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Samuel French Acting Edition

Barrymore

by William Luce

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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BARRYMORE was originally produced at the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada, as a first collaboration between the Festival and Garth H. Drabinsky's LIVENT INC. It opened on September 20, 1996, starring Christopher Plummer, featuring Michael Mastro, and directed by Gene Saks. Scenic and costume design were by Santo Loquasto and the production stage manager was Susan Konynenburg.

The production subsequently toured several cities in the United States, then opened on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre on March 25, 1997. Mr. Plummer won a Tony® Award as Best Actor for his portrayal of John Barrymore.

The play takes place one month before
John Barrymore's death.

Act I The spring of 1942

Act II Later the same evening

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The cover photograph of Christopher Plummer is by Cylla von Tiedemann. Special thanks are given to Gene Saks for his wise and witty direction of my play.

THE MUSIC BOX

THE ESTATE OF IRVING BERLIN AND THE SHUBERT ORGANIZATION, OWNERS

LIVENT (U.S.) INC.

proudly presents

**Christopher
PLUMMER**
in
BARRYMORE
a new play

by
WILLIAM LUCE

featuring
MICHAEL MASTRO

Scenic and Costume Design by

SANTO LOQUASTO

Lighting Design by

NATASHA KATZ

Hair Design by
MICHAEL KRISTON

Production Stage Manager
SUSAN KONYNENBURG

Directed by
GENE SAKS

Originally produced at the Stratford Festival

Canadian Airlines

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BARRYMORE

was produced on Broadway in New York City by
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GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
IS MADE TO **WILL FOWLER** FOR
HIS GENEROUS CO-OPERATION
IN SUPPLYING BASIC MATERIAL
FOR THIS PLAY FROM HIS
BOOKS, ARTICLES AND PERSONAL
REMEMBRANCES OF
JOHN BARRYMORE.

Author's Notes

John Barrymore was already the most popular actor in America when he decided to try his hand at Shakespeare. The year was 1920. He was thirty-eight, the young brother of Ethel and Lionel Barrymore—all three, heirs to an acting dynasty, unwilling recruits into the family business. Behind John Barrymore lay many theatrical hits and flops—some roles trifling, others serious and undisputedly praiseworthy—plus a good number of silent films. In his public's estimation, he was a matinee idol of romantic mien, handsome proportion and profile; possessed of a roving eye and a colorful reputation for high-jinx. Critics and audiences were thus taken by surprise when their quintessential "leading man" lurched onto New York's Plymouth Theatre stage as the warped and malevolent Richard III. Observed Barrymore's vocal coach, Margaret Carrington, "Jack's was a demonstration of demoniac talent at its highest pitch."

Yet, a greater test of his actor's mettle lay ahead. Within three years, he assayed the character of Hamlet in a performance which came to be considered the first great enactment of the role in this century. Sensitive, simple, modern in interpretation, he ran long enough to break Edwin Booth's New York record. Then he took London by storm. Recalled Laurence Olivier, "Everything about him was exciting. He was athletic, he had charisma and, to my young mind, he played the part to perfection. He was astounding." With the closing of *Hamlet*, the high pitch of Jack's "demoniac talent" had spent itself.

Although some creditable film performances followed, alcoholism and self-mockery claimed the rest of his career; his real-life Falstaffian behavior all but obliterated the memory of his shining hour as the magnificent actor. Moreover, the business of theater no longer tolerated the indulgences upon which Jack fed in order to make his art possible. Brooks Atkinson said, "John Barrymore was Icarus who flew so close to the sun that the wax on his wings melted and he plunged back to earth—from the peak of classical acting to the banalities of show business."

That Jack's decline was pathetic is true. That it was tragic is debatable. He had seized the moment, experienced an artistic "high" known to few. Perhaps the one tragic thing would have been his *not* daring the flight "close to the sun."

