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Samuel French Acting Edition

2 Across

A Comedy of Crosswords and Romance

by Jerry Mayer

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2 *ACROSS* was first produced by Emily Mayer and premiered as a guest production at Santa Monica Playhouse, Santa Monica, CA on November 6, 2004. It was directed by Deborah Harmon with set design by Scott Heinman, costume deisgn by Caroline Blackwell, lighting by James Cooper, sound by The Attic Room. The production stage manager was George Vennes. There were two alternating casts, as follows:

SHE (JANET) Susan Cash
HE (JOSH). Kip Gilman
and
SHE (JANET) Sandra Kerns
HE (JOSH). Steve Vinovich

CHARACTERS

HE and **SHE**, who eventually exchange first names (**JOSH** and **JANET**), can be cast late forties to middle fifties. Each is the exact kind of person that the other has always found irritating. At first they are worlds apart on everything, but as the trip continues, they begin to relax and enjoy each other, even as they argue about their differences. Is it possible to believe that you could find the love of your life on an eighty minute rapid transit ride? Absolutely, if the actors play it real. The humor comes from their extreme differences, with each trying to change the other for the better as they struggle to finish their crosswords before the end of the line.

SHE (JANET) - Janet is Catholic, structured, responsible, a good mother and usually right. She's an achiever whose standards are high and her patience is low. As a psychologist, she's blunt and honest. She's a law abider and a rule follower. Everything she attempts she does well, except for one thing, she's got a lot to learn about how to have fun.

HE (JOSH) - Josh is Jewish and a paradox. He's part free spirit, part executive, part dreamer, part good son, part Peter Pan. During the trip, each time Janet decides Josh is a flake, he does something that wins her total admiration, or he makes her laugh, which she's not used to. About two thirds through their journey, Josh decides that he and Janet were meant for each other. Now all he's got to do is convince Janet of that.

ACT I

(Before play begins, we hear BART announcements and actions of passengers at the airport and on platform. LIGHTS UP on a new San Francisco BART car, still in the station. SHE, a smartly dressed woman, 40's/50's, sits alone. Next to her is a rolling travel bag with collapsible plastic handle. Distressed, sobbing, SHE works a NY Times CROSSWORD PUZZLE while pressing a hanky to her eyes and upper lip.)

RECORDED VOICE. Good morning, it is now 4:12 AM, on Bay Area Rapid Transit's early morning service from San Francisco International Airport to the East Bay, final stop, Bay Point. Now leaving.

HE. *(O.S. with urgency.)* Don't close, don't close, don't close. *(HE, 40's/50's, ENTERS, running, makes it, thanks the door.)* Thank you. *(HE wears chinos, jacket, has a crossword, peeks at hers.)*

HE. Morning.

SHE. *(Mumbles, into her crossword.)* Morning.

HE. I see we're both fighting the New York Times Saturday crossword. *(SHE, feeling spied upon, reacts.)* I can't even finish Monday and it gets tougher each day till "Sadistic Saturday." I wonder, can I ask a tiny favor?

SHE. What?

HE. Could you move to another seat? *(SHE reacts, stares.)* Anywhere you want. It's just, you're in my lucky seat. Third one from

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the rear door, fourth from the map. I got almost half my crossword done sitting there on my trip out. It's my lucky seat.

SHE. You realize of course, it's a different train, therefore a different seat. (*HE shrugs, begs with his eyes.*) Okay. (*SHE stands.*)

HE. Obviously you're right, but thanks for humoring me. ("*The Salesman,*" *points to seat upstage.*) Here's a nice seat, clean, excellent view, and in a nice shade of blue. Goes with your outfit. (*Indicates seat opposite his.*) Or you might prefer this one opposite me, "Dueling Crosswords."

SHE. (*Somewhat guarded.*) This'll be fine. (*SHE sits opposite HIM.*)

HE. (*Sitting in "lucky seat"*) Good. Thanks. And feel totally relaxed. I'm superstitious but otherwise harmless.

