

The Tangled Skirt

by Steve Braunstein

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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Photo: Courtesy of SuzAnne Barabas

(Carmit Levité, left; Vince Nappo, right)

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Samuel French, Inc.

45 West 25th Street

New York, NY 10010

www.SamuelFrench.com

FOR PRODUCTION INQUIRIES

Info@SamuelFrench.com

1-866-598-8449

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**The world premiere of *The Tangled Skirt* was produced by
the New Jersey Repertory Company, Long Branch, New Jersey.**

SuzAnne Barabas, Artistic Director.

Gabor Barabas, Executive Producer

THE TANGLED SKIRT was first produced by the New Jersey Repertory Company in Long Branch, New Jersey on December 4, 2010. The performance was directed by Evan Bergman, with sets by Jessica Parks, costumes by Patricia E. Doherty, sound by Nathan Leigh, and lighting by Jill Nagle. The Production Stage Manager was Rose Riccardi. The cast was as follows:

BAILEY Vince Nappo
RHONDA..... Carmit Levité

I would like to gratefully acknowledge Artistic Director SuzAnne Barabas and Executive Producer Gabor Barabas for giving this play such an outstanding, first-rate debut.

-S.B.

CHARACTERS

BAILEY BRYCE – Enigmatic, small town denizen; mid 30s-early 40s.

RHONDA CLAIRE – A stranger in town, to die for; in her 30s.

SETTING

A Small Town Bus Depot

TIME

At The Start Of The Play, 12:30 am

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The play occurs in real time with no intermission.

Did you ever pass through a small town and feel as though you've just gone back in time? Maybe it's economic conditions, or quaint, old fashioned values, or just neglect. Either way, this place just feels locked in another era. Such is the bus station setting of *THE TANGLED SKIRT*. It might be today, but this location starkly evokes many decades past to be sure. The play walks a stylistic tightrope; a modern day tale of greed, need and deadly deeds that gives a nuanced nod to the smoky noirs of the 40s and 50s. People have asked me if I suggest watching some classic noir-styled movies as they prepare to do the play. Sure. Watch them and savor them. Take in the snap and slap of the storytelling and performances. Study the feel and flow, but don't pick up too much. I don't specify year and locality in my directions to enhance the timelessness of the themes. This is a contemporary thriller about the dangers of unharnessed and misguided desires – for people and things. Whether we want to think it or not, Bailey Bryce and Rhonda Claire, the characters in this story, are not so different from you or me. Except, maybe their desperation pushes them farther. Anyway, the dreams and schemes that drive them are universal; sometimes the things we crave most are just out of reach. Tough. Tragic. And true. It was then, it is now, and always will be...no matter where – or when – the bus of life drops you off.

*For Ruthi
who liked a good twist*

(A dimly lit bus depot in the middle of nowhere. The place is deserted. The whole station is just a few benches and a closed snack counter. Maybe a payphone, a newspaper machine. A chalk board reads:

LAST BUS. THUNDER BAY. 2:00 am.)

(The depot clock reads 12:30 am. Dark. Desolate. Uninviting. There seems no reason in the world any living soul would be in this grim place, especially at this ungodly hour. But there is a living soul about to arrive. And there is a reason.)

*(Enter **BAILEY BRYCE**, dapperly dressed, holding a duffle bag, and breathless from running. He scans the depot, relieved, for the moment, that he is alone. **BAILEY** takes a few, shaky deep breaths. He grips his bag tightly, noting the clock and the Thunder Bay bus time. He is clearly on edge, but is determined to keep it all together. He nervously glances out the smudgy depot window, and scans again the shadowy dive. He sits down and pulls from his bag a small voice recorder. He thinks a moment, then switches it on.)*

BAILEY. There was no moon on this dark, dank night. The rain slick streets a relentless reminder that this is indeed a slippery world. The faint light inside the teetering bus depot offered little illumination, emitting, instead, the fatal glimmer of dread. He sat alone in the deserted station, his isolation looming as its own unnerving threat. A prelude, a warning perhaps, of what this moonless night had in store for him. He wondered, if he vanished that night, never to be seen or heard from again, if anyone would know. If anyone would care. He knew the terrible answer, but was more concerned about getting a proper burial.