—William Luce

For Christopher Plummer

ACT I

(As house goes to black, a single shaft of shimmering light appears, as if floating midair. Out of some memory, the voice of John Barrymore as Antony roars with laughter and speaks.)

BARRYMORE. *(Taped.)*

Come, my friends,
There's sap in't yet. The next time I do fight
I'll make death love me; Come,
Let's have one other gaudy night: call to me
All my sad captains, fill our bowls; once more
Let's mock the midnight bell.

(We are in a New York theatre, 1942. A bare light bulb burns on a metal standard. A hulking shape is seen, covered by a canvas. It is actually a throne, which will be used in the second act. Now it is indistinguishable. The stage is otherwise bare, except for three chairs, a large wicker trunk on which sit a bowl of red apples and a book of Shakespeare; a full-length mirror, victrola and records; a small barrel containing swords, canes and a flyswatter. BARRYMORE, in a suit and hat, enters, pushing a garment rack hung with

Richard III costumes. He is modestly inebriated.)

BARRYMORE. (*Singing.*)

A B C D E F G H I got a gal in Kalamazoo,
Don't wanna boast, but I know she's the toast
Of Kalamazoo, zoo, zoo, zoo, zoo, zoo—

(Reciting to Audience.)

Yolanda in Kalamazoo
Once strolled after dark by the zoo.
She was seized by the nape
And humped by an ape,
As she sighed, "What a heavenly screw."

Just a minute. I forgot the baby.

(Singing, he exits.)

I'm gonna send a wire, hoppin' on a flyer, leavin' today.
Am I dreamin'; I can hear her screamin'—

(A la Ted Lewis.)

Is everybody happy?

(He re-enters with a small black doctor's bag. Singing.)

A B C D E F G H I got a gal in Kalamazoo—

(To Audience.)

My medicinal bag. It goes where I go. Its only objectionable feature is that people are convinced I carry around my own ashes. It actually contains vital, life-sustaining potions from my pharmacist at the Jungle Club on Seventh Avenue.

(From the bag he removes two whiskey bottles. Singing.)

Years have gone by; my, my, how she grew;
I liked her looks, when I carried her books in Kalamazoo-
zoo-zoo-zoo—

(Reciting to the Audience.)

Said Yolanda, "Oh, my, you're so hairy!
But I hope—yes, I do—that I marry
A man with a schlong
Half as thick and as long
As the kind that you zoo-keepers carry."

I must be a frigging masochist and, God knows, an ego-tist—for here I am, three months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the whole world at war, and I'm trying to revive my puny career. As well try to rejuvenate my sex life and turn this limp noodle into a bushwhacker.

I can't believe I forked out good money to rent this God-forsaken dump for one night, just to run a few goddamned lines. But I have, so do not be put off by the disarray that you see. All this will hopefully be transformed into the throne room of that lump of foul deformity, ruthless Richard the Turd.

God, he was shit, wasn't he? But I have an affinity with shits.

You know, Richard was my first real success as a classical actor. It was long ago, but it was the first time they took me seriously. So I've got to try to get the old bastard up on his feet

again. I need to be taken seriously once more before the man in the bright nightgown comes for me.

That is, if my trusty prompter ever arrives. For the success of this hazardous enterprise rests not only on your approval, but on the shaky ability of an aging actor to remember his lines. And if, perchance, there are among you one or two charitable angels, the smallest gesture will not be unwelcome. Thank you—

(He extends his upturned hat to the Audience.)

Thank you, thank you, thank you—

(To Audience Member.)

Hya, Mister Jackson—

(Singing.)

Ev'rything's O K A L A M A Z O

Oh, what a gal, a real piperoo.

I'll make by bid for that freckle-faced kid I'm hurrying to.

I'm goin' to Michigan to see the sweetest gal in—

(To Audience.)