SHE. (*Reaches into her large bag.*) No problem, I always feel relaxed.

(*Takes out spray can, aims it at HIM.*)

HE. (*Looks at spray can.*) What's that?

SHE. Mace.

HE. The can says, "Intimate Styling Mousse."

SHE. Shit! (*SHE puts can back, gets out MACE can.*) Mace.

HE. Smart. It's nice riding this early isn't it? Total privacy.

SHE. Yes. And if you don't mind I'm kind of at a moment of truth here.

HE. Got ya, that excitement of battling for those final words that mean either triumph or the shame of calling the 900 number for help. You call often?

SHE. I have *never* called the 900 number.

HE. Neither have I. They charge a dollar twenty a minute. That's almost seventy five dollars an hour. It's *extortion*.

SHE. (*SHE'S had it.*) Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I've

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had a *really long day* and an even longer night and all I want to do right now is concentrate on my crossword, *okay?!*

HE. Boy, do I know how you feel. Thanks for your honesty. There are times when the last thing one needs is... (*SHE stares bullets.*) ...small talk. (*HE looks at his puzzle.*) Well, the enemy awaits.

(*HE tries for a few beats but he's stuck. HE leans, looks sideways, peeks at hers, trying not to be noticed.*)

SHE. (*SHE notices, pulls her puzzle away.*) Do you *mind!*?

HE. Oh, I didn't want to disturb you, just taking a tiny peek.

SHE. If you're going to cheat, why bother?

HE. I wouldn't exactly call it cheating.

SHE. What *would* you call it?

HE. "Fear of flunking." An old college joke. Look, you seem to be a heavy hitter at this and I'm definitely "sand lot." I won't peek anymore but can I ask a question?

SHE. Okay, *what?*

HE. I've got this decision on "1 across." I already have "1 down, "Sermon ender," in four letters, which of course, is "Amen." So, 1 across, "A Saint's first name," in three letters, using the "A" from "Amen," should be "Saint Ann," right? But "2 down" is "A long trip" in six letters, "Voyage," right? And that would make it "Saint Ava," which doesn't sound real saintly to me. But then again, I'm not Catholic, are you?

SHE. That's something I consider private.

HE. Of course, I honor that. To me, whatever a person is, is no big deal. I happen to be Jewish, not that that's important.

SHE. True, will you excuse me? (*SHE pulls bag handle up.*)

HE. Sure, no problem. I'll just go with my gut instinct. (*SHE rolls bag upstage.*) Catholics have so many saints, I'm sure there's a "Saint Ava" around somewhere.

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(*SHE turns around in aisle.*)

SHE. NO, there isn't a Saint Ava around, *anywhere*, nor is there a Saint *Oprah*. Take it from a *Catholic*, Okay?

HE. Got ya'. Okay, then this doesn't work.

SHE. The problem is, *YOU* don't work, *hard* enough. You don't concentrate, you don't commit, you just *flit* along the surface.

HE. *Gee*, I've never been called a flitter before, but you're right, I do flit. But hey, isn't flitting part of the fun? I don't consider crosswords a life or death struggle.

SHE. Maybe you *should*, then you might catch some of your mistakes.

HE. You're saying I've made mistakes?

SHE. *BINGO*.

HE. (*Mild disapproval.*) Oh, you're one of those people who say "BINGO" when you're not playing Bingo.

SHE. I thought it was more polite than saying "*DUH*." Pardon my frankness, but it upsets me when people do crosswords the way you do. You miss out on the real enjoyment and end up feeling frustrated and incompetent.

HE. Exactly, and you can change all that by giving me one tiny hint.

SHE. Alright, as long as you face the fact that when you finish, you'll have a hollow victory.

HE. No problem. I *never* finish.

SHE. And you accept that? (*SHE shakes her head sadly.*) Okay, "One down," "Sermon ender?" The answer is not "Amen."

