed to be all warm and runny like cheddar cheese, your favorite; the smell of which consistently permeates my wall.

WENDY. We really appreciate you coming over like this.

ROBERT. *(almost mesmerized)* What a beautiful mirror? A family heirloom?

TREY. Robert, it's a repro. *(to OLIVE)* Ethan Allen?

OLIVE. *(defensively)* Sears.

TREY. It's just that Robert is extremely knowledgeable about antiques. I mean, the man could be an appraiser for Sotheby's.

ROBERT. There's something very special about it. Wonderful how you can see into the mirror on the opposing wall.

WENDY. How long have you guys lived in the building?

ROBERT. We've *lived* in the building for twelve years –.

OLIVE. What nonsense is that? Irma Sonkin lived next door to me for three decades until her death a year ago.

TREY. If you'd let Robert finish, you would have heard that we've lived on the other side of the building for twelve years but six months ago we moved to this line. A decision we've bitterly rued.

WENDY. Why'd you move? I don't mean to pry.

ROBERT. We had a two bedroom, but since I've retired as an editor and Trey hasn't been working, we've had to tighten our belts.

TREY. Excuse me. You weren't just an editor. Robert Brannigan's perhaps the most influential editor of children's books, ages four to six, in the history of publishing.

ROBERT. Thank you, but that doesn't pertain to why we sold the apartment.

TREY. It pertains to why I'm currently deemed unemployable as an illustrator. Robert and I were considered very much a team. You probably don't know anything about children's literature but we did the Purple Tugboat series.

WENDY. Yes, I do know those books. My nephew was obsessed with Florence, the purple tugboat. Olive, the windows were her eyes and she had the cutest nose made out of rubber tires.

OLIVE. I get the picture.

TREY. When Robert retired, the perception was that I'd also left the business. It's really ugly out there. Children's literature, like the planet Earth, is rapidly headed for obliteration.

ROBERT. We could have moved but we love this neighborhood. I've always felt that there's a beautiful mystery to it.

OLIVE. Kips Bay? It's not uptown, downtown, or midtown. There's no charm or local color. We have a great abundance of dry cleaners.

ROBERT. And I love this building. I was very involved in the lobby renovation. We're now living in a Tuscan villa. Were you friends with Mrs. Sonkin?

OLIVE. Not friends. She was a most disagreeable woman. I was, however, the one who discovered the body.

WENDY. Really? I didn't know that.

OLIVE. She's putting on an act for you. She's heard this story a million times. No one had seen Mrs. Sonkin for quite awhile and then gradually a terrible rotting stench began permeating my wall. Almost as bad as what I've experienced with you. It took two weeks of complaining before the super got around to unlocking her door and we found Mrs. Sonkin. She was propped up in bed, her eyes wide open. She had been dead for over a month and was in an advanced state of decomposition. There were flies and maggots swarming all over the corpse and the bed.

TREY. Thank you. We bought that bed from the estate.

ROBERT. I'm sorry our habitation has caused you such distress.

WENDY. Hear what he's saying, Olive?

TREY. Robert's not apologizing. He's merely stating that the walls in this building are practically made of tissue paper. Consequently, we haven't appreciated each time you've taken your MALLET and banged on the wall.

OLIVE. It wasn't a mallet. It was the end of my plastic swiffer.

TREY. Call it what you will, Missy. It was both violent and unnecessary. You should know that only a few years ago Robert had major heart surgery.

ROBERT. Trey, please.

TREY. The man was on the operating table for seven hours.

ROBERT. You're embarrassing me.

TREY. He's got a zipper scar down his chest like the front of a Dolce and Gabbana knit. So I don't appreciate you disturbing his rest with your crazy lady antics.

OLIVE. I believe you might be the one suffering from a mental disorder. But I'll take the high road and offer you something to drink.

WENDY. This is great. I feel like we're bonding.

TREY. I think we should go.

ROBERT. If we are to be neighbors, then thank you, Olive. I wouldn't object to a glass of water.