Have you ever seen delirium tremens? A colleague of mine, a bibulous fellow thespian, had the best DTs I've ever seen. You might say, Henry's bladder abhorred a vacuum. Henry Malcolm Rogers, known in theater circles as the world's best worst actor. He kicked the bucket last week at sixty-two, but not from liquor. He died of what in New York is called a natural death—he was hit by a cab.

Hank drank a quart of whiskey a day for forty years. They tried to cremate him, but he blew up and wrecked the place. Dear Henry, the only man I ever knew with varicose veins in his eyeballs.

There's really nothing funny about booze.

(Laughing a boozy laugh.)

Hell, I must be a living advertisement for all the friggin' liquor companies in the world. Look at these—

(Extending trembling hands.)

Restless little buggers, aren't they? I'm so far gone, I haven't left yet. But things are beginning to click for me—my knees, my elbows, my neck. When I get out of bed, I sound like Carmen Miranda's castanets.

But I don't feel old yet. They say a man isn't old till regrets take the place of dreams. That's it, isn't it? Dreams. And then our little life is rounded with a sleep, blood clots, gout, arthritis, dropsy, ulcers and—oh, yes—hemorrhoids. They're a pain in the neck.

(Holding up banana.)

The sovereign panacea for whiskey breath.

A tippler from Riverside Drive
Had breath you could barely survive.
He ate a banana,
Read George Santayana,
Then farted Chanel No. 5.

Allow me to disabuse you of the prevalent notion that Jack Barrymore is a tragic figure. I do not suffer easily those maudlin sob-sisters who lament my fall from grace. Hell, they haven't even got the decency to wait till I die. Get this straight: I've

had one helluva life—for a man who's been dead fifteen years.
(*He finds a flyswatter in the barrel.*)

You know, one summer holiday on Staten Island, my brother Lionel and I staged furious duels with these. I was six—I was the baby. Lionel was ten. My sister Ethel, who was nine going on forty, saw us showing off and got the idea of putting on a play in the barn behind the boarding house. All thirty-seven guests came. Each paid a penny. I earned six cents. Lionel, ten. Ethel kept the remaining twenty-one cents for herself. Star billing and production costs. Lionel was irate, threatened to quit. But I was completely happy, because I hadn't learned to count yet.

(*He peers into the barrel.*)

Jesus Christ! I must be having the DTs. What the hell is that? (*Pause.*) Oh, it's only a glove. I thought it was a dead rat—which reminds me of my father. That bastard. He used to drag me along on his nightly binges. I wasn't even ten yet. He'd stumble home at dawn without me—forgot all about me. Just left me in some dingy whorehouse. The girls were always telling me how cute I was, how much I looked like my father.

I was damned if I was going to be like him. That lunatic. He was a madman, a brute—and he got worse. Once he almost killed Ethel—had her by the throat, then ran off screaming into the night. I chased him for twenty blocks. I didn't give a shit how big he was. I was going to kill that raving sonuvabitch.

Is that my inheritance? Scares the hell out of me.
(*Stage lights are turned on.*)

What's going on?

(*The PROMPTER, FRANK, speaks from offstage.*)

PROMPTER. That you, sir?

BARRYMORE. It is I, be not afeard. Who calls?

PROMPTER. Frank. Let me know when you want to start running your lines. I'm all set up and ready to go.

BARRYMORE. (*To Audience.*) Well! Mr. Efficiency has finally turned up. (*To PROMPTER.*) Hello, Frank.

PROMPTER. Hello, sir.

BARRYMORE. How've you been?

PROMPTER. Fine, sir.

BARRYMORE. Keeping busy?

PROMPTER. Yes.

BARRYMORE. (*To Audience.*) That's our Frank. (*To PROMPTER.*) Still living in Yonkers?

PROMPTER. Yes.

BARRYMORE. With your mother?

PROMPTER. Yes.

BARRYMORE. How is she?

PROMPTER. So-so.

BARRYMORE. What?

PROMPTER. So-so.

