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Agnes Under the Big Top

A TALL TALE

by Aditi Brennan Kapil

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



SAMUELFRENCH.COM

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**Originally commissioned and produced by the
Mixed Blood Theatre Company of Minneapolis, MN.**

Agnes Under the Big Top was developed through a consortium led by The Lark Play Development Center (New York City) and includes Rhodopi International Theatre Lab (Smolyan, Bulgaria), Interact Theatre (Philadelphia), Mixed Blood Theatre Company (Minneapolis), and The Playwrights' Center (Minneapolis).

Agnes Under the Big Top was selected as an NEA Distinguished New Play Development Project as part of the NEA New Play Development Program, Hosted by Arena Stage."

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Aditi Kapil (playwright) and Liz Engelman (dramaturg) were participants in the TCG/ITI Travel Grants program, funded by the Trust for Mutual Understanding and administered by Theatre Communications Group, the national organization for the American theatre.

The world premiere of **AGNES UNDER THE BIG TOP** was presented in a National New Play Network rolling world premiere at Mixed Blood Theatre (MN), Long Wharf Theatre (CT), and Borderlands Theatre (AZ).

The play opened at The Mixed Blood Theatre (Jack Reuler, Artistic Director) in Minneapolis, MN on February 18, 2011. It was directed by Aditi Kapil, assisted by Rebekah Rentzel, with scenic design by Andrea Heilman, lighting by Jeff Bartlett, sound by Katherine Horowitz, costumes by Amber Brown, and dramaturgy by Liz Engelman. The stage manager was Ashley Warren. The cast was as follows:

AGNES..... Shá Cage
ELLA..... Linda Kelsey
ROZA..... Virginia S. Burke
SHIPKOV..... Nathaniel Fuller
HAPPY..... Ankit Dogra
BUSKER..... Nick Demeris

The play opened at Long Wharf Theatre (Gordon Edelstein, Artistic Director) in New Haven, CT on March 9, 2011. It was directed by Eric Ting, with scenic design by Frank Alberino, lighting by Tyler Micoleau, sound by Katie Down, costumes by Jessica Wegener Shay, and dialect design by Amy Stoller. The stage manager was Megan Schwartz Dickert. The cast was as follows:

AGNES..... Francesca Choy-Kee
ELLA..... Laura Esterman
ROZA..... Gergana Mellin
SHIPKOV..... Michael Cullen
HAPPY..... Eshan Bay
BUSKER..... Sam Ghosh

The play opened at Borderlands Theatre in Tucson, AZ (Barclay Goldsmith, Artistic Director) on February 9, 2012. It was directed by Barclay Goldsmith, with scenic design by John Longhoffer, lighting by Clint Bryson, sound by Kim Klingenfus, and costumes by Kathy Hurst. The stage manager was Eza Tessler. the cast was as follows:

AGNES		T Loving
ELLA		Toni Press-Coffman
ROZA		Susan Arnold
SHIPKOV		Philip Bennett
HAPPY		Laxmi Dahal
BUSKER		Brian Taraz

CHARACTERS

AGNES - Liberian immigrant, 30s, Ella's home care worker. Tough and funny.

ELLA - American, white. A rheumatoid, bedridden woman. She is deformed and wooden, her fingers trapped in claws. Prematurely aged.

ROZA - Bulgarian immigrant, 40s, speaks Bulgarian, Ella's home care worker. Silent except when addressing birds.

SHIPKOV - Bulgarian immigrant, 40s, Roza's husband, drives a subway train. Former ringmaster.

HAPPY - Indian, 20s, recently immigrated con artist, training as subway driver. Smiles a lot.

BUSKER - Plays an instrument on the subway platform, is all other voices/voiceovers, moves freely through time and space

SET PIECES

a bed
a subway train
a pole
windows, doors, and seats

All the characters inhabit the same apartment set when necessary, the one permanently occupied by Ella. The window is a shared window.

ALTERNATE ENDING

For productions that are unable to, or choose not to, position Shipkov on top of his subway train for scene 23, an alternate scene 23 text is available, following the text of the play.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The playwright would like to thank the following people for their invaluable contributions to this play:

My parents Satish Kapil and Ivanka Kapil for the use of their stories.

