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Aphrodisiac

by Rob Handel

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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Originally produced in New York City by 13P, January 2005

**Subsequently produced by Long Wharf Theatre, December 7, 2005
(Gordon Edelstein, Artistic Director; Michael Stotts, Managing Director)**

APHRODISIAC was originally produced in New York City by 13P on January 7, 2005. It was directed by Ken Rus Schmoll, with sets by Sue Rees, costumes by Michelle R. Phillips, lighting by Garin Marschall, and sound by Bray Poor. The production stage managers were Carrie Meconis and Rebecca Spinac. The cast was as follows:

ALMA Jennifer Dundas
AVERY Thomas Jay Ryan
MONICA Alison Weller

APHRODISIAC was subsequently produced by Long Wharf Theatre on December 7, 2005 (Gordon Edelstein, Artistic Director; Michael Stotts, Managing Director). It was directed by Ken Rus Schmoll, with sets by Sue Rees, costumes by Michelle R. Phillips, lighting by Garin Marschall, sound by Bray Poor, and dramaturgy by Beatrice Basso. The production stage manager was Charles M. Turner III. The cast was as follows:

ALMA Jennifer Dundas
AVERY Rob Campbell
MONICA Yetta Gottesman

CHARACTERS

ALMA

AVERY

MONICA

SETTING

Washington, D.C. and New York City,
early summer 2001 and early summer 2002.

NOTE ON NAMES

The second syllable of “Ilona” is pronounced with a long o, as in “own” or “loan.” The first syllable of “Alma” is pronounced “all.”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

(A Korean restaurant. A man and a woman sit in a booth. ALMA is 24 and looks her age. AVERY is 33 but stress has aged him badly.)

ALMA. It's not that it's not fair, technically it IS fair, I was supposed to have a six-month internship, until I got my degree, but it's not like they weren't happy to have me working for free after that, but now with this, it's like they don't care how it looks on my résumé, they don't care that it looks irregular, like I was doing something irregular, and I would still be there, I would still be there working for free if I hadn't mentioned something in casual conversation about my graduation in December, that's what's not fair, I would still be there if it were not for pure chance, that's what's not fair.

AVERY. You want me to call her again?

ALMA. No, no. I understand it puts her in a funny position. I want to be there, but she doesn't want to look like she's taking advantage of me. Everything is always about appearances.

(pause)

I'm just thrown for a loop.

AVERY. Of course you are.

ALMA. It's just like, all these things, boom.

AVERY. Right.

ALMA. And I haven't been able to get a hold of you.

AVERY. I told you, my wife is flying in tomorrow.

ALMA. I thought she was too sick to travel.

AVERY. It's the first time in I don't know how many years. She really wanted to go to that dinner this year. They're giving some award to someone.

ALMA. Jessye Norman?

AVERY. Is he the guy who was a hostage in Iran? Anyway, I guess she wants to stay for a few weeks.

(pause)

Sorry it's a bad time. Is there anyone you want me to call?

ALMA. Like who?

AVERY. I don't know. Another internship? Maybe a job?

ALMA. With who?

AVERY. I don't know. What do you want to do?

ALMA. I want to be a senator.

AVERY. OK, but I meant have you thought about your immediate plans?

ALMA. I've given them some thought, yes.

AVERY. Is it anything I can help you with?

(ALMA looks at him a moment, and then begins to laugh.)

What?

(Her laughter goes on and on.)

What's so funny?

(He's been trying to share the joke, but now he becomes concerned: people are looking at them.)

Could you stop already?

(She is laughing and wiping her eyes.)

Ilona, come on.

(She stops and catches her breath. She wipes her eyes.)

ALMA. I'm pregnant and I've decided to move to New York and have the baby and wait.

AVERY. What do you mean wait?

ALMA. I'm just going to wait. I'll go to museums. New York is a good place to wait. You can drink coffee – if you're pregnant you can drink herbal tea – and watch the world go by. Very fast.

AVERY. That's ridiculous.

ALMA. Fuck you.

AVERY. Hey!