Everyone should get a proper burial. Even people like him. But he knew, more likely, some overly curious kids, poking around where they shouldn't be poking, will find his bones, fifty years from now, brittle and nameless in the dirt. They'll be too dumb to know at that tender age that things you touch, especially things you shouldn't, become part of you forever.

(BAILEY gets up and moves again to the smudged window, gazing out.)

BAILEY. The images of prying kids faded from his thoughts. Eclipsed by reveries of a moonless sky, a bus to Thunder Bay...

(He sits.)

And the elusive nature of fate.

(RHONDA, a looker to boot, enters the depot. BAILEY turns and watches her. He speaks softly into the recorder.)

Then...she walked in.

(BAILEY observes RHONDA, who is not yet aware of him. She is decked out to the nines, way, way out of place in this mucky locus. She seems rushed, breathless. She anxiously checks the bus schedule and the clock. She is flustered, gripping tight her travel bag. Alarmed, she smoothes her tousled, designer skirt.)

BAILEY. *(cont.) (into recorder)* She was a sight for his weary, jaded eyes. The kind of woman you'd thank for tearing your heart out just because she took the trouble to look at you. You could tell by the way she stood there, the way she carried herself, the way she did nothing, that she's ruined lots of men in her time. He thought about where *her* bones might end up.

(RHONDA glances around for a seat. She now notices BAILEY, who's placed the recorder back into his bag. She finds a seat away from BAILEY, and brushes it with her hand. The dirt is too much. Disgusted and agitated, she approaches BAILEY's bench. She gazes at it, and at him.)

RHONDA. You mind?

BAILEY. All yours.

(RHONDA sits on the far end of the bench.)

RHONDA. Place gives me the shivers.

BAILEY. Not much light, that's for sure.

RHONDA. No place for a woman.

BAILEY. That's for sure, too.

RHONDA. Lots of creeps out there. Lots of hands. Place like this...drifters and loners. This hour. No security. Like people who take the bus have no virtue.

BAILEY. Do we?

RHONDA. What?

BAILEY. I'm Bailey. Bailey Bryce.

RHONDA. Oh. Rhonda. Rhonda Claire. From Thunder Bay.

BAILEY. Going home?

RHONDA. Yeah. It's been a while. You from there, too?

BAILEY. No. I'm from here. But I've got business there.

RHONDA. What do you do, Bailey?

BAILEY. How do you know I'm not a loner drifter creep?

RHONDA. A loner drifter creep named Bailey Bryce? I doubt that.

BAILEY. I've got hands.

RHONDA. I study the backs of heads. I can tell a person's character just by looking.

BAILEY. That's a gift. To be able to do that.

RHONDA. You've got a gift, Bailey?

BAILEY. I tell stories.

RHONDA. What's that mean?

BAILEY. I'm a storyteller.

RHONDA. To who?

BAILEY. To anyone who will listen.

RHONDA. Is that your business in Thunder Bay? To tell stories?

BAILEY. If they'll listen.

RHONDA. That's how you live? Telling stories?

BAILEY. How do you live, Rhonda Claire?

RHONDA. Me? I...married well.

BAILEY. I don't see a ring.

RHONDA. You're very observant.

BAILEY. Storytellers are observers of sorts.

RHONDA. You tell true stories, Bailey?

BAILEY. All stories are true. Every one.

RHONDA. I never thought of that. Yeah. For someone out there I guess anything you can imagine has happened.

BAILEY. That's why they work.

RHONDA. Well, you're the first person I've ever met who called himself a storyteller. I guess it's a small town thing.

BAILEY. Thunder Bay so big?

RHONDA. Anywhere's bigger than here.

BAILEY. (*smiles*) Yeah. Lots of maps don't have us. Just a spot on the world.