My cousin Happy Kapil, and my aunt Roza Zlateva, for the use of their names.

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My children Vyara, Nadezhda, and Stefan, for allowing me to tell them tall tales.

And always, my husband Sean.

1

(in the dark)

ANNOUNCER VO. ...stand back from the doors as the train approaches the terminal. Please stand back from the doors as the train approaches the terminal. Terminal. Do you hear me? Agnes? Agnes.

(Sound of subway doors opening as lights reveal AGNES sitting in a chair.)

(This is a quiet place.)

AGNES. I heard you.

I'm late.

DOCTOR VO. You understand that there's nothing/

AGNES. Nothing that you can do, it's finished, yes I understand. Got it.

DOCTOR VO. You're terminal.

AGNES. Sure. Aren't we all.

DOCTOR VO. It's a matter of weeks. I don't like to estimate...
One can never be absolutely sure with cancer.

AGNES. No schedule?

DOCTOR VO. No exact schedule, no

AGNES. But then how do I know when to arrive at the station?

DOCTOR VO. Excuse me?

AGNES. The station? When I need to arrive at the station? Terminal.

It's a joke.

DOCTOR VO. I'm sorry

AGNES. Well, I should get back to work

DOCTOR VO. When you're ready to talk to someone about
your further care, I'll connect you with/

AGNES. Maybe later

(Sound of subway doors shutting as lights crossfade.)

2

(The subway platform)

(A BUSKER plays in the background, barely audible.)

(HAPPY is looking at his cellphone.)

(AGNES stares out, immobile for several long beats.)

(This is a loud place.)

HAPPY. Shit!

(AGNES looks at him.)

Sorry... no signal down here! It's crazy, right?

(AGNES doesn't respond.)

(Silence)

(Sound of train arriving at the station, the announcer is garbled.)

ANNOUNCER VO. This is the blue line, eastbound, please stand back from the doors. Blue line, eastbound.

(Sound of subway doors opening, lights shift.)

3

(Ella's apartment)

(ELLA speaks briskly on the phone.)

(ROZA is gathering her things to leave.)

(AGNES enters.)

(This is a quiet place.)

ELLA. —if I have another AGNES. How is she?

episode they're going
to try a different
medication, but
they're concerned
about combining with,
anyway all the other
medicines are working
fine, my hands aren't
better, of course
the arthritis hasn't
improved in thirty
years why would my
hands be better, the
point is managing the
diabetes, ok if you're
not going to pick up I
can just stop talking.

(ROZA shrugs.)

Lunch?

(ROZA nods.)

Ok.

(ROZA exits.)

AGNES *puts away her things, watches ELLA, sits. It hits her in waves.*

Fine.

Fine.

You said you were inter-
ested.

When are you coming
by?

Good bye, Frederick.

(ELLA hangs up the phone, eats her lunch.)

(AGNES *sits and stares, tension emanating.*)

(*Lights fade.*)

(*quiet*)

(*Sound of a train passing far in the distance*)

4

(Lights fade up.)

(ELLA and AGNES are exactly where we left them.)

(ELLA is still eating.)

(Several beats)

AGNES. It's quiet.

It's too quiet here. It feels like a waiting room.

You should open a window.

(AGNES stands to open it)

ELLA. Leave it

(AGNES ignores her and opens the window, leans out.

ELLA is surprised, this is irregular.)

(beat)

AGNES. *(softly)* Help!

(beat)

ELLA. What?

(Beat. Nothing happens.)

AGNES. Nothing. Help me write— *(AGNES starts jotting)* eggs,
bread, what else?

ELLA. bananas, and not green ones this time either, the last
batch never ripened

AGNES. bananas...

ELLA. I want some ice cream, with real sugar, and yes I can
tell the difference—

*(As ELLA continues to speak without sound, AGNES
hears the subway announcer through the open window.)*

ANNOUNCER VO. This is the blue line, eastbound—

Next stop, see us raise the Big Top, please stand back
from the doors ladies and gentlemen, they'll open
soon enough!