BARRYMORE. That's life. (*To Audience.*) Dear old Frank. I have but to discreetly cradle my auditory orifice, lean artfully in his direction, murmur, "Line?" and the forgotten words waft their way toward my eagerly awaiting ear, unbeknownst to the enchanted audience.

PROMPTER. Anytime, Mr. Barrymore.

BARRYMORE. (*Having a swig.*) I have very poor and unhappy brains for drinking: I could well wish courtesy would invent some other custom of entertainment.

PROMPTER. Wait a minute, sir.

BARRYMORE. Hmm?

PROMPTER. That's not from *Richard*.

BARRYMORE. Oh? How perceptive of you, Frank. What is it from?

PROMPTER. *Othello*.

BARRYMORE. Right as usual. (*To Audience.*) Pedantic prick. Save me from him. (*As Richard.*) A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!

PROMPTER. Mr. Barrymore, aren't we taking it from the beginning?

BARRYMORE (*To PROMPTER.*) Presumably.

PROMPTER. That's the *end* of the play.

BARRYMORE. (*To Audience.*) Tedious boy. (*To PROMPTER.*) All right, Frank.

PROMPTER. Act one, scene one.

BARRYMORE. Give me a second here. Right. Start me off.

PROMPTER. Now—

BARRYMORE. Now's as good a time as any.

PROMPTER. No. "Now" is the first word.

BARRYMORE. Oh.

PROMPTER. Now is the—

BARRYMORE. Now is the *what*? Now is the *what*?

PROMPTER. Now is the winter of—

BARRYMORE. Now is the *winter* of what?

PROMPTER. Our discontent.

BARRYMORE. Now is the winter of our discontent—
(*Annoyed.*) That's what I said! Don't you listen, boy?

PROMPTER. I listen!

BARRYMORE. Frank, don't prompt me unless I ask. If I ever need one, I will just say, "Line." (*Pause.*) Line.

PROMPTER. By this sun of York—

BARRYMORE. Line.

PROMPTER. And all the clouds that lour'd—

BARRYMORE. (*Taking over.*)

—that lour'd upon our house

In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.

God, that was a killer. Let's take a break.

PROMPTER. You've only done four lines.

BARRYMORE. Oh, shut up, Frank.

PROMPTER. Come on, Mr. Barrymore, let's get serious.

BARRYMORE. All right, Simon Legree. What's next?

PROMPTER. Now are our brows—

BARRYMORE. Now are our brows— (*To Audience.*) I can recite two entire plays by Shakespeare. I know you've heard that when I make pictures, I use blackboards once in awhile, placed in strategic positions.

PROMPTER. Bound with victorious wreaths—

BARRYMORE. Well, it's true! What the hell's wrong with that?

PROMPTER. Bound with victorious wreaths—

BARRYMORE. (*To PROMPTER.*) Shut up, Frank. (*To Audience.*) Doesn't mean I'm losing my marbles, does it?

PROMPTER. (*Impatiently.*) Bound with victorious wreaths!

BARRYMORE. (*To PROMPTER.*) That's right, keep after me!

PROMPTER. Come on!

BARRYMORE. (*To Audience.*) See? Never gives up. Tonight all is well. Franklin is at the helm.

(*BARRYMORE reaches for a bottle.*)

PROMPTER. What're you doing? You know what the manager says.

BARRYMORE. (*To PROMPTER.*) I do not give a rat's ass what the manager says.

PROMPTER. No drinking on the premises.

BARRYMORE. (*As Gertrude, to bottle.*)

No, no, the drink, the drink,—O my dear Hamlet,—

The drink, the drink!—I am poison'd.

(*To himself.*)

Maybe I should do Hamlet. No, no. Too late, too old. Alas, Richard is an undertaking more befitting my age and condition. Middle-aged actors shouldn't play Hamlet. (*To PROMPTER.*) Although, I don't look middle-aged, do I, Frank?

PROMPTER. Not anymore.