TREY. Robert, please. The elderly aren't great at rinsing out their glasses. You can practically see the E Coli prancing.

ROBERT. Wendy says you're an actress.

OLIVE. I earn a living.

WENDY. Olive was the queen of commercials in the eighties and nineties.

ROBERT. Really?

TREY. Jesus, you're the "Gimme the sausage" lady.

ROBERT. Indeed, you are!

WENDY. The close-ups of your face. The perpetual sneer.

ROBERT. They were classics.

OLIVE. My agent negotiated a buy out. I got totally screwed.

ROBERT. Do you have anything currently running?

OLIVE. I had a national spot for a vaginal cream for seniors. It was yanked off the air by the Conservative Right. Ironic considering how often Republican men have contributed to vaginal dryness.

WENDY. Just a few weeks ago, she shot an episode of Manhattan Coroner.

ROBERT. What do you play? Is it a fun part?

OLIVE. A holocaust survivor. I'm playing older than my years.

WENDY. I was with her on the set and saw her scenes on the monitor. She's incredible.

ROBERT. When will it be on?

WENDY. Next week. I can hardly wait.

ROBERT. I gather you two have known each other a very long time.

WENDY. No. We only met like eight months ago. I'm a theatrical company manager. I handle payroll and contracts, etcetera. I was working on a production of *The House of Bernardo Alba* in Montclair, New Jersey. It was connected to the College. Spanish Tragedy! University theatre! Montclair, New Jersey! You've gotta be kidding. I'M MISS BROADWAY! –

OLIVE. You're pushing, dear.

WENDY. Olive was playing the warm, understanding housekeeper.

OLIVE. The director was a Professor at the college. Thought he was the new Stanislavsky. The final straw was when he insisted I bend over the kettle.

TREY. What's so awful about that?

OLIVE. And fart.

WENDY. By mutual agreement Olive left the production before it opened.

OLIVE. That's it. No more theatre for me.

WENDY. Going back and forth from New Jersey, we really hit it off. Not long after, Olive had two very minor episodes. Disorientation. Double Vision. Unsteady gait. She's fully recovered but I got in the habit of checking in on her.

(OLIVE looks towards the mirror over the sofa. She thinks she sees something again.)

ROBERT. At first, I assumed you were a relative. A niece or a cousin.

WENDY. As far as I know, Olive doesn't have any family. Olive, are you all right?

OLIVE. I thought I saw something in the mirror.

WENDY. Was it a bug? I keep telling her she needs screens.

OLIVE. *(hesitantly)* Sometimes, I think I see something in the mirror within the mirror.

ROBERT. There's something very special about that mirror.

WENDY. You see something? What do you see?

OLIVE. A figure moving very quickly. Just a glimpse.

WENDY. You've never mentioned this before.

OLIVE. I don't want to be carted out of here in a strait-jacket.

ROBERT. It might just be a floater. I get them sometimes.

TREY. *(fascinated)* Robert, let her talk.

OLIVE. It's a man. I've never seen his face...

TREY. What can you tell us about him?

OLIVE. He's got a long neck, a cowlick and protruding ears...And I think I love him.

(blackout)

End of Scene

Scene Two

(Late afternoon. WENDY and ROBERT have gone.

OLIVE and TREY are standing in front of the mirror.

TREY's on his third glass of wine. The bottle and an empty clean glass are on the coffee table.)

TREY. *(with great enthusiasm)* I am so totally into this, Olive. The two mirrors. The cowlick. The jug ears! It's fantastic! I had to come back and find out more.

OLIVE. It's kind of a miracle. And something of a responsibility. I'm the guardian of this spirit.

TREY. I'm so honored that you've taken me into your confidence.

OLIVE. Well, it's been hard keeping it to myself.

TREY. It's just so wild that the ghost is in *your* apartment, of all people.

OLIVE. And why shouldn't it be in my apartment? What? I'm not famous enough?

TREY. Because you're – too famous. These paranormal things usually happen to blind women who run curio shops. Are you sure you don't want some wine? This is a great Cabernet.