This is the blue line, eastbound

ELLA. Are you listening?

AGNES. What? Yes.

ELLA. And I don't like that new tea, so get my usual, and I guess that Darjeeling will go to waste, or you can drink it since you're so hell bent on trying new things, but don't expect me to.

AGNES. Ok, got it.

I'll go end of shift, yah?

ELLA. Hm

(AGNES exits.)

(A bird chirps, ELLA looks up and out. Beat. She resumes eating.)

(sound of subway train in the distance)

(Lights fade.)

5

(In the dark, sound builds into a loud subway symphony, culminating in sound of subway doors opening, as lights reveal SHIPKOV, the train driver.)

(BUSKER plays on the platform.)

(SHIPKOV talks at the passengers on the platform through the glass, makes up little voices for them. This is for his own enjoyment, they can not hear him.)

SHIPKOV. Step right up, step right up!

Come on, get on, what are you looking at?

Idiot.

“oh, my nail, I broke it, what will the other girls think...”

“I am looking very handsome today, and it is clear that everyone is noticing me, oh wait, that one hasn’t seen me yet, maybe I’ll knock the old lady down with my immensely muscular shoulders and impress her...”

“I wonder if this is the right train, it’s so confusing, oh no, another map, must not look at it as it will only confuse me more, I will just stare at the train and feel if it’s the right train, because my feelings are important and valuable...”

Come on, come on, wake up!

Fuuuuuck!

BUSKER/ANNOUNCER V/O. Please stand back from the doors, this is the Blue line westbound, please stand clear of the doors.

(HAPPY rushes to SHIPKOV’s door and starts to get in. SHIPKOV blocks him.)

SHIPKOV. Hey!

HAPPY. Sorry, man, sorry

SHIPKOV. Who the fuck are you?

HAPPY. I– I’m Happy

SHIPKOV. And I am fucking pissed, get off my train

HAPPY. I'm Happy, we met yesterday, right?

You're training me.

You're training me, we met yesterday!

(long loaded beat)

(SHIPKOV laughs loudly.)

SHIPKOV. I'm just fucking you, get the fuck in, let's go!

HAPPY. Shit! Oh God. Ok!

(SHIPKOV is still laughing as the doors shut, platform noise and Busker out.)

(Sound of train driving into the tunnel, lights and sound change. Isolation on SHIPKOV and HAPPY.)

SHIPKOV. Should have seen your face!

Happy! Happy! What kind of stupid ass name is that anyway?

HAPPY. You asked me that yesterday.

It is a nickname, not my real name... my mother said I was a very happy baby—

SHIPKOV. Yeah yeah whatever, right?

HAPPY. Yeah. Right...

SHIPKOV. When I was a baby I climb out from my – what is it – crib and crawl outside on the steps where my mother leave this electric hotplate to cool, and I put my hand on it like this and it burn me right? So I go Waaah! pick up one hand, put the other hand on it Waaah! and I go like that Waaah! Waaah! *(miming alternating hands on the hotplate)* Waaah! until they come and lift me up. My mother say 'not so smart, but he can climb!'

HAPPY. That's a great story

SHIPKOV. Fuck you

You tell your mother she should have name you something good, like Rich. Richie Rich.

HAPPY. Ok

SHIPKOV. I got lots of great stories. You don't piss me off maybe I tell you more. Maybe teach you something,

you can be all grown up. Maybe you grow up from an adjective to a, what you want to be, a noun? A proper noun? Haha! Hear that? I gotta call my ESL teacher tell her I use that shit in a sentence

Ok, you drive—

HAPPY. Really?

SHIPKOV. Don't be an asshole, no not really, the computer is fucking driving. You practice just standing there

HAPPY. ok, man!

(HAPPY stands. SHIPKOV watches him, finds him comical.)

(beat)

(The dispatcher's voice comes through the radio.)