HE. What? It *has* to be "Amen." It's got the right amount of letters, *four*. And when a sermon ends, people say "Amen." Catholics do it, Jews do it, "even educated fleas do it."

SHE. But "Amen" gives you "Saint *Ava*," a nun would clobber

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you for that. Look, "One down" says "Sermon ender," but didn't you notice, there's a question mark at the end?

HE. Oh yeah, look at that little question mark.

SHE. That means the puzzle writer is throwing you a curve. You have to think harder.

HE. *Why?* I've got the answer, A-MEN.

SHE. But it doesn't cross-check. Stop guessing. The Golden Rule for the beginner is, EXACTNESS IS EVERYTHING.

HE. Who says I'm a beginner?

SHE. That pencil you're using says it.

HE. What's wrong with pencils?

SHE. They have erasers, to correct beginners' mistakes.

HE. (*HE breaks his pencil with a flourish.*) Okay, now I'm an official member of "Pen snobs of America," but I still say the answer is AMEN.

SHE. No, it *isn't*. Look, you asked for my help, I'm giving it to you.

HE. I don't want it anymore.

SHE. But you're stuck, this will unstick you.

HE. (*Covers his ears.*) I'm not listening.

SHE. (*Loudly.*) ETTE!

HE. (*Uncovers ears.*) What?

SHE. You heard me, E, T, T, E, ETTE!

HE. ETTE?

SHE. "Sermon ender," in other words, when you end a sermon with ette, you have SERMON-ETTE. And ETTE works both down and across.

HE. (*Eyes narrowed.*) You son of a bitch!

SHE. (*Insulted.*) What did you say?!

HE. *Nothing.* The S.O.B. isn't *you*, it's Will Shortz, the guy who runs the puzzle. If it was *you*, I would've said *daughter*, not son. EXACTNESS IS EVERYTHING.

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SHE. That's a start.

HE. (*Points to his crossword.*) Look, this putz Shortz gives himself a by-line yet. "Edited by Will Shortz," like he's Ernest Hemingway or something. All he is is an evil little twerp who's trying to mess up my brain.

SHE. Mr. Shortz is a little late for that. That was too easy, I'm sorry.

HE. Don't be, you're good. Okay, I accept "Ette," but that means I no longer have *Ava*, now I have *Eva*.

SHE. That's *right*.

HE. You're telling me there's a "Saint Eva?"

SHE. No, I'm telling you to *think*.

HE. Okay. I *think*...I need another hint.

SHE. You won't even try? One hint, "ON THE WATERFRONT."

HE. You call that a hint? Okay, I'm thinking...of Marlon Brando, but what does he have to do with...Wait, *EVA*, MARIE SAINT! *Yes, Yes!*

SHE. Congratulations! Now don't you feel proud of yourself?

HE. Not really. You *gave* me the answer. I'm like Blanche Dubois. "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers." (*Talking to Crossword Page.*) Bye bye, Mr. Shortz, I've got better ways to waste my time. (*HE tosses Crossword, grabs Sports.*)

SHE. What are you doing? Besides littering. (*SHE picks up Crossword, hands it to HIM.*)

HE. I'm doing something manly, reading the Sports Page. That puzzle's just too tough.

SHE. Then why buy the New York Times?

HE. Because I'm a split personality, half Yankee fan, half masochist.

SHE. Let me see that. (*SHE takes his puzzle.*)

RECORDED VOICE. Now approaching Daly City Station.

SHE. You've finished almost half, you're doing fine. Well, ex-

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cept for this...and this...and how could you *possibly*? Okay, you've made mistakes, but you're not going to let Will Shortz beat you?

HE. Why not? When you fail against the best, it's really not failing.

SHE. The hell it isn't. Now don't roll over, *try* harder.

HE. I *do* try hard but every time I get halfway through, the Marquis de Shortz begins his torture and I know it's time for my Sports Page. (*HE drops crossword, picks up sports page.*) And who gives a damn if a stupid crossword puzzle gets finished?