OLIVE. No, thank you. I should have kept my mouth shut. All I need is the co-op board having more ammunition against me.

TREY. I won't say a word. Have you thought about having your agent contact the SciFi Channel?

OLIVE. NO! Now stop it. You're getting carried away because you're unemployed and bored out of your skull.

TREY. Well, this is the most exciting thing that's happened to me for a very long time.

OLIVE. It didn't happen to you. It happened to me. He's mine and nobody else's

TREY. That's why I want to know more about you. What is it about the sausage lady that brings forth spirits from an astral plane?

OLIVE. You're a little wackadoodle. Would I see him better if I moved that mirror slightly to the right? *(She moves towards the non-decorative mirror.)*

TREY. One can't be literal-minded when dealing with the metaphysical.

OLIVE. His name is Howard.

TREY. You're on a first name basis?

OLIVE. I don't engage in conversation with him. I'm not a nutcase.

TREY. Then how do you know his name is Howard?

OLIVE. I just know.

TREY. Does he have a last name?

OLIVE. Only his first name came into my head.

TREY. He's in the vapor.

OLIVE. *(matching his rhythm)* He's in real estate. Verbalizing makes it sound so ludicrous.

TREY. *(excited)* Hey, I once knew a Howard. He died in a hot tub. Performed in drag on weekends.

OLIVE. My Howard is not a transvestite. I don't like where this conversation is heading. In fact, I hate it.

TREY. So you want me to leave?

OLIVE. Did I say I wanted you to leave? You're so prickly. For the record, don't think I'm in any way homophobic. I'm very gay friendly. It's just that I'm slowly getting a picture of who Howard might be. And I don't want anything to muddy it up. So keep your notions to yourself. You can pour me a little bit of that wine. Just a sip.

(TREY pours some wine into her glass.)

OLIVE. That's too much.

TREY. Look, I'm sure it wasn't the same person. I met this guy years ago in Key West.

OLIVE. Howard lived in Key West.

TREY. How do you know?

OLIVE. I just know.

TREY. And you love him?

OLIVE. Disregard that previous statement.

TREY. Were you ever married?

OLIVE. Uh huh. And divorced for over thirty years. Is all this helping you figure out why I'm the chosen one?

TREY. I'm still filling in the details. Are you friendly with your ex?

OLIVE. No. He married the woman with whom he betrayed me. My husband had a music school in Yonkers. I was the bookkeeper. Among his faculty was a lonely widow, who specialized in the oboe. *(She mimes blowing into the instrument.)* Need I say more?

(The doorbell rings.)

This could be the super.

TREY. Why do you need the super?

OLIVE. A million things. I'm always ignored. At this point, every foot of this joint is Gerry-rigged.

(She opens the door. It's a dignified, ebullient man in his seventies, SYLVAN GUZICK.)

SYLVAN. Mrs. Fisher?

OLIVE. You're not the super.

SYLVAN. No, I'm not the super. Sylvan Guzick. My daughter is the board President, Carol Kandel.

OLIVE. She sent her father? She can't face me herself?

SYLVAN. Are you gonna make me stand in the hall like a Jehovah's Witness?

OLIVE. I'm not sure how I want to handle this situation.

SYLVAN. It's not a situation. Look. I'm coming in. *(He enters the apartment. He immediately sees the decorative mirror and is startled.)* Oy gevalte! That strange old man! Oh, it's a mirror. *(He sees TREY.)* Hello. Sylvan Guzick.

TREY. Trey Chamblay. I live next door.

SYLVAN. Lovely to meet you, Mrs. Fisher. I understand this morning you had a contretemps with my daughter.

OLIVE. Is that what she called it?

SYLVAN. She used stronger language. That's why I'm here.
To apologize for her behavior.

OLIVE. Well, this is a first.

TREY. I adore Carol. She's so chic. Do you two need to be alone? I can go.

SYLVAN. No, please. I won't be long. I don't even live here.
I'm visiting from Buenos Aires.

OLIVE. Buenos Aires?