BARRYMORE. Insolent boy. Oh, cruelty, thy name is Franklin. *Prompters!* So, it's Richard Crookback or nothing. And if I don't do it. Some other ham will beat me to it. Right, Frank?

PROMPTER. Right, sir.

BARRYMORE. All right, let's get cracking. (*He staggers. He speaks to Audience.*) You probably hadn't noticed, but I tend to stagger. My whole family staggers. My father, God rest his soul, was a great staggerer. "Staggering is a sign of strength, Jackie," he'd say. "Only the weak have to be carried home." (*To PROMPTER.*) Where were we?

PROMPTER. Grim-visaged war—

BARRYMORE. Grim-visaged war hath smooth'd his wrinkled—

(*Referring to an apple.*)

Ethel sent me these. Red apples have been the Barrymore

good luck wish—or the family curse—for generations. I don't know why I ever went into theater. Lionel and I wanted to be painters—great painters of the American spirit, like Homer, Eakins, Whistler, Bellows. Ethel wanted to be a pianist. (*To PROMPTER.*) You may not know this, Frank, but I was for a time political cartoonist for the Evening Journal.

PROMPTER. Really, sir?

BARRYMORE. Oh, yes. Some of my happiest hours were spent at Minnie Hay's boarding house on 34th Street—a hang-out for the tough newspaper crowd. Magnificent wastrels! (*As Reporter.*) Say, Jacko! How come ya always draw Teddy Roosevelt standin' in de tall grass? (*To Reporter.*) Because, my dear fellow, I never learned how to draw feet. (*To Audience.*) I also had one fatal flaw, which got me fired. All my drawings looked like me. The bad boy side I loved. So it was back to the stage. Dear old Ethel came to the rescue—got me a job.

But acting isn't an art. It's a scavenger profession, a junk pile of all the arts. It's just that we three were trapped in the family cul-de-sac. The Barrymores and the Drews! The Drews and the Barrymores! They wrote plays about us. We were the theater's Royal Family and I was the Clown Prince. Somewhere along the way, the public got tired of us. Can't say I blame them. But it's paid well. That's the narcotic. (*To PROMPTER.*) Frank?

PROMPTER. Yes, sir?

BARRYMORE. Do you think my fans will remember me when I'm a has-been?

PROMPTER. Of course, they do, Mr. Barrymore.

BARRYMORE. (*To Audience.*) I don't know what I'd do without him, but I'd rather. (*To PROMPTER.*) Incidentally,

Frank, why haven't you been drafted?

PROMPTER. The Army didn't want me.

BARRYMORE. Why not?

PROMPTER. I'm 4-F.

BARRYMORE. Flat feet?

PROMPTER. No.

BARRYMORE. Weak eyes?

PROMPTER. No. Homosexual.

BARRYMORE. Yeah? Well, W.C. Fields and I were turned down for Home Defense. You know what that impudent girl behind the registration desk said? "Who sent you, the enemy?" W.C. replied, "Please correct me, if I'm wrong, my little hermaphrodite, but is that your truss that's chafing you, or is your tutu too tight? (*Pause.*) *Homosexual?* Did you have to tell them?

PROMPTER. I didn't.

BARRYMORE. Well, how did they know?

PROMPTER. I think they guessed.

BARRYMORE. Well, come to think of it—as W.C. would say—there is a bit of the tomboy in you, Frank. Damnit, you're a good man to own up to that. I must say, you've got guts. I'm proud of you. You're outspoken, honest, incredibly frank—Frank.

You know, the quaint irony of it is—I've sometimes wished I'd been born on your side of the fence. It's when I blamed women for my troubles and thought all dames were poison. Odd, that, considering I adore women more than do most men. Even though all four wives were bus accidents. Katherine, Dolores, Blanche—

PROMPTER. Didn't Blanche come *before* Dolores?

BARRYMORE. You're right. Katherine, Blanche, Dolores—

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