ALMA. You called me ridiculous.

AVERY. I said you're BEING ridiculous. I meant you're BEING ridiculous.

ALMA. Fuck you.

AVERY. Will you stop saying that.

ALMA. You used to like when I –

AVERY. Now STOP. What's gotten into you?

(She begins to laugh again.)

OK, I get that.

(She calms down.)

I'm trying to say, listen to yourself. Watching the world go by? You're young. You're full of life.

ALMA. You're pretty lively yourself.

AVERY. Will you listen?

ALMA. This is much more fun than I imagined.

AVERY. You can't put a stop on your life. You can't call everything off, you can't let this – this – random – fluke – of luck –

ALMA. Careful.

AVERY. *(continuous)* determine how you're going to spend the next 18 years of your life.

ALMA. How are you going to spend the next 18 years of YOUR life?

AVERY. *(continuous)* Are you thinking about that? Listen to me. You have an amazing life ahead of you. You're smart.

ALMA. Oh, thank you.

AVERY. *(continuous)* You're one of the smartest young people I've ever met.

ALMA. Funny how my age is suddenly a big subject.

AVERY. (*continuous*) You could be anything you want in this town. You don't want to leave Washington.

ALMA. Would you miss me?

AVERY. I'm thinking about you.

ALMA. Would you miss me?

AVERY. This is going to determine your whole future.

ALMA. Would you miss me?

AVERY. That's not something to throw away out of petulance.

ALMA. Would you miss me?

(*pause*)

But enough about me. How have you been?

AVERY. I care about you.

ALMA. You CARE about me? Like a parakeet?

AVERY. Let's talk about this in the car.

ALMA. Let's talk about it in bed.

AVERY. I think we need to focus –

ALMA. I'm not attractive to you anymore?

AVERY. Ilona. Give me a break here.

(*AVERY checks his reflection in a piece of silverware.*

ALMA catches him. He rises, takes her arm.)

Come on.

(*sees her amused expression*)

What?

ALMA. You're afraid of me. It's really funny.

(*She cracks up again.*)

AVERY. Do you want to hurt me? Have I given you reason to hurt me?

(*She doesn't budge. He tries a new tone.*)

It must have been a great shock. Finding out you were pregnant. This is a confusing time for you.

ALMA. Not really.

AVERY. Let's go.

ALMA. I don't want to.

AVERY. Ilona –

ALMA. I don't want to. Why don't you sit down?

AVERY. We can't talk about this here.

ALMA. No one ever comes in this place. That's why you take me to eat here.

(AVERY sits, takes a deep breath.)

AVERY. Let's say you move to New York and have a kid.
What do you think is going to happen?

ALMA. You'll come visit. After the kid is born.

AVERY. I can't do that.

ALMA. I'll sleep with you again if you do.

AVERY. That is the last thing on my mind right now.

(Beat. ALMA explodes into uncontrolled laughter.)

All right.

(Her laughter continues.)

Ha ha.

(Her laughter continues.)

We're going to get kicked out.

(Her laughter continues.)

It's not funny.

(Her laughter winds down. Pause.)

ALMA. The last thing on my mind.

(She starts up again.)

AVERY. Jesus God.

(ALMA regains her composure. She smiles at AVERY.)

ALMA. You'll come. I know you'll come.

AVERY. You're wrong, sweetie.

ALMA. We'll see.

AVERY. You're really overestimating yourself. You're thinking like a child.

(ALMA begins to fill with a reckless anger. AVERY sees it happen and tries to undo his words.)

AVERY. That's not like you.

ALMA. That's exactly like me. That's why you're here.

AVERY. What's that supposed to mean?

ALMA. You like children. Do you know how many times you told me you love my tight little cunt?

AVERY. *(rising, grabbing her arm)* Jesus, that's enough. –

ALMA. *(continuous)* Every time except twice. I know because that was what made me come. When you said that into my ear, I knew you were totally out of control.

AVERY. You've never seen me out of control.

(He rises, firmly grasping her arm. She tries to yank it away, but he has too tight a grip. He pulls her to her feet and towards the door. She resists.)

