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The Mystery of Miz Arnette

Alan Bailey and
Ronnie Claire Edwards

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



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THE MYSTERY OF MIZ ARNETTE was first produced by One Thirty Productions, in Dallas, Texas in May 2011. The performance was directed by Marty Van Kleeck, with sets and costumes by Marty Van Kleeck, lighting by Jaymes Gregory, and sound by Graeme Bice. The cast was as follows:

FLOY KATE LANDERS Zoe Kerr
REUBEN LANDERS..... Sonny Franks
OLETA..... Gene Raye Price
SHERIFF TROTTER R. Bruce Elliott
MIZ ARNETTE..... Cindee Mayfield

CHARACTERS

FLOY KATE LANDERS

REUBEN LANDERS

OLETA

SHERIFF TROTTER

MIZ ARNETTE

SETTING

A farmhouse kitchen in remote Hardesty, Oklahoma

TIME

Act One

Scene 1: October, 1934,

Scene 2: One week later

Scene 3: Late that same night

Act Two

Scene 1: A few days later

Scene 2: Later that same day

ACT ONE

Scene One

(As the house opens and the audience enters, the whine and howl of wind is relentless until the lights go down.)

(The wind dies down a bit.)

FLOY KATE (VOICE OVER). The grass was stirrup-high. No trees. Daddy said you could see a man coming on horseback from here to the Gulf of Mexico. No one could sneak up on us. But elements from the sky and earth snuck up on us, leaving us caught between, in their clash. The winds twisted away the earth, blowing our outside world to dust. But inside, an equally ferocious storm hovered like a huge cloud, threatening to destroy us.

(The wind crescendos. The lights fade to black.)

(The wind starts to die down again as the lights come up to reveal the kitchen of a farmhouse in Hardesty – a remote town in the Oklahoma Panhandle. It is October, 1934.)

(The walls and floor of the kitchen are plank. It is a single-sided house, the external and internal walls being one and the same, a portion of which is covered with newspaper comic strip pages.)

(There is a door with a screen door upstage center. Upstage left, there is a door leading into two shotgun bedrooms. Upstage right, next to the outside door, is a pantry, its entrance hung with a quilt. A window is left of the outside door. Stage right is a door leading to REUBEN's bedroom.)

(A kitchen table and five chairs occupy the area stage right. Stage left is a dry sink cabinet. Downstage of it is a large bucket of water with a dipper. Upstage of it is an iron stove. A few pots and pans and a skillet are hung on nails on the wall.)

(FLOY KATE enters from the upstage [outside] door, a bandana around her face to shield her from the wind. She is a small, thin, freckled, fourteen year-old girl with her hair in pigtails. She lights a kerosene lamp. She takes a rag and wipes off the oilcloth on the table and chair seats. She continues to wipe dust off every surface in the kitchen as her father, REUBEN, enters.)

(REUBEN, wearing coveralls and a jacket, is 45. He is tall, rangy, and weathered.)

(He beats his hat off on the door, and wipes his face and neck. A train whistle blows in the distance.)

(FLOY KATE sets a pan of water and washrags on the table. They wipe themselves down.)

REUBEN. That dirt was black. Must have been half of Kansas in that storm.

FLOY KATE. At least it wasn't that awful gray New Mexico dust.

REUBEN. But still and all, wasn't as bad as it could have been.

FLOY KATE. Those dumb chickens.

REUBEN. Did any of them blow away?

FLOY KATE. I got them all under the house except one chick. What about Ol' Worthless?

REUBEN. Didn't have any trouble with him. 'Course that mule's smart. Headed right for the barn. 'Course that barn, it's not much good cover what with all the dust coming in them slats.

FLOY KATE. At least he's in out of the wind.

REUBEN. Oleta could have pitched in and made a hand.

FLOY KATE. Should we ask that of her? She's a paying boarder.

REUBEN. You suppose she slept right through the storm?

FLOY KATE. I imagine. It's only three o'clock in the afternoon. But, well, she does work late.

REUBEN. She usually runs for the storm cellar, but it's pert near filled up with dust now.

FLOY KATE. We're lucky this house is tight. We've ridden out a lot worse.

REUBEN. Probably be better off if the whole place just blowed away.

FLOY KATE. We can't give up, Daddy. Where'll we go?

REUBEN. California, like everybody else.

