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CONCORD
THEATRICALS

THE HEIGHT OF THE STORM

by Florian Zeller

translated by Christopher Hampton

SAMUEL FRENCH

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THE HEIGHT OF THE STORM in this translation by Christopher Hampton was first presented by Simon Friend, Mark Goucher and Howard Panter at the Richmond Theatre on 1 September 2018, and in the West End at Wyndham's Theatre on 2 October 2018. Directed by Jonathan Kent, Set Designer Anthony Ward, Lighting Designer Hugh Vanstone and Sound Designer Paul Groothuis The cast was as follows:

ANDRÉ ..... Jonathan Pryce
MADELEINE..... Eileen Atkins
ANNE ..... Amanda Drew
ÉLISE..... Anna Madeley
A WOMAN ..... Lucy Cohu
A MAN ..... James Hillier

Avant de s'envoler in its original French production opened at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Paris on 5 October 2016 directed by Ladislas Chollat, with Robert Hirsch, Isabelle Sadoyan. Anne Loiret, Lena Bréban, Claire Nadeau, François Feroleto.

CHARACTERS

ANNE – daughter
ANDRÉ – father
MADELEINE – mother
ÉLISE – second daughter
A WOMAN
A MAN

SETTING

André and Madeleine's country house, not far from Paris.

TIME

Present.

ONE

(A house. The drawing room opens onto a kitchen. **ANDRÉ** *is looking out of the window, as if watching out for someone.)*

ANNE. What are you looking at? Did you hear that storm last night? It woke me up. Didn't it wake you? It's a long time since I've seen such a violent storm. It was impressive. Don't you think?

(Pause.)

What is it you're looking at? Come and sit down…

*(***ANDRÉ** *doesn't move.)*

It's no use just standing there, you know.

(Pause. She goes up to him and glances out of the window, as if she wanted to check what **ANDRÉ** *is looking at, then moves off.)*

You ought to come and sit down. It's no use waiting.

(Her gaze falls on **ANDRÉ***'s old armchair; she smiles. She rests her hand on the back of it, as if she wanted to stroke it.)*

I'm thinking this was already here when I was a child. It was, wasn't it? This chair… All in all, nothing much has changed here…

(Pause. She's hesitating about saying something to him, finally decides to take the plunge.)

I was looking through your desk, you know, and I came across your diaries…

(Pause. For the first time, **ANDRÉ** *looks at her.)*

I didn't know you were still writing… I mean, these last few months…

(Pause.)

I don't know what to do with them… What would you do, if you were me?

(Pause. He looks away again.)

Anyway, there are so many heaps of paper to sort through… I don't know how you found your way around. I always feel compelled to tidy everything away… I can't bear mess. It upsets me. I don't know who I get that from… Because you and Mum are the complete opposite… Aren't you?

(Summoning up this image causes a fragile smile, which disappears immediately.)

But now all that needs organising. That's what I'm here for.

(Pause.)

No, I didn't sleep much last night. And not only because of the storm… Obviously. All this has disturbed me, you can imagine. And then there's the very fact of sleeping here. In my childhood bedroom. I think I must have slept there at least… I don't know. Ten years. Maybe even longer…

(Pause.)

At one point, when the rain had eased off, I got up and found myself here. All by myself. There wasn't a sound. And I stayed here. In the drawing room. I was thinking

about you. About all the things we said to each other yesterday evening…

(She turns to him.)

You understand, we need to find some solution.

*(***ANDRÉ** *turns towards her, his expression somewhat hostile.)*

(Unconfidently.) Of course, this is a wonderful house… I don't deny it. We're all attached to it. But is it still what the situation calls for?

*(***ANDRÉ** *abandons his position close to the window and sets off towards his chair, moving slowly. His annoyance is palpable.)*

I mean… You can't live in this place on your own. If you want to buy a loaf of bread, you have to take the car…

*(***ANDRÉ** *stops in his tracks.)*

It's just common sense, Dad. You can't live here on your own.

ANDRÉ. Croissants.

ANNE. What?

ANDRÉ. I have croissants. Not bread.

ANNE. Yes, yes… I know. Same thing.

ANDRÉ. Bread and croissants? The same thing?

ANNE. No. Obviously.

ANDRÉ. So?

(He shrugs his shoulders, to demonstrate the irrelevance of what his daughter's saying. And goes to sit down.)

ANNE. What I meant is… the house is isolated. When there were two of you, it was still viable. But now… it might

be time to come up with something else. A different configuration. Don't you think? With some things, you need to know when to let go. Sometimes.