RHONDA. Maybe if they had more buses...

BAILEY. Sure. And more light. Yeah. No postcards of this place.

(*They laugh softly.*)

No one ever comes here. What reason could there possibly be? On the other hand, I find it quaint.

RHONDA. To each his own.

(*They go silent a moment.*)

BAILEY. When did he die?

RHONDA. Who?

BAILEY. Your husband.

RHONDA. My...? Well, where on Earth did you...did you come up with such a ridiculous –

BAILEY. Am I right?

(**RHONDA** *gets up shakily.*)

RHONDA. My life is *my* business.

BAILEY. Sometimes I'm too observant for my own good.

RHONDA. (*muttering*) Don't talk to strangers. First thing you learn.

(**RHONDA** *fidgets by the dim snack counter.*)

Make you wait so long for a bus. Think they'd offer coffee. Gum. Something.

BAILEY. Yeah. I guess it's like you said. We've got no virtue.

(**BAILEY** *fishes through his pockets.*)

Usually carry a lozenge.

RHONDA. Don't bother. But thanks.

(*a siren in the distance*)

BAILEY. They're like candy.

(**RHONDA** *looks out the window.* **BAILEY** *has patted every pocket.*)

Oh, well. In my other suit, I guess. I have another suit.

RHONDA. I don't really want anything. I just...you know. It's the waiting.

(**RHONDA** *paces; tense, shaky.* **BAILEY** *watches her.*)

BAILEY. Anticipation. In the station. Waiting for a bus. It will arrive. You will likely survive. So what is all the fuss?

(**RHONDA** *looks at him, unamused.*)

RHONDA. You just make that up?

BAILEY. You inspired me. Impressed?

RHONDA. (*not really*) Sure, Bailey.

BAILEY. That's not to say I'm good at everything. That would be overkill. But I do have a way of putting people at ease. I have that kind of personality. People just like me.

RHONDA. I'm happy for you.

BAILEY. You like me, Rhonda Claire?

RHONDA. I...don't know you.

BAILEY. Well, not intimately. But you're getting the gist.

RHONDA. (*agitated*) What's the difference? We're just waiting for a bus together. Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I'd rather not...you know, get into some personal thing with you.

BAILEY. You mean like your husband.

RHONDA. (*flustered*) For example, yes. Let's just talk about the weather or not talk at all.

(**RHONDA** stands off to the side, collecting herself.

BAILEY is quiet for a moment.)

BAILEY. Rained earlier.

RHONDA. Yes. I know.

BAILEY. I'm glad we get the seasons here. I like the changes. I like when the leaves turn. But I like the sheen of the frozen lake in the winter, too.

(**RHONDA** is silent, preoccupied.)

What's it like in Thunder Bay?

(**RHONDA** recoils.)

That's not personal.

RHONDA. It's where I'm from.

BAILEY. It's a climate question.

(**RHONDA** sits on the far end of the bench)

RHONDA. When it's cold, it's cold.

BAILEY. Really.

RHONDA. I hope you packed warm. If you intend to stay.

BAILEY. I'd never leave this place forever.

RHONDA. Yes. You fit here.

BAILEY. It's all I know of the world. Everything I need is here.

RHONDA. Then why are you leaving?

BAILEY. I'm not leaving. I'm just going away.

RHONDA. I won't be a hypocrite and pry.

BAILEY. I'll tell you anything.

RHONDA. I don't need to know your story.

BAILEY. It's free.

RHONDA. Knowing people always comes with a price. And you don't look cheap.

BAILEY. You've been burned.

RHONDA. Set on fire. But there you go again.

BAILEY. It wasn't a question. It was an –

RHONDA. Stop observing me, Bailey.

BAILEY. But...you're right here. Where else do I look?

RHONDA. I don't mean to be impolite. But it's just a little unnerving being alone in this dark heap so late at night.

BAILEY. You're...um...not alone.

RHONDA. You know what I mean.