FLOY KATE. If I could just find me another job. But since the café closed down, what else is there?

REUBEN. You got a job, little lady. You keep workin' on that essay of yours. You're gonna win that essay contest.

FLOY KATE. But we need the money now. And since the cafe closed down, what else is there? Oleta's got the only job left at the beer joint.

RUBEN. The beer joint'll be the last place to close.

FLOY KATE. Daddy, I'd hate to do it, but I guess we could always sell the mule.

REUBEN. That's a jackass of an idea, girl. Nobody'd want Ol' Worthless. Besides, that money won't stand between us and the poor farm.

FLOY KATE. At least you've got a job, Daddy.

REUBEN. A job I hate.

FLOY KATE. You're lucky to have one, Daddy. Somebody's got to do it.

REUBEN. But, delivering bank foreclosures? On my neighbors?

(A car pulls up outside.)

FLOY KATE. *(looking out the window)* Sheriff Trotter drove through that storm!

REUBEN. I dread every time I see him coming.

FLOY KATE. It'd be easier, Daddy, if every time you see him coming, you think of the money.

REUBEN. Maybe he's just come to see Oleta this time.

(FLOY KATE opens the door and SHERIFF TROTTER enters carrying a bundle of magazines and comic books.)

(TROT is portly and around 50. He wears an Oklahoma sheriff's uniform with a cowboy hat, boots, and coat.)

FLOY KATE. Come on in, Sheriff Trotter. Light and set.

REUBEN. Did you drive through that storm?

TROT. I was caught about halfway here. I pulled into the barn over at the old Johnson place, waited it out. It peeled the roof right off Flint Henderson's place.

REUBEN. We better strike out and see if we can make a hand.

TROT. They're gone. Left for California four days ago.

(puts stack of magazines on table)

Today's your lucky day. Conductor Mills threw a whole big bunch of magazines off the train for you this morning. "Modern Screen," "Unsolved Mysteries," "Reader's Digest."

(giving FLOY KATE the comic books)

Must have been a bunch of kids on the train. Look at all these funny books.

FLOY KATE. I'll put them aside for Oleta. Would you like some coffee?

TROT. Don't mind if I do.

My main reason for coming is I just got a call that Pretty Boy Floyd robbed a bank up in Ohio some place called East Lambertville and they say he's headed this way so I'm out giving warning. The last thing we want is for a family to be held hostage and have to engage in a shootout.

RUEBEN. But he'd head for Hell's Fringe over there in the Cookson Hills where he was raised and still has family.

TROT. He's too smart for that. He knows that's the first place the law would look for him.

RUEBEN. But why would he come here?

TROT. To hole up. It's isolated and a train comes though here.

RUBEN. Is he traveling alone?

TROT. He usually doesn't, but the gang may have split up.

REUBEN. I hope that's all the bad news you come to drop off.

TROT. Sorry, nope. Got a notice for the McCubbins for you to deliver.

(He pulls an envelope out of his shirt pocket and hands it to REUBEN.)

REUBEN. This is the third foreclosure this month.

TROT. Think of it this way. It's more money for you every time you deliver one.

(We hear OLETA's voice trilling offstage, singing a popular song of the day.)

FLOY KATE. *(to TROT)* I figured she'd get up when she heard you was here.

OLETA. *(calling)* Is that who I think it is out there?

(OLETA enters, buttoning up her dress. In her 40s, she is a blowsy peroxide blonde, tending toward fleshiness.)

Why, hello, Sheriff Trotter.

FLOY KATE. We sure could have used some help during the storm, Oleta. Where was you? In bed?

OLETA. Under the bed.

TROT. I'm out giving warning that Pretty Boy Floyd may be headed this way.

OLETA. Pretty Boy Floyd's headed this way?

TROT. There's a \$23,000 bounty on his head.

OLETA. I wouldn't mind running into Pretty Boy Floyd, especially for that kind of reward money.

(OLETA pours herself a cup of coffee and spoons in three spoonfuls of sugar.)

TROT. You don't need all that sugar.

OLETA. *(as she licks spoon and drops it into the sugar bowl then sits beside him)* You mean I'm sweet enough already?

TROT. Sweet enough to make your teeth ache.

OLETA. Oh, go on now. You're just pulling my leg.

(TROT whispers something to her. They giggle and she pinches his cheek. They exchange a look.)

