

Acting Edition

Harry Clarke

by David Cale

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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HARRY CLARKE was first produced in New York City by the Vineyard Theatre (Douglas Aibel, Artistic Director; Sarah Stern, Artistic Director; Suzanne Appel, Managing Director) in 2017. The play was subsequently produced Off Broadway in 2018 by Audible at the Minetta Lane Theatre, New York City. The artistic team for both productions included: scenic design by Alexander Dodge, costumer design by Kaye Voyce, lighting design by Alan C. Edwards, and sound design by Bart Fasbender. The director was Leigh Silverman, and original songs were by David Cale. The cast was as follows for both productions:

PHILIP BRUGGLESTEIN / HARRY CLARKE Billy Crudup

CHARACTERS

PHILIP BRUGGLESTEIN / HARRY CLARKE

*A single deck chair stands on a bare stage.
Low-key yet tantalizing cinematic music
plays, like the opening credits music for a
mystery movie or a thriller.**

The music fades.

Philip Brugglestein walks out.

*A curiously captivating but essentially timid
man from the Midwest, Philip feels more
himself speaking with an English accent.*

*His self-confidence fully comes alive when
adopting the persona of a cocky Londoner,
Harry Clarke.*

*He addresses the audience with an English
accent, but when he recalls what people
from his past have said he replicates their
American voices and demeanors with
uncanny accuracy, almost as if he's able to
channel the personalities of the people he's
recalling.*

I could always do an immaculate English accent.

Ever since I was a little kid. I don't know where it came from. English TV shows on PBS? English movies?

I don't remember much about my childhood, but I remember laying out on the football field at school in South Bend, Indiana with this kid from my class, Chris Keane, and saying,

"I could be myself if I had an English accent."

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And Chris Keane staring at me blankly, not saying a word, but me knowing that I had just uncovered what would be one of the fundamental truths of my life.

My mom died when I was fifteen and my dad died just before my eighteenth birthday. After he died I went through all his possessions. Came across an 8mm film that in four minutes crystallizes my whole childhood.

The film was taken just after my mom and dad and I moved from Evanston to South Bend. Somebody had given my dad a camera and tripod and this was his one attempt at using it.

In the film my father is interviewing me in the front yard. I'm about eight years old at the time.

He says to me, "What do you think of the new house, Phil?"

My name was Philip Brugglestein then.

I answer, "Oh, it's lovely, Father."

I was posher then.

My dad yells out, "Lois, he's speakin' in that goddamn English accent again!"

My mother comes into the shot and says, "Don't upset your father."

I say, "But it's my real voice."

And my dad loses it.

"Phil, you're an American! You were born in Illinois. No one in this family has ever been to Europe. You don't stop talking in that Britty Brit accent I'm takin' you to the doctor. He says you need electroshock to cure you, I'm going to let him plug you into the goddamn wall! You want to get electrocuted huh? Huh?"

My mother starts screaming, "Jack, don't scare him!"

I'm yelling, "It's my voice, Mummy. I cant help how I sound!"

My father hollers, "You wanted to keep the kid, you deal with this."

Storms off.

My mother runs after him and in the background of the 8mm film you hear,

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean? Don’t you ever talk like that in front of him. You’re a pig. I cannot wait to leave you. Why was I thinking it was going to be any different when we moved to Indiana? ...Don’t you raise a finger with me.”

They’re battling it out in the kitchen. I’m left standing alone in front of the camera, which is still running, and I start clowning around doing this character I’d come up with – Harry Clarke.

I’m eight years old looking into the camera and going,

“Allo! My name’s Harry Clarke.

You awright?

Don’t get your knickers in a twist, darlin’.

Why these people yellin’ all the time?

Come off it.

They’re bonkers.

I feel like I’m livin’ in a bloody mad house.

I’m Harry Clarke, and I’m gonna mess you up.

’Cause I’m Harry Clarke.

Yeah!”