(The bell rings. She sees he hasn't reacted.)

You want me to get that?

ANDRÉ. It's quite simple. I have croissants, that's all. With butter. And jam. Strawberry jam, if you must know!

ANNE. Right. I… don't move. I'll go.

(She goes to the door.)

ANDRÉ. I dunk them in my coffee. At one time, I also used to like apricot jam. But that's a bygone age. Time has passed. Under the bridge. Except that nowadays who understands that? *Who* understands?

(She comes back with a bunch of flowers, which has clearly just been delivered.)

ANNE. Oh, look… yet more flowers. See? It's really… There's no card. Strange… do you know where the vases are kept? Two days now I've been searching for vases…

(She starts to unwrap the flowers.)

Anyway, they're beautiful. Don't you think? You've always loved flowers… I remember… Peonies were your favourite… you often used to buy them for Mum? She loved flowers as well… didn't she? All the same, it's strange not to send a card with them. How do we know who sent them?

(She glances at her father. She's still searching the cupboards for a vase. Pause. Then, cheerfully, as if she's trying to distract him.)

I went for a walk yesterday. I went for a stroll round the town. I didn't know they'd put up that building… What is it? A sports centre? You know the building I mean?

Opposite the Town Hall… yes? It's really hideous. Don't you think? I sometimes wonder who makes these decisions. Ah, there's a vase…

(She continues to arrange the flowers, very casual.)

Anyway, on my walk, I passed an estate agent.

*(***ANDRÉ** *reacts to this.)*

I dropped in and had a word with the man there. Charming fellow. And I explained the situation to him.

(He doesn't understand what she's talking about.)

The situation, Dad… I explained it to him. And he suggested calling round, to have a word with you about it. And also to get an idea of what might be involved…

(He's glaring at her accusingly.)

Obviously, you wouldn't be committed to anything. But we've been talking about it for such a long time without doing anything about it… so, as I'm here this weekend, I thought it might be a good opportunity… don't you think? An opportunity to make some concrete progress.

(Brief pause.)

Anyway. He said he'd try to drop by tomorrow. Just for a visit. If you agree, of course.

ANDRÉ. By the ton.

ANNE. *(Who hasn't understood.)* Sorry?

ANDRÉ. By the ton!

ANNE. I … I don't know what you mean.

ANDRÉ. *(As if to himself.)* "What you have denied me in grams, I will rip from you by the ton."

ANNE. What… what are you saying?

ANDRÉ. "I will build you a city out of piles of rags, yes, I will. Without plans and without cement, I will build you a structure you can never destroy. Which will be supported and inflated by a kind of overflowing undeniability… I will install for you proud and overpowering fortresses. Fortresses made entirely from alarums and excursions… Toll the bell! Toll the bell! For all of you! Oblivion to the living!"

*(***ANNE** *is paralysed by this outburst from her father, which seems to come from beyond the grave. Suddenly, a key can be heard in the front door. A change of atmosphere.* **ANNE** *returns to the real world. She turns: her mother appears, followed by her sister,* **ÉLISE.** *They're back from the shops.* **ÉLISE** *has carrier bags in both hands.)*

MADELEINE. What are you doing? Talking to yourself now?

ANNE. Mm? No. We… we were talking about the house. And we… in fact, I was arranging these flowers. They've just been delivered. There's no card with them.

ÉLISE. Really?

ANNE. No. I … I checked.

ÉLISE. Who sends flowers without a card? It's completely idiotic.

ANNE. You're right, I don't know. They're beautiful. Don't you think?

MADELEINE. I'm not in the mood for them. All these flowers… I find it sinister. I've become allergic to flowers. And the vases I had, I've thrown them all out.

ANNE. Except this one.

MADELEINE. I must have missed it.

ANNE. I'll put it here. Or if you prefer, I'll take it away. Up to you, Mum.

*(***MADELEINE** *shrugs her shoulders.* **ÉLISE** *has put the shopping bags on the kitchen table.)*

Have you been shopping? You should have told me. I could have come with you.

MADELEINE. You were asleep. I wasn't going to wake you up. Anyway, I had Élise… you don't need a regiment to do a bit of shopping.

ÉLISE. Especially as you had more important things to do, if I understood correctly…

ANNE. What makes you say that?

*(***ÉLISE***'s mobile rings.)*

ÉLISE. Ah. I have to take this. Sorry. I'll be back.