BUSKER/DISPATCHER VO. Shipkov, come in

SHIPKOV. I am in, out

BUSKER/DISPATCHER VO. Yeah, ok, can you take third shift Friday? Collie's got a wedding or something, out

SHIPKOV. And I have nothing, no reason to be above ground, third shift Friday is ok

BUSKER/DISPATCHER VO. Uh. Ok, I'll put you down then.

SHIPKOV. Put me down as much as you want my friend

(beat)

BUSKER/DISPATCHER VO. over and out

SHIPKOV. It's never over and you're never out.

Idiot.

You start pushing the brake now—

BUSKER/ANNOUNCER VO. *(muted)* Please stand clear of the doors, the train is approaching the station. Please stand clear of the doors.

(Train is pulling into the station. SHIPKOV looks out at the platform.)

SHIPKOV. Hah. You like looking at people?

HAPPY. Sure

SHIPKOV. So look now. That's what they look like when they are in the 'off' position.

That's what people look like with no audience, no show I'd help them out, but I'm not in that business any more.

Fucking cows. Moooooo

HAPPY. Cows are holy, man

(Train stops.)

SHIPKOV. We on break now, come back in an hour.

(beat)

Open the fucking doors.

(Subway doors open, lights shift.)

6

(Ella's apartment)

(Distant sounds of the outside world are invading her quiet through the window that AGNES left open)

(ELLA is on the phone leaving a message.)

ELLA. Frederick, I'm extremely frustrated. I expect these women to adhere to my wishes, I expect to be in control of my own environment, but you know how these people can, well anyway call me back, I really don't know where you are, well you know where I am and I'm not going anywhere, so you could stop by, that would be appreciated. Well...

The steady mechanical hum of your absence is very soothing.

I can't sleep with all this noise.

Ok. Bye, bye.

(ELLA hangs up, stares at the open window.)

At least it's not winter or I'd probably catch pneumonia. Probably what she wants.

(Birds chirp.)

Birds. Stay out, stay out...

They're probably nesting on the side of the building, I should call pest control.

Anyone could get in

(Lights shift.)

7

(Roza and Shipkov's apartment)

(ROZA feeds the birds at the window)

ROZA. Heeey, pile pile pile— *(Heeey, bird bird bird—*
kak e dumata... *what's the word...)*

Bird... bird!

Heeeeeey bird bird bird.

Moment, chakai malko... *(Hold on, one moment)*

Eto... hapni de, hapni— *(There... eat, come on*
eat—)

Kakvo pravish tuka? Ah? *(What are you doing*
here?)

Ela po blisko... *(Come closer...)*

Haide... *(Come on...)*

(ROZA beckons the bird
closer)

Ela, ela... *(Come, come...)*

(SHIPKOV enters from elsewhere in the apartment, pulling his pants up. ROZA ignores him.)

SHIPKOV. You're home.

What the hell are you doing?

You feeding the fucking birds again?

I'm going back to work now, why don't you stay here and feed birds.

No really don't move.

(ROZA does not respond. It's as though he does not exist.)

Your ass is getting fatter every day. I notice this because it's always pointed at me. Me and your ass we have long conversations, 'hey, how you doing?'

(fart noise)

'oh really? well, my day sucked'

(fart noise)

'ok then see you later'

(SHIPKOV *makes fart noises all the way out, exits.*)

(ROZA *stands very still.*)

(*Lights shift.*)

8

(AGNES's apartment)

(AGNES is on the phone.)

AGNES. Hello Eugene? What you doing home, what time is it over there?

– Oh, right... hey, is Granny there?

– No, I just needed to talk to your Granny...

– Oh, well, anyway... how is school?

– You need to concentrate, Eugene, those other boys can goof around but you are my smart boy, you can be president!

– Well, I think an honorable president would be better, don't you? The other kind gets killed off in very bloody manners.

– Sure you still get killed off, but it seems to me it's less bloody.

– Of course that makes a difference, you are going to die anyway, so how you do it makes a difference.

– Eugene, Eugene this is a morbid conversation, I don't care what you do, be a shopkeeper if that suits you better, your life expectancy there should be fine. Do you talk like this in school? It is a wonder your teachers don't spank you!