He pulls a comical, child-like Harry Clarke face to the camera.

My dad comes into the frame, goes, “And you wanna know why you get kicked around at school!”

Whaps me on the side of the head and the screen goes blank.

After my father’s funeral I donated the contents of our house to Goodwill, put the house on the market, and when I found a buyer, took the money and walked away from

Indiana. I got on a plane to New York, and from the day I landed only spoke with an English accent.

If anyone asked where I was from, I told them I was from Elstree, north of London, where the film studios are.

I felt liberated. Special. I felt like I was finally being myself.

When I got into my thirties, I thought of levelling with people about where I came from. To test the water I told one person I know who moved to the West Coast. We don't have any friends in common. He had such an adverse response. "I'll never see you in the same light. I'll never see you the same way." He stopped returning my calls. I thought, I'm not telling anyone else. All my friends in New York know me as an English person. The Evanston and South Bend years seem like such a thing of the past. Irrelevant to me now. So I'm just gonna leave things as they are, get on with my life.

And I didn't think about Harry Clarke for years.

Till one day he re-appeared.

He sits on the chair.

It was a strange time. I wasn't working. Didn't know what to do with myself.

He speaks confidently to the audience.

I was wandering around midtown Manhattan. Sixth Avenue and 49th Street. There was a guy walking ahead of me. And I don't know why I did this, or what made me choose to do it with him, but I thought, I'm going to follow that guy. See where he goes.

He walks south on Sixth Avenue.

I trail behind him.

This must be what a stalker feels like. Or a private detective or a cop.

He crosses the avenue at 48th.

I do the same.

He ducks into The Gap.

I follow him into the store. He picks up four packs of grey boxer briefs. There's a large sign above them. "Special Sale. Two packs of two for twenty dollars."

I hang near the jeans while he stands on line to pay, and when he leaves the store I follow him south, and then west along 46th Street, keeping about thirty feet behind.

Where are we headed? I think. Where are you leading me?

He goes into the Dean and DeLuca in the lobby of the Paramount Hotel. I wait a few moments and follow him inside.

When I get up to the counter he's paying for an iced coffee. I order an espresso and sit at the empty table next to him.

He reaches into his pocket for a little pill container. Takes two white tablets out of it. I can't read what the label says. Washes them down with iced coffee, and gets on his phone.

I hear him say, "Sabine, I don't want to go to couples counseling. I've made the decision... Sabine, Sabine, you're not listening to me, it's over."

Then he says a few sentences in French and the call ends, as though this Sabine had hung up on him.

He dials another number.

I hear him say, "Jed, hey. Look, I got some family stuff I have to attend to unexpectedly. I'm not coming back to the office. Gonna head back to Connecticut."

When he hangs up I think to myself, what are you doing? Get out of here. Leave!

On the street I figure, no harm done. He had no idea I was following him. I just got a little glimpse into somebody's life. I won't do it again. It was just my morning for doing something I'd never done before. Now I know what it's like to follow a stranger around.

A few months later I go to see a play in a little theatre in Tribeca. The lights come up for intermission. The

person sitting across the aisle from me looks familiar. I'm thinking, where do I know that face from? I know you from somewhere, and I realize it's the guy that I'd followed that day.

And I must have been staring at him as I tried to figure out who he was because when I came out of my head he was glaring at me.

And without thinking I squint up my eyes and say, "Sorry, I didn't mean to stare but I think we've met before. With Sabine?"

"Oh yeah," he says, trying to make it seem like he remembers. "What's your name again?"

I feel a surge of panic. What the hell am I going to say? Paralyzed for a moment then oddly calm. It's like another force is pulling me out of my seat towards him. I get up, look him in the eye, extend my hand and say,

"I'm Harry Clarke. What's your name again?"

From this point on every time Philip interacts with Mark Schmidt he speaks in Harry's voice, and every time he recalls what Mark says it's in Mark's faintly Long Island accent.