(She answers as she's heading for the door. She speaks into the phone.)

I asked you not to call me any more… no!

(She exits.)

ANNE. What's the matter with her?

MADELEINE. I don't know. They never stop quarrelling on the phone… all morning, same performance.

ANNE. With Paul?

MADELEINE. The new one.

ANNE. Yes, that's right. He's called Paul.

MADELEINE. Are you sure? Maybe… I can never manage to keep up with all her dramas… what about you? How are you getting on? You went to bed late last night, didn't you?

ANNE. There are so many papers to sort out.

MADELEINE. I told you.

ANNE. Yes.

MADELEINE. I got up about three o'clock. Because of the storm. The light in the office was still on.

ANNE. Yes. I worked quite late.

MADELEINE. I don't understand why you insist on doing this.

ANNE. You know very well. His editor asked me to. But if you think it's a bad idea, nothing's forcing you to agree…

ANDRÉ. Old papers.

ANNE. Sorry?

ANDRÉ. Notes. Old papers. What's the appeal?

ANNE. They'd like to bring out an edition of all your unfinished pieces… diaries… sketches… poems… Everything you didn't publish.

> *(***ANDRÉ** *raises his eyes to heaven. Clearly, he doesn't like the idea.* **ANNE** *speaks to her mother, as she helps her to unpack the shopping.)*

They think it's a good way to get into his work. To understand it.

ANDRÉ. There's nothing to understand. People who try to understand things are morons.

ANNE. *(To her mother.)* His editor's very keen on this. Thinks of it as an *hommage*. But if you're against it, all you have to do is refuse.

MADELEINE. I don't know. Seems to me it's a bit like digging up a corpse. Don't you think? Not to mention the fact you'll never manage it in one weekend.

ANNE. I know.

MADELEINE. *(As if addressing a problem.)* You'll have to come back.

ANNE. Yes, of course. Is that what's upsetting you?

MADELEINE. No. Except I was wondering… what would *he* have wanted? Would he have liked people rummaging around in his papers?

(They look at each other. Pause. A break.)

ANDRÉ. What did you buy?

MADELEINE. What?

ANDRÉ. In your shopping bag? You've just come back from the shops, haven't you? What did you buy?

MADELEINE. Mushrooms.

ANDRÉ. Ah… wonderful. For lunch?

MADELEINE. *(As if stating the obvious.)* Yes.

ANDRÉ. Show me.

*(***MADELEINE** *shows them to him.)*

Oh… perfect. *(To his daughter.)* You'll see. For years we didn't eat them. We preferred meat. I don't know what we were thinking. But now… she's become a terrific mushroom cook. A real scorcher! What are the ingredients? Tell us again.

MADELEINE. Nothing worth saying…

ANDRÉ. Nothing worth saying! Tell us all the same.

MADELEINE. A bit of parsley…

ANDRÉ. *(To his daughter, his eyes shining.)* A bit of parsley…

MADELEINE. An onion.

ANDRÉ. *(To his daughter.)* An onion. Yes, yes, that's it… just an onion, cut in very thin slices, like that. Marvellous. One good onion.

MADELEINE. Salt and pepper…

ANDRÉ. Salt and pepper, obviously!

MADELEINE. And that's it.

ANDRÉ. And that's it. You see? *(To* **MADELEINE**.*)* No chives?

MADELEINE. Oh, yes. Of course!

ANDRÉ. *(To his daughter.)* Ah, chives! Mustn't forget the chives! Green, red and yellow. All the colours. In an omelette. An omelette… mmm… That's her specialty. My little scorcher.

MADELEINE. Stop calling me that.

ANDRÉ. When are we eating?

ANNE. It's only eleven o'clock, Dad.

ANDRÉ. *(Clearly disappointed.)* Is it? Is that all?

MADELEINE. Yes.

ANNE. Are you hungry already?

ANDRÉ. Yes. Maybe. Aren't I?

ANNE. It's still a bit early.

ANDRÉ. It's this talk about mushrooms… eleven o'clock? Is that all?

ANNE. Yes.

ANDRÉ. But on what day?

ANNE. *(Kindly.)* Today, Dad.

ANDRÉ. Ah.

(He seems lost and annoyed. He takes a few steps into the room, then stops.)

I thought it was a different day. Isn't it? Unless…

(He seems, suddenly, to have lost the thread. **MADELEINE** *continues to unpack her purchases.)*

MADELEINE. We'll sit down at the table in about an hour…

ANNE. Reading his diaries, I noticed he talked a lot about you.