SHE. (*SHE jumps up, grabs sports page, crumples it.*) I do!

HE. You really *hate* sports, don't you?

SHE. *No*, I hate *apathy*. What you're doing is giving up, which is an awful habit. You're slinking away from a simple challenge.

HE. That's me, first I flit, then I slink.

SHE. Exactly, which means you're showing zero character!

HE. Now hold on, *Ms.*, how can you make permanent judgments on someone's character when you've known them for less than...

SHE. *Easy*, I judge their *actions*. And yours are, *quitting* when you should be standing up and fighting!

HE. True, but remember, I've got zero character and it's very hard to stand up when you're spineless.

SHE. (*Realizing how caustic she's been.*) Oh my God, what am I doing? Forgive me, I have no right to judge your character. You're just fine. (*SHE hands him crumpled sports page.*) Here, go ahead, read your...earned run averages.

HE. (*HE uncrumples sports page.*) Sorry if I upset you.

SHE. It's not you at all, it's me.

HE. No, it's me, I obviously interrupted your moment of truth.

SHE. It's nothing you did. I just haven't recovered from a very negative trip to the airport.

HE. Aww, hey, too bad. Want to talk about it?

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SHE. Not really.

HE. You sure? Sometimes it helps to unload your frustrations to a total stranger.

SHE. I don't unload frustrations, I deal with them.

HE. I'd bet on it.

SHE. (*A resigned shrug.*) I'm worried about my son.

HE. Damn, sorry. Is it serious?

SHE. Yes, it is. Thanks for your concern.

(*SHE turns total attention to her puzzle.*)

HE. Wait, you can't say to a person, I'm worried about my son" without saying *why*. Especially to a *Jewish* person. He isn't sick, God forbid?

SHE. No, I assure you, he's healthy. Now that's *it*, okay?

HE. (*A half beat of frustration.*) Actually it's *not* okay, unless you don't care if I'm *up* all night worrying about...may I at least ask your son's name?

SHE. Brian.

HE. That's a start, can you tell me how old Brian is?

SHE. He's eighteen.

HE. *Oy*, 18, *that's* the age. Are we talking misdemeanor or felony?

SHE. *Neither*, he's never been arrested.

HE. Good, but you're worried. He's not in any kind of danger?

SHE. (*This hits a nerve, fighting tears.*) Yes he *is*! Or he might be. That's all I can think about...so I'm trying not to.

HE. Alright, I'm backing off, I'll leave you alone.

SHE. (*A call for help.*) Brian's 18th birthday was last week and to celebrate, he joined the Marines.

HE. *Oy*.

SHE. Plus, he dropped out of high school to do it.

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HE. Oh *Christ!* Sorry, that's *yours*.

SHE. He's flying out at 5:30, a little over an hour from now, to Parris Island Marine Base, that's in South Carolina, for basic training and I am so scared.

HE. Can't blame you.

SHE. I tried to get him to stay in school, but quitting's always been his pattern. He quit piano lessons at 9, Camp Thundercloud at 12. The only thing he hasn't quit is pot. He's devoted to that.

HE. Sounds a lot like me at 18. You're so damn unsure of yourself. He probably fell for that Marine commercial, "The few, the proud."

(*HE salutes.*)

SHE. It wasn't any commercial, it was his accident, he totalled my car last week. That's why I'm on the BART. Thank God he wasn't hurt.

(*SHE crosses herself.*)

HE. You may be right, he probably joined up to escape the guilt.

SHE. Yes, I know a little about guilt, I'm a psychologist.

HE. AH-HAA. (*Then innocently.*) Oh *really?* I noticed that you're dressed...exactly the way you should be. And lovely.

SHE. Thank you. Didn't have time to change. Rushed home to help Brian pack, he forgot to put in socks and underwear. Then rushed to the airport and spent an hour at Starbucks in Terminal 3 trying to change his mind. Finally, I got up, hugged him, told him I loved him and left, leaving my untouched turkey sandwich. I'm not just frustrated, I'm *starved*.