BAILEY. You said you weren't afraid of me.

RHONDA. That's before you talked.

BAILEY. What did I say?

RHONDA. Forget it. Please.

BAILEY. Oh. The husband.

RHONDA. It rained earlier.

BAILEY. I'm just nobody. Don't worry.

RHONDA. I don't scare easy. It's just...I'm away from home.

BAILEY. And it's dark.

RHONDA. And it's dark.

(They go silent a moment.)

BAILEY. Gets dark in Thunder Bay I imagine.

RHONDA. Well sure.

(BAILEY stands up)

BAILEY. How dark?

(RHONDA tries to contain her agitation)

RHONDA. What an odd question.

BAILEY. They got a moon there?

RHONDA. The whole world's got a moon.

BAILEY. Not here.

RHONDA. Well, not tonight. Sometimes it's just not there.

BAILEY. (*amused*) Where could it be? Who's got the moon?
You got it, Rhonda Claire?

RHONDA. Sure. Right there in my bag. With the stars, the
solar system and my stockings.

BAILEY. I once promised a girl the moon.

RHONDA. What she get instead?

(*BAILEY sighs, leaning against the snack counter.*)

BAILEY. Stories.

RHONDA. That's sweet, Bailey.

BAILEY. Yeah. But you can't take stories to the bank.

RHONDA. Oh. She's not your girl now, I take it.

BAILEY. This was, God, so long ago.

RHONDA. You sound...not quite over it.

BAILEY. I'm over her. It was just a hard lesson.

RHONDA. What's the lesson?

BAILEY. Women love money.

RHONDA. Boy.

BAILEY. See. I don't mind opening my soul to a stranger.

RHONDA. I did get sucked in.

BAILEY. It's social intercourse.

RHONDA. I don't need to know more.

BAILEY. But am I wrong?

RHONDA. About what?

BAILEY. About women and money?

RHONDA. Bailey. We're waiting for a bus

BAILEY. We already did the weather.

(*RHONDA fidgets, disquieted.*)

RHONDA. I can't speak for all women –

BAILEY. Then you.

RHONDA. What could it possibly matter? We're not dating.
We're just killing time in Hell.

(RHONDA gets up and goes to the window.)

RHONDA. (cont.) Maybe it'll get in early.

BAILEY. I doubt that.

RHONDA. Just let me think it. Okay?

(RHONDA shakes him off and sits quietly. BAILEY sits, too, keeping his distance. Another siren is heard deep in the distance. BAILEY perks up a little, but RHONDA is oblivious, lost in thought. All is silent again. Until ...)

(softly) What would life be without it?

(BAILEY looks at her.)

Money.

BAILEY. Yeah. Sure.

RHONDA. Don't blame women. It's everybody.

BAILEY. It is everybody. I was too young back then. I didn't know the world outside this town.

RHONDA. You know the world now, Bailey?

BAILEY. I know buses never come early. What else is there?

(Despite herself, RHONDA smiles.)

Don't take this personally. But I like your smile.

RHONDA. Bailey. Don't. Please.

BAILEY. Don't what?

RHONDA. Don't be a man.

BAILEY. Just because I'm a man doesn't mean I'm after something.

(RHONDA looks away, shaking her head.)

Doesn't mean I'll burn you.

RHONDA. Bailey –

BAILEY. I don't even carry matches.

RHONDA. You can't help it. None of you can.

BAILEY. I'm not going to marry until I'm really in love. That's the mistake people make. They marry for the wrong reasons.

RHONDA. Is that a shot at me?

BAILEY. I'm just saying, my time comes, it'll be true love.
True love.

RHONDA. I hope your own story ends well, Bailey.

BAILEY. Me, too. And yours.

RHONDA. That bus'll be a start.

BAILEY. Wherever you go, no matter how far, what's done
is done. You're still who you are. What you are.

RHONDA. What's that mean?

BAILEY. I'm just saying...wherever you go...it doesn't
change a thing.