– Well Mr. Roberts should be careful what he tells impressionable young boys, Social Studies sounds a bit too exciting for my taste, you should study biology. You can be a doctor! You want to be a doctor Eugene? Discover new medicines?

– Who talks like that? You better shape up boy, get through this unpleasant phase quickly before you get left behind by all the smarter kids. I'm going to tell your Granny to wash your mouth out with soap.

– Sure I can, I am in the most powerful country in the world, I can do anything. Hahaaaa! Black ops with soap in their holsters, on their way right now, stand back from the door my boy, they are coming for you! No you're lying! No you!

– Ok, enough of this goofin' around, I don't got time for stories! You concentrate on your studies, hear?

– And listen to your Granny, turn out she right about every damn thing. So you pay attention, and keep your feet on the ground, don't let me hear otherwise.

– Just press your cheek.

– Do it you lazy boy!

(She kisses the phone.)

You feel that baby?

– Good. That's how much I love you.

– Nothing important, nothing really, tell granny I'll call later.

(AGNES hangs up abruptly.)

Shit...

(She walks to the window. Birds–)

Don't get so damn excited, I ain't birdfood yet.

(Lights shift.)

9

(HAPPY and SHIPKOV are driving.)

ANNOUNCER VO. This is the Blue line, Eastbound. This is the Blue line, Eastbound.

(beat)

HAPPY. Hey, do you ever get to announce?

SHIPKOV. What?

HAPPY. To announce. Announce the stations, man.

SHIPKOV. It's fucking automated

HAPPY. Yeah but it would be fun to do, right? I could do a great job!

SHIPKOV. Yeah, sure

HAPPY. I have a great voice

SHIPKOV. So, is that how you getting rich? You gonna to be a rockstar? 'He started as a subway announcer, and one day mr. bigshot record producer was on the train because his Porsche was in the shop, and he said that's the voice I've been looking for!'

HAPPY. That's how it happens, man!

Ok, I'm just joking about that, but my voice is going to be my fortune, that part is true. I have many business deals going on, many deals. You just got to be in the right place at the right time! That's my specialty. Hey, you want to be my partner? Fifty/fifty! I give you the easy job, I do all the work. We get rich together, ok old man?

SHIPKOV. Hey, here's a riddle! What's 50% of shit?
More shit!

HAPPY. Ok, you are not very much an optimist. Here you live in greatest country in the world and you are very negative.

SHIPKOV. Optimists are stupid people.

Do you know how depressing my damn life is?

HAPPY. Maybe you need a nickname

SHIPKOV. What?

HAPPY. My life is very 'Happy'!

SHIPKOV. Oh, haha

HAPPY. It's really too bad your mother named you 'Pissed off dude living underground in the dark'

SHIPKOV. You watch yourself

That's very fucking funny.

Asshole.

HAPPY. I think you are jealous of my name

SHIPKOV. Ha

HAPPY. Haha!

But I'm not joking man, my name keeps me safe from bad thoughts! Do you know I have had four jobs this year already? My last boss was a very unstable person, mentally you know! A different person would be very depressed, but not me man! Good thing I have a positive outlook, right?

SHIPKOV. You are proof that god has a sense of fucking humor.

HAPPY. Oh, ok, when I am famous I will still say 'hello' to you, man. That is the sort of person I am.

SHIPKOV. Famous! Ok, I'll tell you something. You ever watch a trapeze artist? Hell, you ever been to the circus?

HAPPY. Sure.

I have! I have been to the circus, I'm Indian!

SHIPKOV. Right, with a bunch of elephants sitting and standing, or did you have artists? Real artists – acrobats, trapeze/

HAPPY. India has great circus, man/

SHIPKOV. Ok, you ever look at the face of a trapeze artist?

They keep their eyes open, they do what they need to do, they move forward, next act, keep moving, audience gets bored. You can't do that, you can't keep your eyes open, then I don't know, maybe you should go sell shoes or some shit, you need to think about that.

And the trap's not the big brass fucking ring, it's the next step, it's get to the other side, just moving through space, just staying alive!