"Mark Schmidt."

"Pleased to re-meet you Mark Schmidt. You enjoying the play?"

"It's unusual to be in the theatre and feel tension."

"This play's like a mystery. In that sense, seems more like a movie. You on your own?"

"Yes, I couldn't find anyone to come with me. My friend's on the board of the theatre. Wanted to be supportive. It got a very good review."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand why anyone would read reviews. Why would you want to know what's going to happen? Isn't one of the powers of art rooted in the element of surprise?"

I remember years ago seeing that film *Sexy Beast*. I didn't know a thing about it. From the title I assumed it must be one of those soft-core porn films the English are partial to. But it was nothing at all as I imagined. All these former criminals laying low in Spain. It was fabulous. But part of what made it great for me was I knew absolutely nothing about it. The impact of the film was connected to the unknown."

"I'm guessing by your accent, you're from London?"

"Could you tell? Wish I could remember where we met. I don't know why I'm thinking it was Connecticut."

"I used to live in Stamford. When I was with Sabine. I was going to get a drink. Can I get you something?"

"Oh, thanks. Whatever you're having. Surprise me."

He comes back from the concessions stand. Hands me a drink.

"Sabine and I separated."

"I'm sorry."

"I moved into Manhattan. Sabine's talking about moving back to Paris. I hope she does. I'd be happy if I never run into her again. You married?"

"Nah, never met the right bird."

"Bird?"

"Girl, chick, woman. Funny how the English call girls, 'birds.' And the Americans call 'em 'chicks.' Wonder where all this avian terminology hails from? Wine's pretty good for something that comes in a plastic cup."

The lights begin flickering. We take our seats. I can't concentrate on the second half of the play. I feel like I've had an out of body experience. Harry Clarke was a character I did for myself. Harry Clarke had never made an appearance in New York. I'll make a quick exit at the end of the show. Don't need to talk to the guy again.

But there's a bottleneck of people at the front of the theatre and coming from directly behind me I hear,

"I can see why you don't read reviews, Harry. Wish I hadn't known the brother wasn't who he said he was."

I turn back, and Harry Clarke kicks in again.

"I could eat a fucking pony. I'm going to get something to eat, you wanna join me?"

"You know, I haven't eaten since this morning."

"Come on, you gotta eat."

Walking through the street I notice my walk has changed. My posture is different. I'm standing up straight. I seem to have a whole new internal life.

We go to a fish restaurant. After we order he asks me what I do for a living.

A slight pause of hesitation.

"Right now, nothing. Unemployed. But for the last twenty years, up till last year, I was tour manager slash personal assistant slash whatever-else-was-needed type person for a recording artist in England."

"Anyone I might know?"

And just one word flies into my brain, out through my mouth and makes its home in the world.

"Sade."

"Sade! Oh man, how cool! What's she like?"

"Well, she's about the most real person I know. What's she like? She's funny. Loyal. Kind. Extremely astute about people emotionally. Little bit of a recluse. You have to pull her out of her shell sometimes. I was with her for twenty years. One of my closest friends at this point. Though I can't say I've seen her much of late. When I left the job I felt I needed to shake things up in my life, so I got on a plane and here I am. What d'you do?"

"Building appraisals for banks and insurance companies, not very interesting. Sometimes, I feel there's a more adventurous, artistic person inside me wriggling to get out."

"Oh, let 'im out. Give 'im the run of the place."

"Easy to say. I realized recently, I have such a recognizable life, it's interchangeable with any number of people. An indistinct life."

"My life's had no planning. It's an intuitive trail that goes where it wants to go. I feel like fate is pulling me along. I happen to meet Sade in a pub in East London when she was just getting started, that led to what that became. I happen to meet you in Connecticut, now here we are."

"Wish I could have more of a connection to the arts. I think about producing movies. I know people with money. I could find investors. But then everyone tells me, you can't make money in independent films, so I back off."