SYLVAN. I should be from Boca? Buenos Aires is paradise on earth for retirees. Cosmopolitan, welcoming and you can live like a Czar in a two-bedroom condo on a fixed income. As per your problems in this building, I love my daughter Carol. A wonderful girl, but she can be tough. She takes her role as board President very seriously.

OLIVE. She's struts around like Boss Tweed. She makes me feel like a guttersnipe in Buckingham Palace.

SYLVAN. She can be persnickety about her living quarters. You have to understand, her mother died when she was very young and I remarried and was widowed twice afterwards. Her life was full of constant upheaval.

TREY. Wait. You've been widowed three times. That's terrible.

OLIVE. I don't mean to be offensive, but there's something a little creepy about it.

SYLVAN. I'm not a serial killer. I've lost two wives to cancer and my last wife to heart disease only last year. I loved each of them dearly, and all could be deemed volatile. My life today is peaceful to be sure, but I frankly miss the sturm and drang.

OLIVE. Well, don't come sniffing around here. I've no intention of becoming Bluebeard's fourth wife.

SYLVAN. I'll take due note. So what was the *fracas* (*pronounced "fra-ah"*) this morning between you and Carol?

OLIVE. I was simply telling your daughter about my horrible next door neighbors and not only did I receive no sympathy, she was downright abusive.

SYLVAN. (*to TREY*) You live on this floor. Is it dreadful for you too?

TREY. I'm the horrible neighbor.

OLIVE. You see? I'm not the harridan your daughter and the rest of this building paint me as.

TREY. We're calmly discussing the ghost in Olive's mirror.

OLIVE. DAMN IT, TREY!

SYLVAN. You have a ghost?

OLIVE. No, I do not have a ghost. I don't know what the hell he's talking about.

TREY. I'm sorry. I must have misunderstood you.

SYLVAN. If you're interested in ghosts, my daughter Carol has, for quite a few years, organized through her Temple on Thirty-Fifth Street, tours of haunted synagogues in the tri-state area.

TREY. I had no idea. How cool is that?

SYLVAN. I could never go because of my lingerie business, and then I retired with my wife to South America. But now I'm a free agent. Olive, may I call you Olive? We should join Carol the next time around. You could get to know her better.

TREY. Olive, do you belong to that Temple on Thirty-Fifth Street?

OLIVE. What? You assume I'm Jewish?

TREY. You're not?

OLIVE. I come off pushy and aggressive?

TREY. No.

OLIVE. Because I detect a subtle tinge of anti-Semitism.

SYLVAN. It was an innocent question.

OLIVE. Open to interpretation.

TREY. I will not be accused of being prejudiced.

SYLVAN. Carol loves the theatre. She's written several unproduced plays.

OLIVE. Fisher isn't necessarily a Jewish name.

SYLVAN. Perhaps one evening, the three of us could go...

TREY. I know. So Fisher's your maiden name?

OLIVE. No. I retained my husband's name after the divorce.

TREY. What's your maiden name?

OLIVE. (*simply*) Blechman. Olive Blechman.

SYLVAN. That's not Jewish?

OLIVE. This topic is terminated.

TREY. When I was growing up in Indiana, I was best friends with the one Jewish kid in my class. We were the town misfits. Known to all as the cocksucker and the hebe. I loved having Passover at the Rabkins. It was so theatrical. The symbolic dishes. Reading the Haggadah. You know, Passover is coming up this week. Are you gonna do anything?

OLIVE. I haven't observed Passover in years.

SYLVAN. My daughter has a very grand Seder. Catered, rehearsed and with a theme. I'm not looking forward to it.

TREY. Should we have a Seder?

OLIVE. You've gotta be kidding. You've got to make a brisket. It's an enormous undertaking.

TREY. Forget it. I don't know what I was thinking.

SYLVAN. You kids give up easily. You preheat your oven to 350. Salt and pepper the meat, place it in a roasting pan and let it sit for a couple of hours. How difficult can it be?

OLIVE. It's the whole thing. I detest holidays of any kind.