(She tries to bite his hand. He snatches it away just in time, releasing her. She backs up to the table. They face off.)

(He moves towards her. She picks up a glass and throws it down on the floor, smashing it. He freezes. She picks up another glass and smashes it. He turns around, calmly, as if he was suddenly a mere passer-by, and walks out the door as she picks up all the plates and saucers and teacups and smashes them one by one.)

(The lights slowly fade. In the darkness we hear taped voices.)

ALMA. *(ON TAPE)* Congressman Ferris, do you know what happened to Ilona Waxman?

AVERY. *(ON TAPE)* No, I do not.

ALMA. *(ON TAPE)* Did you have anything to do with her disappearance?

AVERY. *(ON TAPE)* No, I didn't.

ALMA. (ON TAPE) Did you say anything or do anything that could have caused her to drop out of sight?

AVERY. (ON TAPE) You know, Ilona and I never had a cross word.

(The lights gradually fade up on an apartment. It is so orderly you would think no one lives there. AVERY sits brooding, drinking a bottle of beer. Tape continues.)

ALMA. (ON TAPE) Do you have any idea if there was anyone who wanted to harm her?

AVERY. (ON TAPE) No.

ALMA. (ON TAPE) Did you cause anyone to harm her?

AVERY. (ON TAPE) No.

ALMA. (ON TAPE) Did you kill Ilona Waxman?

AVERY. (ON TAPE) I did not.

ALMA. (ON TAPE) Can you describe your relationship? What exactly was your relationship with Ilona Waxman?

(A key turns in the door and ALMA enters. AVERY does not acknowledge her. ALMA drops her coat and bag on a chair. Tape continues.)

AVERY. (ON TAPE) Well, I met Ilona last, uh, October. And um, we became very close. I met her in Washington, D.C.

ALMA. (ON TAPE) Very close, meaning...?

AVERY. (ON TAPE) We had a close relationship. I liked her very much.

ALMA. (ON TAPE) May I ask you, was it a sexual relationship?

AVERY. (ON TAPE) Well, Christine, I've been married for 34 years, and uh, I've not been a, a perfect man, and I've made my share of mistakes. But um, out of respect for my family, and out of a specific request from the Waxman family, I think it's best that I not get into those details, uh, about Ilona Waxman.

(Tape out. Silence. ALMA gives up on waiting for AVERY to speak and picks up her coat as if to leave.)

AVERY. *(suddenly)* What do you call that? I'll never be able to go in there again.

ALMA. Oh well.

(They speak in different voices than in the first scene – their own.)

AVERY. They had the best bibimbop in Virginia.

ALMA. You left me there. The cab ride cost me forty bucks.
(silence)

AVERY. Alma, this is getting out of hand.

ALMA. We've got to figure out what happened.

AVERY. Call me crazy, but I'm almost sure there are more traditional methods. Forensic evidence, that sort of thing.

ALMA. For God's sake, Avery. There are 558 open missing persons cases in Washington. I think it's safe to say the M.P.D.C. don't exactly specialize in locating –

AVERY. You don't know that. Something might turn up.

ALMA. Something might turn up in fifty years. Or never.

AVERY. Or tomorrow.

ALMA. And until then we're supposed to sit quietly and wait?

AVERY. It's better to break some poor restaurant's dishes?

ALMA. *(on "restaurant")* It's better for me, yes.

(pause)

AVERY. We could ask Dad. We could come right out and ask him what happened. We could say, Dad, we understand you're not ready to tell the whole world every detail of your personal life, but for us, within the family, we'd like you to tell us about –

ALMA. I'm not ready to speak to him. Besides, I know what he'll say.

AVERY. What?

ALMA. He'll deny everything.

AVERY. To us? To his children?

ALMA. What if I called him right now? Said I'm coming over? I get out of the cab. Smile at the doorman. Go up in the elevator. Ring the bell.

AVERY. (*in Dan's voice, rising*) Alma. Thanks for dropping by. How have you been?

ALMA. Are you going to offer me a drink, Dad?