There. That was a fucking metaphor, if you can't figure it out tough shit for you.

HAPPY. You really like the circus.

SHIPKOV. Yeah, whatever. I used to be Ringmaster. Another life.

Circus is like life. Only better.

HAPPY. Ok, so Ringmaster, what's your big plan?

SHIPKOV. Fuck you talking about?

ANNOUNCER VO. (*muted*) This is the Blue line, Eastbound.
This is the Blue line, Eastbound.

HAPPY. What's your big plan, man? Life plan, you know.

SHIPKOV. Ok, so the metaphor, whshoo, right over your head, ok, not too bright, now I know and I won't waste my time

This, this right here, my friend, this is my plan.

I plan to stand right here, pushing this lever, for the rest of my fucking life

HAPPY. This is your dream?

SHIPKOV. No fuckhead, this is my life. Dreams are for morons, dreams are the trap, whatever, shut up, I'm finished talking to you

HAPPY. You have a very depressing outlook, I think. Not me, man, I got to think positive! I mean, no offense, but I won't be here very long, you know?

ANNOUNCER V/O. (*muted*) The train is approaching the station, please stand back from the doors, change trains to the Red line or Green line. The train is approaching the station.

SHIPKOV. (*overlaps*) Ok, watch this, let's see if anyone gets killed today— oppa! My money's on that guy with the briefcase, watch, he'll lean forward to pick it up, will he make it back up before I snap his head off?

HAPPY. Shit man

SHIPKOV. Ohhhhaaaa! Bravo! Da! By a millisecond he survives to go to work and live another boring ass day. What? This is great stuff!

(The sound of train stopping, subway doors open, lights shift.)

10

(The subway platform)

(BUSKER plays.)

(AGNES is having an imaginary conversation with Eugene.)

AGNES. So Eugene, your ma's a big fat liar, I ain't coming back.

Why? Oh, I finally heard back from the CIA and they need me to go deep undercover.

For life.

(She drops the imaginary conversation.)

Yeah there I go again, that's a damn tall tale, can't seem to help myself, which is how I ended up in this damn place. Stupid.

Yes ma, you were right about everything, Agnes thought she was special, Agnes thought she could fly, Agnes should have stayed put, stayed in her place, then maybe Agnes wouldn't be standing on this damn platform waiting for a damn train to go to the damn grocery store—

I'm bloody dying, let me go pick up some groceries.

Hey, I should get some new shoes for winter

No wait, I won't be around for winter!

Well that's a time saver!

What I need is some travel size shampoo and conditioner, little tiny bottles, that should last me!

Bullshit

This is bullshit

This is not me. This is some other woman whose life got screwed up. Not me.

No way I'm bloody dying before my own bloody punch line.

(ROZA enters platform, stands on the edge. This is a game she plays with herself, the count down to jumping in front of the train. But she does not jump.)

ROZA. Tri, dve, edno... op (*Three, two, one... op*)

AGNES. Roza?

(sound of a train passing and departing)

Hey, sorry! That's the express. It don't stop here.
I only mention it cuz you looked like you was gon' hop
on whether it stopped or no

Yeah, ok, good talk

You and me, we never really connected what with the
language barrier. Tell truth, I don't much care, no
offense, but you not that pleasant.

Well this is nice.

Guess what? I got cancer!

Eating away at my insides. Next stop, Dead Liberian
woman laying on the platform! Please stand back from
the damn doors, or she'll take you down with her!

Well, it's good to get that off my chest!

Thanks for listening, you blank faced cipher, boy
there's nothing back there, is there?

This is great, life's full of these precious moments,
right here. I got a whole series of them, lining up like
empty frames going back bloody years

(They both stare ahead, long moment.)

Roza, Roza, Roza... now would be a really shitty time
for you to suddenly start talking English, you wouldn't
do that to me, would you?

(sound of train arriving)

No. That's my girl. Consistent, and I appreciate that.

(ROZA burps and sways.)

Hey...

Roza...?

Well, shit girl!

Are you drunk?

(Subway doors open, lights shift.)

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