TREY. It's nice giving and receiving presents. When I was working, I must say I enjoyed the tradition of the Secret Santa.

SYLVAN. Oh, the Secret Santa. I forgot all about that. I used to enjoy doing that with the people who worked for me.

OLIVE. The Secret Santa? What kind of sick people are you? The last time I participated in that disgusting ritual was when I was doing an Odets play in Cleveland five years ago. For the first time in my career, I felt a

genuine sense of family with this company. After the final matinee before Christmas, the whole cast and crew gathered in the green room and we exchanged our ten dollar presents. People were getting really nice things; a jar of gourmet roasted peppers, an expensive fashion magazine. I gave the ingénue a lovely box of note cards. My secret Santa was the young man running the lights. I pull off the ribbon, tear off the pretty wrapping paper, open the box, remove the colorful tissue paper, and what do I find but a small, dried dog turd. A canine bowel movement scooped up off the street. (*Reliving the painful betrayal, it builds and builds*) He thought it was funny. The girl playing my daughter doubled over with laughter. The actor playing my son was holding his ribs, he was guffawing so hard. The entire cast. the stage manager, the dressers, the prop crew. All heaving with laughter. I never spoke another word to anyone associated with the production for the rest of the run. So much for Secret Santa. So much for the holiday spirit. So much for stinking humanity.

TREY. Wow. You're Sweeney Todd.

SYLVAN. (*dazzled*) You're wonderful.

(*OLIVE sees something moving in the mirror within the mirror. She appears to be receiving a message. Is Howard somehow suggesting she have a Passover Seder?*)

TREY. Come to think of it, I've never gotten a present I really loved. Most of the time, people give you things just to shut you up. So you'll stop crying. So you'll forgive them. So you won't cause any more trouble.

OLIVE. I'll do Passover.

SYLVAN. Is that an invitation?

OLIVE. (*perplexed*) Yeah...I guess it is.

End of Scene

Scene Three

(A few nights later. In the middle of the room is a linen covered card table with four chairs. ROBERT is setting the table, and speaking to OLIVE, who's in the kitchen.)

ROBERT. This is a very attractive gravy boat. Olive, do you know, in Philadelphia there's a marvelous little shop near Rittenhouse Square that only sells gravy boats? In every conceivable china pattern. Can you hear me?

(ROBERT quickly crosses to the decorative mirror.)

We've only a few seconds. Olive's in the kitchen. Trey's in the bathroom. Are you there? I'm not a kook. I'm an extremely rational fellow, with no spiritual beliefs, no interest in the occult. But my heart skipped a beat when I first looked into this mirror. And after you've had heart surgery, believe me, you listen to that organ like an emergency broadcast system. Now this may sound really off the wall, but when this apartment house was first built in the forties, this apartment and ours was one unit. Is it possible, whoever you are, that you were looking for me but got the wrong apartment? *(vulnerably)* Are you someone – who loved me? Follow me next door and we can figure this thing out at our leisure. We have a lovely mirror. Venetian glass. What would you want from me? Total honesty? That would be a blessing.

(TREY comes out of the bathroom.)

TREY. Who were you talking to? The man in the mirror?

ROBERT. No. Olive. She kicked me out of the kitchen.

TREY. *(suspiciously)* Is that so? You're not seeing anything *special* in the mirror?

ROBERT. Should I be seeing something special in the mirror? Have you gotten a peek at Olive's secret friend? You've been here quite a bit the last few days.

TREY. If I'm here, darling, it's because I've been working my tits off organizing this Seder. I got Madame's oven

repaired. I ordered the brisket. Went all over town today trying to round up Haggadah booklets with some visual flair. I ended up at Park Avenue Judaica, where I found these very stylish mid-century modern Seder booklets. I'm taking them off the shelf, when this woman next to me violently snatches them out of my hand. She had a kid with her. So she says, "My daughter had her eye on these." Really? A five year-old in love with clean lines? And of course, they had nothing left in stock. The salesgirl refused to get involved and let this woman get away with this shit. And then had the audacity to ask *me* to leave the shop. Needless to say, I'm going back tomorrow when the manager is in. Oh yeah.