MADELEINE. Are you surprised? Given we spent half a century together.

ANNE. I know. I was talking to Élise about that yesterday… it marked us in some ways, both of us.

MADELEINE. What?

ANNE. The fact you stayed together all that time. It's not very common, if you think about it. The ability to love one another to the end.

MADELEINE. How's it going with Pierre?

*(***ANNE** *moves closer to the kitchen table.)*

ANNE. Would you like me to chop them?

MADELEINE. No, no. Leave them. I'll do it.

(Brief pause.)

Are things not going well?

ANNE. It's complicated. Especially with Emma, it's really not easy.

MADELEINE. Why?

ANNE. She's supposed to take her exams this year. But she's doing nothing. She's skipping all her courses. She… well, she's behaving very strangely.

MADELEINE. It'll calm down. Give her time.

*(**ANNE** shrugs her shoulders. She doesn't look convinced.)*

ANNE. I remember. He loved these.

MADELEINE. What?

ANNE. Mushrooms.

MADELEINE. *(To her daughter.)* There was a time, he even used to go and pick them. Remember?

ANNE. Did he?

MADELEINE. *(To her daughter.)* Don't you remember? He always used to walk a lot. Said it helped him think.

*(**ANDRÉ**'s listening to what they're saying and trying to remember.)*

When he got back, he'd go straight to his study and write... His best ideas came to him while he was walking.

ANDRÉ. Yes.

MADELEINE. When we left Paris and settled in here, he took it into his head to go and pick mushrooms... He did that for a year or two. It used to make me laugh. He'd put on his hat and all the gear... I used to make fun of him... And then, suddenly, he stopped.

ANDRÉ. Who are you talking about?

ANNE. *(As if* **ANDRÉ** *hadn't spoken.)* Why?

MADELEINE. The really good mushrooms, you'd find them along the river. Not far from Saint-Pierre. It's a dangerous path. Very slippery. And one day, we heard about someone who'd disappeared just like that. Armanet! Does that name mean anything to you?

ANNE. No.

MADELEINE. Yes, it does. Madame Armanet's husband. They never found out what happened to him, he never came back. Everybody thought he'd slipped and fallen in the river. So your father, who was never the most courageous man… his obsession was always his work. Write, write, write… the rest was…

ANNE. I know.

MADELEINE. So, the mushrooms, you can imagine! He kept on going for walks, but nowhere near the river.

ANDRÉ. But who, who is it you're talking about?

MADELEINE. Armanet.

*(***ANDRÉ** *frowns, as if the name evokes some confused memory.)*

ANDRÉ. Ah.

ANNE. Last night, I came across… you were saying he never stopped writing. But I was surprised to see that towards the end, he was still writing a lot…

MADELEINE. Well!

ANNE. Recently… just seeing his handwriting… it's been… I don't know…

(She breaks off, overcome with emotion.)

MADELEINE. What's the matter?

ANNE. Nothing. It's…

MADELEINE. What's the matter with you?

ANNE. Nothing. I said. It's the onions.

*(***MADELEINE** *comes over to her daughter and takes her in her arms.)*

MADELEINE. Come on, come on…

(They stay like that, in each other's arms, not speaking, as can happen between a mother and a daughter, without quite knowing why, when the subject is painful.)

ANDRÉ. *(Not looking at the two women behind him.)* Yes, he used to live other side of the hill. Armanet, I mean. We knew his wife better. Friend of your mother's. Some people thought he'd found some poisonous mushrooms. There are plenty of them round here. They can kill you… but then they would have found the body… the path along the river seemed more likely… except, years later, I bumped into him in Paris in a station. Can you believe it? I'm almost sure it was him. I was staggered. I couldn't get over it. I went over to him. And I said to him: "Armanet? Is that you?" And then, I saw his face distorted with terror. Terror. Colossal. Gigantic. "You must be mistaken…" That's what he said to me. Then he ran for it, fast. You think people are dead, but it's not always the case… You know what I mean? He was with a woman… But I never told anybody. I kept it to myself. Naturally. It's everyone's right to take their secrets with them, don't you agree?

(He turns towards the two women and sees that they are in each other's arms.)

What's the matter with her?

(The two women move apart. Everything is as if they've heard nothing of the story he's just told them. Everything's as if he weren't there at all.)

MADELEINE. Come on.

ANNE. Yes.

MADELEINE. All right?

ANNE. *(To her mother.)* Yes. Yes. I'm sorry. Forgive me.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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