RHONDA. (*agitated*) I don't want to change a thing. I like
just where I am.

BAILEY. This hole?

RHONDA. I don't mean it like that. I mean I like where I
am in life. It wasn't always the case.

BAILEY. I got that impression.

RHONDA. Sometimes you get chained to people without
realizing it. Before you know it, you're trapped.

BAILEY. Like now. With me.

RHONDA. We're not chained together. And I've got my
ticket out. Sometimes it seems there is no out. All that
lies ahead is hopelessness.

BAILEY. A woman trapped like that...might do anything
to escape. Desperate people might resort to desperate
measures.

RHONDA. A woman, in particular, shouldn't be judged.

BAILEY. They're different. Women.

RHONDA. Yes. They are.

BAILEY. Your travel bag there. What's that? Kind of a
lipstick red?

(RHONDA *impulsively puts her arm on the bag.*)

A man wouldn't carry that.

RHONDA. (*softly*) No.

BAILEY. You can get a lot in there I'll bet.

(RHONDA *fidgets.*)

BAILEY. (*cont.*) You seem to handle it just fine.

RHONDA. (*uneasy*) I manage.

BAILEY. You unchained yourself from something terrible in Thunder Bay. You can probably handle anything. Even this town.

RHONDA. Some days you're on top of the world. Other days you're trying to crawl out from under it.

BAILEY. And how was this day? On top? Or under?

(*Dogs bark in the distance. BAILEY goes to a window.*)

Some commotion ...

RHONDA. The wet streets.

BAILEY. The what?

RHONDA. Maybe a car skidded off the road.

BAILEY. Oh. Right.

(*The barking fades off.*)

People aren't cautious anymore.

RHONDA. Cautious. Careful. What's going to happen is, I don't know, going to happen.

BAILEY. Well, that's the whole mystery. Of life, I mean. Are we all just headed to some pre-planned end?

RHONDA. Now you're getting into destiny. And it's late, Bailey.

BAILEY. Maybe...maybe *this* is destiny.

RHONDA. This? You mean this place?

BAILEY. And...us. You know, maybe our meeting here was pre-destined. Maybe this was meant to be.

RHONDA. You've got 'small town' written all over you.

BAILEY. (*laughing*) I guess some things just can't be erased.

RHONDA. I don't mean it in a bad way.

BAILEY. (*good-natured*) I've heard worse.

(*They laugh softly.*)

Anything else written on me?

RHONDA. Oh, it's just an expression. I gave up figuring people out long ago.

BAILEY. Why bother. It never works.

RHONDA. You think you've got someone pegged and wham. They're something else entirely.

BAILEY. Like the girl.

RHONDA. The girl? Oh. *Your* girl.

BAILEY. The best part of a relationship, maybe the only good part, is the first thirty minutes.

RHONDA. (*laughing*) That's a dark view of people.

BAILEY. Well, take us. I mean, this part now, right now, is probably the happiest we'll ever be together.

RHONDA. (*gently*) Bailey, we won't know each other after tonight. We're just two people waiting for a bus.

BAILEY. Thank God for that. If only the bus were less than thirty minutes away. There's too much time for this cordial chance meeting to go bad.

RHONDA. (*amused*) Just keep things light and superficial, we'll be fine.

BAILEY. Yes. I have a habit of probing. Life is a story and that's my business. So I have to force myself to close shop.

RHONDA. It's after midnight. Most people are sleeping.

BAILEY. Oh, I know. They're gone. So deep, they're gone.

RHONDA. I envy them.

BAILEY. Really.

RHONDA. Well, I'm not always a good sleeper.

BAILEY. Good people should sleep deep. Clear conscience.

RHONDA. How many people are good?

BAILEY. I sleep like a rock.

RHONDA. It's nice to meet a man so pure.

BAILEY. But psychopaths sleep well too, I read somewhere.

RHONDA. Yes. No remorse.

BAILEY. Is that it?

RHONDA. People with no remorse have the sleep thing down.