AVERY. In fact I was.

ALMA. How civil.

AVERY. I know this is terrible for you and I'm sorry.

ALMA. (*on "and"*) Bourbon and water.

AVERY. (*fixing drink*) No ice?

ALMA. Sorry I'm late. I was at my recovery group for children who have to picture a parent having sex because the whole world is doing so. Chelsea Clinton broke down again.

AVERY. When you're sarcastic you remind me of someone.

ALMA. Well, it's a Freudian nightmare all round.

(*accepts drink, takes a swallow*)

Were you having an affair with Ilona Waxman?

AVERY. (*immediately*) Yes.

ALMA. Jesus how pathetic.

(*pause*)

Don't you think?

(*pause*)

Do you miss her?

AVERY. My heart is broken.

ALMA. Is it. Did you ever love me?

AVERY. That's kind of a jump. Of subject.

ALMA. I'm suddenly curious.

AVERY. Yes, Alma, I love you very deeply.

ALMA. What's it been like?

AVERY. Like any father, I guess.

ALMA. (*on "I"*) The past few days. How did you find out?

AVERY. Her mother called me. After they hadn't heard from her in five days.

ALMA. Did her mother know? About...

AVERY. No one knew. As far as I know, no one knew.

ALMA. How long had it been going on?

AVERY. Not long. A few months.

ALMA. Were you in – this is humiliating – Did you break up with her?

AVERY. No. We never fought. We never argued.

ALMA. Where did you think it would lead, for God's sake?

AVERY. Nowhere. I do this pretty often.

ALMA. Excuse me?

AVERY. I'm sorry. I do this pretty often. You can't be completely shocked, you know your mother and I –

ALMA. (*holding out her empty glass*) Could you?

AVERY. (*taking it*) – hardly ever see each other. You must have wondered.

ALMA. It's not something I thought about. Not being an intern myself, or a congressman, I actually think about things besides sex.

(*He gives her the refreshed drink and resumes his story.*)

AVERY. Her mother called. She asked me if I was having an affair with Ilona. I said no.

ALMA. You lied.

AVERY. It's nobody's business.

ALMA. She's missing. She could be dead.

AVERY. I feel terrible about that, but it's not because we were seeing each other. Probably something awful happened to her. It might be a random crime. It might have to do with some part of her life I didn't know about. But it's got nothing to do with me. There's no reason everyone has to know about us. You asked and I told you because you're my daughter.

ALMA. Bill Clinton lied to his daughter.

AVERY. I'm not Bill Clinton.

ALMA. That remains to be seen.

AVERY. After I hung up with her mother, I called a friend at the M.P.D.C. and told them to give the matter top priority. Then on Monday, the parents went to the Susan Burns Morgenstern Memorial Reward Foundation, which has a very effective public relations department, and within hours a 24-year-old adult working at the Bureau of Prisons became The Missing Intern and I became...

(vague gesture)

The reports started on the six o'clock news. I was in a subcommittee meeting that ran over. When I came out reporters started chasing me back to my office. I laid low with my staff for five hours. They wanted me to sneak out and stay with one of them, but I insisted on going to my own house. I had my personal cell phone turned off – the number I only give out to friends. I turned it on when I got home. Most of the messages were from women I've seen in the past ten years. The first one asked if I still had the book she gave me and asked me to throw it away. The second one asked if I still had the tie clip she gave me and asked me to throw it away. The third one – anyway, it went on from there.

(Sips his beer.)

The police questioned me for three hours yesterday. You probably know that, you probably saw Chief Showbiz on the news.

ALMA. Did you tell them the truth?

AVERY. No.

ALMA. For crying out loud, Dad!

AVERY. It's nobody's business. It's not going to help them find her.

ALMA. You didn't think Monica Lewinsky was nobody's business.

AVERY. I thought it was sordid. In the Oval Office!

ALMA. *(giving up)* Adultery is really its own moral universe.