(spying the magazines) What have we got here? "Modern Screen." Doesn't Ginger Rogers look beautiful! I love her hair. And did you bring a – oh, here it is – "True Confessions!" And "Ace Detective Stories!"

REUBEN. *(reading a newspaper)* Let's see what Will Rogers has to say in his column. "The way to solve the traffic problem is that the only cars that should be allowed on the road are those that are paid for."

(They all chuckle.)

TROT. Ain't that the truth. Well, I expect it's time I got back to putting out the word about Pretty Boy Floyd. Reuben, I'll give you a ride. I've just got to drop Oleta off at the beer joint.

OLETA. Thank you, Trot. Oh, by the way, Floy Kate, my room's covered in dust.

FLOY KATE. I'll get to it.

OLETA. Thanks, girl.

FLOY KATE. But first I've got to work on my essay for the contest.

(TROT and OLETA exit. REUBEN puts his arms around her.)

REUBEN. Your mama would be so proud of you writing this essay. She had so many hopes and dreams for your future. I'll be back by suppertime. See you directly.

(He exits upstage center.)

(FLOY KATE rinses out the coffee cups. She goes off into her bedroom and brings back a Big Chief tablet and stub-end pencil. She puts it on the table, opens it, reads a few words to herself. She bends over the page, erases something, and makes a correction. She stands and starts to read aloud.)

FLOY KATE. Essay contest sponsored by the National Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. The Land Where I Live, by Floy Kate Landers. Oklahoma means Land of the Red Man. But on the old maps, it was called the Great American Desert. But I do not live on a desert. I live on a plain.

(A figure [MIZ ARNETTE] appears in the doorway in silhouette – .)

From all over the country, people made a mad dash into the Indian Nation to stake a claim. On April 22, 1889, my grandfather made The Run in a buckboard wagon hitched to a matched team of fine bay Morgan horses. It was quite a sight. People came on foot, on bicycles, on horseback, muleback, and in surreys. After riding over hill and dale, the flat grasslands looked appealing to the original settlers.

MIZ ARNETTE. Dangling participle!

(FLOY KATE whirls around terrified.)

FLOY KATE. What?

MIZ ARNETTE. A dangling participle!

(beat)

FLOY KATE. Who are you? Are you part of the Pretty Boy Floyd Gang?

MIZ ARNETTE. Indeed not! If I threw in with a gang, it wouldn't be Pretty Boy Floyd's.

FLOY KATE. *(a sigh of relief)* Thank Heavens!

MIZ ARNETTE. It might be with Baby Face Nelson. May I come in out of this inclement weather?

FLOY KATE. Oh well, ma'am, I –

MIZ ARNETTE. Please, lest I be blown away like the Witch of the West Wind?

FLOY KATE. Oh. Oh, I'm sorry.

(She opens the door. MIZ ARNETTE steps in carrying a valise and a wicker suitcase.)

(MIZ ARNETTE wears an opera cape and a hat with a veil held on by a jeweled pin. She wears gloves, tan cotton stockings, and black oxfords with a slight heel. While her clothes are worn, she has a certain chic style and elegance all her own.)

(She never takes off the following pieces of jewelry: a very long pearl necklace or a chain with a gold medallion, single-drop large pearl earrings, wide gold slave bracelets on each wrist, and rings on every finger and a small dagger in a jeweled sheath hanging from her belt.)

MIZ ARNETTE. It's fortunate you're not far from the rail station. I'm weary unto death tramping through such a dreary landscape after my long train ride. As I was saying, a dangling participle is a misplaced modifier describing a word other than the word intended. What you have erroneously written is that your grasslands are riding on horseback.

(to the speechless FLOY KATE) I am Miz Arnette.
(lifting her veil)

(silence)

And you are?

FLOY KATE. Floy Kate Landers.

MIZ ARNETTE. Floy. Obviously a Latin derivative of Florence. Meaning "to flower," "to bloom." And Kate from the Greek Katherine meaning "pure." An innocent flower struggling to bloom in this arid, desolate place.

FLOY KATE. Where did you come from?

MIZ ARNETTE. The question is not where did I come from. The question is where am I going. Always stay in the affirmative. Look to the future. I've come about the room.

FLOY KATE. What room?

MIZ ARNETTE. Why, the room you advertised.

FLOY KATE. What?

MIZ ARNETTE. I've got it right here.