HE. I'll bet you are, and I'm gonna fix that. I can only eat half of this barbecued pork sandwich. *Here.*

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(HE grabs a wrapped sandwich from bag.)

SHE. You can't be serious?

HE. You mean *pork*? I *laugh* at dietary laws.

SHE. I'm talking about *BART* laws, eating and/or drinking are prohibited.

HE. Are you nuts? It's 4:28 AM, who's around to care?

SHE. I am. By getting on this train, I agreed to obey the rules.

HE. *(HE puts sandwich back into bag.)* Heavens, I don't want to turn this into a crime scene. Back to your son, it's none of my business, but may I offer an opinion?

SHE. I suppose so.

HE. Brian seems like he might be rebelling against what he feels is too much "hands on parenting," my *dad's* specialty.

SHE. Parenting is what parents are supposed to do.

HE. It's hard to accept that at 18. You take on some kind of a strange meshugenah factor. I'll explain that.

SHE. You don't have to, half of my patients are meshugenah... I mean Jewish, so I've learned some of the basic terms like... *(Seeing how many she can remember.)* meshugenah, shlep, mensch, goy, kvetch, shlemiel, chutzpa, shiksa.

HE. I'm impressed, *congratulations*.

SHE. You mean "mazeltov."

HE. Exactly. I'll bet you're a capable psychologist.

SHE. Thank you, I think I help quite a few patients on their road to "Menschhood."

HE. And *some* of us make it.

SHE. And some of you are "menschhood challenged."

HE. Well I can relate to Brian. I didn't quit high school, but in my freshman year at Berkeley, at 19, I did something that drove my father nuts. I quit college, to become...an ACK-TOR.

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SHE. That's as bad as the Marines.

HE. *Worse*, but I was convinced I was the Jewish Al Pacino. And for three whole years, all I cared about was..."The *Work*." Until one night I was doing this cheapo version of Julius Caesar in a tiny storefront theatre. As I start my big speech I realize there are more bodies on stage, *six*, than there are in the audience, *two*. So I took the stage and said... (*HE rises, "ACTS"*) "Friends, Romans, countrymen, *both* of you, lend me your ears, all *four* of them. I come to bury Caesar, and my acting career. *Curtain*, The *End*...of *that* dream. So, I exited the stage and entered real life, working for my Dad. Out of the frying pan, into the pressure cooker.

SHE. And you also got married. I noticed your ring.

HE. Yeah, and I noticed yours.

SHE. Any children?

HE. Nope, it's just Suzy and me. You have any other kids?

SHE. Just Brian. Thanks for sharing your history, it gives me hope. If you got through your growing pains, maybe Brian will too.

HE. I'm sure he'll do just fine.

SHE. I hope you're right.

HE. I *know* I'm right.

SHE. So, what do you do for a living?

HE. I'm unemployed.

SHE. *YOU'RE OUT OF WORK?!*

HE. That's right, I'm a total bum.

SHE. Sorry, I was surprised.

HE. So was my *father*.

SHE. You want to talk about it?

HE. Three years ago, I quit my job with my dad's company, after almost thirty years in the button business.

SHE. The *button* business?

HE. I know, it sounds boring but it isn't. The company's been in our family since the gold rush days. Dad's factory makes buttons

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for Levi Strauss, Ralph Lauren. This brass eagle button dates back to The Civil War. My great, great, *great* grandfather designed it. It's more than a button. It's sculpture.

(HE shows HER a button on blazer or key chain.)

SHE. It certainly is. You say you quit? *Why?*

HE. Dad pushed my buttons.

SHE. You just left after working with your father for thirty years? Too bad. And what, he must be in his...late sixties?

HE. Thank you very much, he's almost eighty.

SHE. A shame you left, You'd think he'd be ready for you to take over.

HE. Right, but old "Iron Fist" didn't see it that way.