ROBERT. Trey, is it really necessary to report that salesgirl to her boss?

TREY. She was horrible to me.

ROBERT. Perhaps she was. Maybe she was having a bad day. Maybe her best friend was kidnapped by pirates while on a cruise. Maybe she had a bad canker sore.

TREY. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. This is so typical.

ROBERT. Typical of what?

TREY. This OCD habit you have of seeing both sides to everything.

ROBERT. That's bad?

TREY. In life, Robert, some things are right and some things are wrong. They just are. When I get into an altercation with a waiter or a receptionist or a salesperson or a hotel concierge or an acupuncturist or a life coach, I demand one hundred percent sympathy from my partner. Okay? I'm not looking for an objective analysis of the situation.

ROBERT. But you get into these altercations every day.

TREY. Once and for all, I do not have rage issues.

ROBERT. I'm not saying that. I've never said that.

TREY. But you think I create these situations.

ROBERT. I think for reasons stemming from your childhood, you're extremely sensitive to a slight.

TREY. I'm a reactive personality. In my entire life, I've never started an argument.

(TREY accidentally catches a glimpse of himself in the decorative mirror and instinctively smiles and greets his reflection as if he were an old friend.)

TREY. Hello.

ROBERT. Do you see the man in the mirror?

TREY. Just my reflection. I swear I look ten years younger in this mirror. Maybe not ten years. But my eyes don't look so beady and suspicious. They were beautiful eyes, weren't they? Everyone said so. Wide open, trusting, luminous orphan eyes. Why can't I look like this all the time?

ROBERT. I'll tell you what. For your birthday, I'll pay for you to get your eyes done. Would you like that?

TREY. You'd do that? Really? It ain't cheap.

ROBERT. We won't take a big vacation. You're miserable traveling anyway. I just want you to be happy.

TREY. So the little dump truck had his bags removed, joy reigned throughout the junkyard and they all lived happily ever after. Give up, honey.

(OLIVE enters carrying a few small dishes.)

OLIVE. What are you boys gabbing about?

TREY. I was commenting that one would never guess this was the apartment of an actress.

OLIVE. I should have a velvet divan and a spot lit portrait of myself?

TREY. I meant, it's an apartment of a woman of many interests.

OLIVE. It's the apartment of a former bookkeeper from Yonkers. We should start the Seder soon. What's keeping the Merry Widower? He should be here by now.

ROBERT. Trey said he was a charming fellow.

OLIVE. The jury is still out. Trey, would you help me set the small dishes?

TREY. Of course. Be nice to Robert. We want him to fall in love with the Seder.

(He goes into the kitchen.)

ROBERT. What are these? Are they a holiday symbol of something wonderful?

OLIVE. The Haroset is a mixture of apples, nuts, wine and spices. It symbolizes the mortar the enslaved Jews made for the torturous building of the Pyramids. And the Zeroa is symbolic of the lamb slaughtered as a Passover sacrifice.

(TREY comes out with two more dishes.)

ROBERT. A hard boiled egg and a dish of parsley. Does this symbolize birth and renewal?

(TREY returns to the kitchen.)

OLIVE. The hard boiled egg is the food of mourning. The parsley is dipped in salt water to represent the misery and tears of the Jewish people.

(TREY comes out with two more dishes.)

ROBERT. Horseradish and this other one just looks like water. Isn't water usually a symbol of hope? And the horseradish certainly is a bright cheerful color.

OLIVE. The horseradish is the Maror, a bitter herb that symbolizes the agony of the enslaved Israelites. *(sincerely and with no irony)* I forgot how much I enjoyed this holiday.

(blackout)

(Lights up and OLIVE, ROBERT, TREY and SYLVAN are in the living room area having drinks.)

OLIVE. So you're led to believe I bumped off the kid but the twist ending is that the boy's father did it. Okay. Now you don't have to watch.

SYLVAN. I wouldn't miss it for the world.

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