(producing a newspaper clipping)

"Room to rent. Landers farm. House just west of the rail station with a yellow windmill. Hardesty, Oklahoma."
So, like Don Quixote, I looked for the windmill.

FLOY KATE. *(taking the clipping)* But that was four months ago.

MIZ ARNETTE. Oh, surely not.

FLOY KATE. Yes, look here. June 23, 1934. It's October now.
The room has been taken.

MIZ ARNETTE. *(pushing through)* What about this room?

FLOY KATE. That's just a storeroom. Nothing would fit in there but a little pallet.

MIZ ARNETTE. Eureka! I prefer a small, enclosed hiding space. I've spent many a time camping out. In tents, igloos, teepees. All over the world in all climes.

FLOY KATE. I wouldn't feel right charging you for that. I suppose I could give you my room.

MIZ ARNETTE. That would be less invasive.

(FLOY KATE crosses the kitchen and opens the door into her room. MIZ ARNETTE peers in.)

So you live here alone?

FLOY KATE. My daddy, my mamma died.

MIZ ARNETTE. I'm sorry to hear that. Semi-orphaned.

FLOY KATE. It's only us. Not a lot of folks come this way.

MIZ ARNETTE. So you're free from spying eyes and tattling tongues.

FLOY KATE. But we do have a boarder, Oleta.

MIZ ARNETTE. The one who took my room?

FLOY KATE. Yes, ma'am.

MIZ ARNETTE. And what does Oleta do?

FLOY KATE. She runs the beer joint.

MIZ ARNETTE. Ah. Quenching the thirst of the weary wandering wayfarer. But I would think that would not be an easy job in a dry state.

FLOY KATE. It's only three point two beer, and we don't get many wayfarers.

MIZ ARNETTE. (*murmurs to herself*) Perfect.

MIZ ARNETTE. So Oleta has to come through here to get out?

FLOY KATE. I'm afraid so.

MIZ ARNETTE. Oh, dear. This does complicate things. You must inform her to respect my privacy and make her entrances and exits quickly and quietly.

FLOY KATE. Here, I'll get your grip.

(FLOY KATE *picks up* MIZ ARNETTE's *suitcase.*)

MIZ ARNETTE. Oh, yes, my portmanteau.

(FLOY KATE *gets a kerosene lamp and goes into the bedroom.*)

FLOY KATE. (*from off*) I'll just collect a few of my things.

MIZ ARNETTE. We have yet to settle on the rate.

FLOY KATE. It'll be five dollars a week.

MIZ ARNETTE. What does this price include? Does it include board? How many meals?

(FLOY KATE *comes out with an armful of her things and puts them in the alcove.*)

FLOY KATE. Breakfast and supper and that's a dollar extra.

MIZ ARNETTE. I don't eat breakfast so it should be fifty cents. But I will take a cup of strong black coffee in the morning.

FLOY KATE. I'm sorry; I'd have to get the full amount.

MIZ ARNETTE. That seems unreasonable.

FLOY KATE. That's the rate.

MIZ ARNETTE. I won't quibble. I'll pay you sixty cents.

FLOY KATE. I'll take seventy-five.

MIZ ARNETTE. Very well, but I want two cups of coffee. Black and very strong.

FLOY KATE. You don't take nothing in it?

MIZ ARNETTE. No, I don't take ANYTHING in it. Now, here are my requirements. If you would, please keep this table cleared so that I can spread out my work here. Also, it's necessary that I get my mail in a timely fashion, so you must be sure to go to the post office every day.

FLOY KATE. But we don't go every day.

MIZ ARNETTE. It's crucial that I get my mail. I'm expecting money orders, addressed to Cryptic Critiques. So, I have to have it to pay you.

FLOY KATE. I'll take a week's advance.

MIZ ARNETTE. Oh, no, I can't until I get these money orders. You'll have to wait on that.

FLOY KATE. But I'm going to need cash.

MIZ ARNETTE. We'll settle that later. I can no longer discuss finances. Right now, I'm utterly exhausted and my nerves are raw from my travels. I must lie down with my feet up and a cold cloth on my head.

(She picks up the wicker suitcase and goes into her room, stopping in the doorway.)

What time is supper served?

FLOY KATE. Six o'clock.

MIZ ARNETTE. Please call me five minutes before you're ready to sit down.

(MIZ ARNETTE closes the door. FLOY KATE stands there, looking after her in amazement. She goes to the table and picks up her writing tablet.)