SHE. Iron Fist? He's violent?

HE. No, he came up with this cute shtick when I was a kid. He called his right hand "Iron Fist." He'd clench it and tell me to open it. *(HE demonstrates.)* And I'd try and try with no luck, and we'd laugh about it. But it stopped being funny when he controlled his business that way.

SHE. I know, family businesses can be pretty stressful environments. I've refereed a few.

HE. Ah, he meant well. He'd always say, "A hundred and sixty years, from father to son, from father to son." But for that to work, a father's got to loosen his grip and listen to his son, *once* in awhile.

SHE. Sons, no matter what age, often feel like they're teenagers being grounded.

HE. So I left, and landed a job in advertising at an online clothing company called, "Peace in the Valley." Things went great for three years, then the Internet hit the fan and I got downsized out.

SHE. How long have you been out of work?

HE. Not that long, eighteen months.

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SHE. *EIGHTEEN MONTHS?!*

HE. Surprised again?

SHE. Yeah, *sorry*, again. So, what do you do with your time, when you're not interviewing?

HE. I stay busy. Two days a week I do volunteer work at Oakland City Jail for Juveniles. I teach speed typing to tough little peckers... well, "*hunt* and peckers," so they can get decent jobs when they get out.

SHE. How admirable. I hope your delinquents appreciate you?

HE. I don't want to seem immodest. I am loved.

SHE. I'll bet. While you're doing this good work, how do you provide, at home?

HE. Well, let's see, I teach people who are too old to work their computers how to work their computers. I get forty bucks an hour, which almost pays for my valium. And I do a few temp jobs. In fact I just got off my midnight shift at the airport. I'm a computer maven at the International Air Terminal on Christian holidays.

SHE. Really? Oh, that's right, yesterday was Good Friday.

HE. *Exactly*, when people of *your* faith want to go to church for your "*sermon-ette*," people of *my* faith take over. I call our group, "The Jew Crew." Our motto, "When Christ *calls*, call *us*." But all that'll end on Tuesday

SHE. What happens on Tuesday?

HE. I'm interviewing at Banana Republic for V.P. in charge of advertising. This one I've got in my hip pocket.

SHE. Good, you've studied the company history? Researched Banana Republic from top to bottom?

HE. Yeah, I buy all my pants there.

SHE. You know something, I've got a great idea, it might just land you that job at Banana Republic. But we need enough time. What's your stop?

HE. The last one, Bay Point.

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SHE. Me too. I just know this will work. You are going to walk into Banana Republic and be hired on the spot! That's how sharp and sure of yourself you're going to be.

HE. As opposed to the way I am *now*?

SHE. Let's just say, now you're a little...loosey goosey.

HE. So you plan to tighten my goosey?

SHE. And focus your powers, so Banana's Personnel Director will know, "*You're The Man!*"

HE. And exactly how do I become "The Man?"

SHE. Very simple, all you have to do is finish your crossword puzzle by the time we get to Bay Point.

HE. (*HE reacts, whimpers comically!*) I need this?!

SHE. I'm serious, crosswords not only add to knowledge, they improve memory and sharpness. You'll find you can multi-task by using crossword wisdom, organizing and crosschecking. Studies show that doing crosswords in one's later years fights dementia.

HE. Or *causes* it.

(*Riffles lips with finger, makes sounds.*)

SHE. Most of all it gives you confidence that you can finish what you start. That's what's going to get you hired at Banana Republic.

HE. I see...interesting. Can I ask you one simple question?

SHE. Sure, go ahead.

HE. Can a psychologist be sued for malpractice?

SHE. (*Laughs in spite of herself.*) I don't believe you! Your ship is sinking, I try to throw you a life line, so you thumb your nose at me. You're just like Brian! Okay, I'll give you one last chance. (*Sports page in one hand, Crossword in other.*) *Sports Page...Puzzle.* You can read about jock straps... Or be hired by Banana Republic. *Make* a decision.

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