"You gotta get a little ballsy sometimes. Find a script you like and just throw yourself into it."

"I need to be around more people like you, Harry. Everyone I know is so cautious. They would never get up and move to another country because they wanted a change."

"I thought, England doesn't suit me right now. I need to feel like a stranger in town. So here I am. A stranger in a strange land. Some people live their lives so seriously. I'm having fun with mine."

We keep talking and polish off two bottles of wine, and he says,

"Look, my place is literally four blocks from here. I have this potato vodka from Lithuania. Come back and I'll make you a nightcap that'll put color in your dreams."

"Sure", I say.

We stand up to leave. He slaps me on the shoulder.

"You're a cool guy, Harry Clarke."

His apartment is on the eleventh floor of a new building in Tribeca overlooking the river. He mixes us the strongest martini I've ever had in my life and asks me what my honest take on Sabine is. I tell him I only met her once.

"I'll tell you this, I had a lot more hang-ups after our relationship than I had going into it."

I ask him what he means.

"Suddenly in the middle of making love she'd say something like, 'Mark, don't do that with your tongue.' I'd say, 'Do what?' She'd say, 'You're making your tongue go hard when you kiss me, I don't like it.' I'd say, 'I have no idea what you're talking about, Sabine.' She'd say, 'Well just keep your tongue soft.' For weeks after, every time we were intimate, I'd be crippled with self-consciousness.

Or she'd say, 'You're so tender and sensitive I feel like I'm having sex with another woman. That we're a pair of lesbians.'

Then she got into this whole gay thing with me. I can't believe I'm telling you this shit. It's the potato vodka and the tempranillo talking.

Oh, she'd say, 'I feel like I'm with a man who never really explored who he is sexually.' She'd say, 'Ask Fred.' We had this gay friend Fred. 'Call him up. Ask him if he'll come over and fuck you next time I'm in France. Tell him I give him my blessing. He'll wear a condom. You won't catch anything. You're blushing!' 'Of course I'm blushing, Sabine,' I'd say, 'I'm embarrassed for you.' I'm making another drink. You havin' one?"

"Why not?" I say, trying to say as little as possible so he wouldn't be able to tell I was having trouble keeping my words from sliding into one another.

We finish up the martinis. He glances at his watch. "Man I have to be up in four hours. Gotta go to bed."

Five minutes later I'm in the back of a cab hurtling up the FDR thinking, that was the weirdest night of my life. What the hell were you doing?

I wake up groggy and dehydrated. Pick up my jeans off the floor and a business card falls out.

Mark Schmidt
Vice President
Redman Appraisals.

I remember I'd given him my home phone number and that my name is on the outgoing message of the answering machine. So before I have coffee I change it to simply, "Please leave a message."

By late afternoon the whole thing is off my mind. I'm drifting in and out of a Raymond Chandler short story, when the home phone rings.

Coming out of the answering machine I hear,

"Harry Clarke! Mark Schmidt here. So much fun last night. Hey look, man, tell me if you're not up for this, my folks have a boat they keep up in Rhode Island and my mom's a huge Sade fan and my sister's a singer-songwriter and my mom wants to meet you and my dad wants my sister to play you some of her songs, have you give her your professional advice. They're up in Newport right now. And they invited us to spend the weekend on the boat. I know I hardly know you..."

I lunge at the phone.

"Mark Schmidt – star of last night. Yeah, I'd love to come to Rhode Island."

"You know I could take Friday off and we could get a head start on the weekend."

"Sounds groovy. I'll swing by your apartment. Ten a.m. Friday morning, okay?"

I put down the phone and it's like a fever flaring up. I go to the computer. Do a search for the names of travel agents in London. Write down the number of one and dial it. Get the after-hours answering machine with a brief message. Hanging up, I program the travel agent's number into my phone. List it as *Sade – Home*.

The next few days I read everything I can get my hands on about Sade. Every interview. Every profile.

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