AVERY. Ilona is an adult. I'm an adult. We were both lonely people and we enjoyed being together. I'm sorry she's missing and I'm angry that people are suggesting I might have had something to do with it. I'm angry that my life could be ruined. I'm angry that I'm being judged.

ALMA. That's three angries to one sorry.

(beat)

Was there a message from Mom?

AVERY. No.

ALMA. You're kidding. The house must be surrounded by reporters. She didn't call.

AVERY. Nope.

ALMA. Is that how you guys deal with these things? Silence? Pretense? Never mind, I don't want to know. No, I do. No, I don't. Mom must have called.

AVERY. I guess she was waiting for me to call her.

ALMA. Did you?

AVERY. I didn't have anything to say.

ALMA. *(a suggestion)* "I'm sorry I ruined your life."

AVERY. *(ignoring this)* I couldn't sleep, of course. I kept watching Headline News. It's interesting, actually. The way they repeat the same stories every half hour. Making little alterations in the order and phrasing even when they have no new information. A rumor becomes part of the story at 1:30, then disappears by 2:30. As if they have someone whose job is to make them up, to keep people awake. Finally I picked up the phone because I needed to talk to someone and, you know, your mother and I have been married for 34 years.

ALMA. She was probably thinking the same thing. How can I be there for him?

AVERY. I'll tell you one thing, Alma, she wasn't angry and sarcastic and thinking only of herself.

ALMA. No, thinking only of yourself is your job, isn't it?

AVERY. You'll excuse me, I have some work to do.

ALMA. What did Mom say?

AVERY. I don't care to share that with you right now. Where are you staying? I'll give you a ride on my hog.

(Pause. ALMA and AVERY crack up.)

AVERY. He SAYS that.

ALMA. I know, I know.

(They collapse, weeping with laughter. AVERY puts his hands out in front of him on imaginary handlebars.)

AVERY. Vroom, vroom!

(This sets them off again.)

ALMA. *(wiping her eyes)* Can you imagine him giving me a ride through the streets of Washington? Sitting behind him with my arms around his waist? I'd be on the cover of every paper. The new girlfriend.

AVERY. Jesus.

ALMA. *(barely able to speak)* I know, it makes me want to throw up.

(Their laughter subsides.)

AVERY. We've got to figure out what we're going to do.

ALMA. OK.

AVERY. Why don't you go see him?

ALMA. Why don't you go see him?

(Stalemate)

Have you talked to him at all?

AVERY. No.

ALMA. He didn't call?

AVERY. He never calls. I call him. Actually I don't call him, I call Mom, and she passes messages back and forth. You know, the clearinghouse.

ALMA. You and Dad live in the same city and you don't call? You don't have lunch?

AVERY. I bump into him. We get coffee.

ALMA. I'm hungry.

AVERY. Yeah, well, next time we go out, why don't you wait until they bring our food before you trash the place.

ALMA. Do you have any bread? I want to make toast.

AVERY. No.

ALMA. You don't have bread? How about a frozen bagel?

AVERY. Nope.

ALMA. What, you have nothing in your fridge except a jar of pickles, like Ilona Waxman? I hate Washington.

AVERY. As a representative of the mayor's office, I feel I should respond to that.

(pause)

The museums are nice.

(He gets another beer from the fridge.)

What's the worst-case scenario? He's hiding something terrible. He's done something we never thought he was capable of. Truthfully, I wouldn't have thought he was capable of having an affair. I would have thought he was too averse to risk.

ALMA. Like Bill Clinton?

AVERY. Maybe Dad didn't see it as a risk. Maybe he saw it as part of the job. He's a consummate professional.

ALMA. Like Bill Clinton.

AVERY. Best-case scenario. Benefit of the doubt. It was an innocent friendship. Here's this young woman. She and her friend – what's the friend's name?

ALMA. Trish.

AVERY. She and Trish are grad students in public administration. They go on what they call "political field trips" where they visit the offices of House members and have their photo taken with them. One day, they visit the representative from Ilona's home town. Trish talks herself into an internship in the office, but Ilona, Ilona's already interning at the Bureau of Prisons. But she and Dad get to be friends. They call each other

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