FLOY KATE. What did she call that? A danged parsnip..le?

(From MIZ ARNETTE's room comes a high, piercing shriek.)

(At the same moment, the kerosene lamp on the kitchen table goes out, leaving the stage in darkness.)

(A long beat.)

(MIZ ARNETTE comes out of her room carrying a lit kerosene lamp. The light reveals FLOY KATE standing in the middle of the kitchen, a skillet raised above her head.)

MIZ ARNETTE. No, no, don't be frightened. I should have explained. There are two of us.

FLOY KATE. Two of you?

MIZ ARNETTE. Myself and Little Lucifer.

FLOY KATE. What's a Little Lucifer?

MIZ ARNETTE. My traveling companion. We've been together for years.

FLOY KATE. What is it?

MIZ ARNETTE. He's a tamarin.

FLOY KATE. A tamarin?

MIZ ARNETTE. Yes. Of the family callithricidae. A tiny monkey of the hurdy-gurdy species. He's a stimulating and enjoyable companion.

FLOY KATE. Does it bite?

MIZ ARNETTE. Not unless crossed.

(Another shriek comes from the bedroom.)

FLOY KATE. How am I ever going to explain this to Daddy?

(blackout)

Scene Two

(A week later. A haunting train whistle in the distance.)

(MIZ ARNETTE is working at the kitchen table. She has papers spread out all over it. She has exchanged her black oxfords for a pair of worn Chinese scuffs.)

(FLOY KATE is trying to set the table around MIZ ARNETTE's clutter. She stands over her with forks and plates.)

MIZ ARNETTE. Just one moment. I need to look up something in Deuteronomy.

FLOY KATE. What exactly are you writing?

MIZ ARNETTE. I'm rewriting the Bible.

FLOY KATE. How long have you been at this?

MIZ ARNETTE. Twenty years. It needs elaborating.

FLOY KATE. Why?

MIZ ARNETTE. In those days, they were writing on scrolls, so they had to conserve space. There are a myriad of unresolved mysteries that need to be researched.

FLOY KATE. What are you going to do with it?

MIZ ARNETTE. My work is sought out by Biblical scholars all over the world, many of whom I met in my travels to lands of ancient cultures. But, alas, brilliance and creativity are not always rewarded. Many a time, people have sought to suppress my work. There are no bars on the mind. It cannot be confined. Of course, it can be a lonely life. But fortunately I have Little Lucifer.

(OLETA enters from the bedroom carrying a stack of magazines.)

OLETA. Can't you keep that durn monkey quiet?

MIZ ARNETTE. He's expressing himself.

OLETA. *(yelling back into the bedroom)* He never shuts up!

(setting the magazines next to the other stacks in the kitchen)

MIZ ARNETTE. I noticed you moved Little Lucifer's cage and put it next to the window. That is not your province. He must never be near the window. His lungs will fill up with dust.

OLETA. If we're lucky.

FLOY KATE. Can monkeys get dust consumption?

OLETA. You're just here under sufferance. Reuben would never have allowed you to move in, for sure not with that nasty monkey, if Floy Kate hadn't pled your case. And if they hadn't needed the money.

MIZ ARNETTE. I've noticed some of my other things moved as well. Please do not touch any of my belongings.

OLETA. You're hallucinating. Who'd want to? You don't have nothing anybody would want.

(OLETA sits at the table, pushing aside some of MIZ ARNETTE's papers.)

MIZ ARNETTE. Please don't touch my work!

(REUBEN comes in from outside. As he beats his hat on the door, MIZ ARNETTE gathers her papers from the table.)

REUBEN. Ain't nothin' in the rain register but six inches of dust and a dead June bug.

MIZ ARNETTE. "Where is the Lord that led us through a land of deserts and drought, and of the shadow of death?" Jeremiah 2:6.

(MIZ ARNETTE takes her papers into her room.)

OLETA. I saved the newspapers for you, Reuben. I knew you'd want to read Will Rogers.

REUBEN. Let's see what he has to say in this one. "I don't belong to any organized political party. I'm a Democrat."
(He chuckles.)

FLOY KATE. *(handing REUBEN a wet rag)* Daddy, wash up. We're about ready to sit down. I hope there's not too much grit in this food.

(knocking on MIZ ARNETTE's door)

Miz Arnette? Time for supper.

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