Acting Edition

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Based on the Book by
Cheryl Strayed

Adapted for the Stage by
Nia Vardalos

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Co-Conceived by Marshall Heyman,
Thomas Kail, and Nia Vardalos

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Original New York production by The Public Theater in New York City. Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director. Patrick Willingham, Executive Director.

TINY BEAUTIFUL THINGS premiered on November 15, 2016 in the Shiva at The Public Theater in New York City. The production was directed by Thomas Kail, with scenic design by Rachel Hauck, costume design by Jennifer Moeller, lighting design by Jeff Croiter, and sound design by Jill BC Du Boff. The production stage manager was Diane DiVita. The cast was as follows:

SUGAR . . . . . Nia Vardalos
LETTER WRITERS . . . . . Phillip James Brannon, Alfredo Narciso, Natalie Woolams-Torres

TINY BEAUTIFUL THINGS transferred to the Newman at The Public Theater and opened on September 19, 2017. The cast was as follows:

SUGAR . . . . . Nia Vardalos
LETTER WRITERS . . . . . Teddy Cañez, Hubert Point-Du Jour, Natalie Woolams-Torres

CHARACTERS

SUGAR – Female, forties.

LETTER WRITER #1 – Male, forties.

LETTER WRITER #2 – Female, twenties.

LETTER WRITER #3 – Male, twenties.

Casting is open to all genders, ethnicities, and ages.

SETTING

The play takes place over the course of one night on the bottom floor of a worn and not luxurious two-story home. There are dirty dishes in the sink, the floor is strewn with toys and food, and well-known works of literature plus used writing journals line several bookshelves.

TIME

Late evening into early morning.

COSTUMES

Sugar wears casual, comfortable clothes suitable for home. The Letter Writers also wear casual clothes, and there aren't costume changes to delineate between the different characters they play.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

While she was awaiting publication of her memoir *Wild*, the writer Cheryl Strayed sent an admiring letter to an online anonymous advice column called *Dear Sugar*. The advice columnist emailed Ms. Strayed, revealed his identity as Steve Almond, and reminded her they'd met at a writers' conference. He praised her writing, then asked if she would take over the column.

Since it was anonymous, there wouldn't be credit, and as is the case with most art, there wasn't a paycheck, yet Ms. Strayed decided to take on the challenges of writing an advice column. She changed the tone and content by combining genuine transparency and empathy. Inserting personal stories within her responses, she gave advice which was illuminating rather than instructional.

Within months, the column became enormously popular and widely admired as a compassionate and open forum was formed by this online community. Although Sugar's identity remained a mystery, writing anonymously was not a motivating factor for Ms. Strayed. Instead, her goal was to engender unadulterated advice, unencumbered by the readers' preconceptions of who she might be.

The letters were later collected in a book titled *Tiny Beautiful Things*, published after *Wild*, and both became beloved bestsellers.

The text of this play is created from the epistolary exchange of the *Dear Sugar* advice column. To arc the play and add narrative, letters have been edited, others have been combined, and new material has been written. Although Cheryl Strayed wrote the column over the span of two years, the play takes place in one night.

A few thoughts about the initial production:

Setting Sugar in her home illustrated she was a regular person navigating the complexities and challenges of life – like the people writing to her – rather than an oracle with all the correct answers. After Sugar accepted the job, the Letter Writers entered her home, as if they visited to reveal some of their deepest truths and secrets. Sugar offered counseling deep into the night, resulting in a catharsis for both her and the Letter Writers.

Sugar entered and exited via the stairs. The set of her home did not have joined walls, so rather than walk in in a conventional manner, for example, through a door, the Letter Writers entered via the spaces between the walls. When the Letter Writers weren't conversing with Sugar they did not exit, but rather sat or stood in dimly-lit areas onstage, actively listening to the discussion. The Letter Writers and Sugar performed conversationally, as if they were speaking to each other rather than writing or reading a letter. Although the text appears to be in letter format, the intention is not to suggest a pause after the greeting or before the sign-off.

At first, Sugar did not make eye contact with the Letter Writers, but rather, read along from her computer screen. Then, in the letter titled "Confused," upon hearing the word "love," Sugar made eye contact with Letter Writer #3 and later, with Letter Writer #2 when she appeared as Sugar's mother. From "Epistles 1A" and onward, Sugar saw all the Letter Writers and addressed them directly. During "Stuck," as Sugar began to settle into her role and understand that her responses were public, she often addressed the audience as well. The computer was closed halfway by Sugar while Letter Writer #3 was speaking in "Confused." Sugar did not read, type, or refer to the computer again until the final piece, "Tiny Beautiful Things."

It was decided in our production that the actors could see each other but would not touch. They congregated and moved to various areas around stage – leaning on the kitchen table, sitting on the coffee table and stairs, standing in the kitchen. The Letter Writers interacted within the space as if they were in their own homes, not Sugar's. They ate snacks, poured drinks from the refrigerator, and picked up various objects. Symbolizing the bond formed by the exchange of grief and pursuit of healing, there was one touch at the end of "Obliterated Place" which took place in the abstract and transcended the pattern.

While many of the letters are heartbreaking, there were many humorous moments directed as well, devised to provide the relief of laughter. Many of the lighter lines in the "Epistles" and letters such as "Sexy Santa" were directed as humorous to provide an ebb and flow to the play.

Our production featured an ethnically diverse and inclusive cast who played a multitude of roles. For future productions, I request that best efforts be made to include actors of all genders and all ethnicities, without age limits.

I look forward to upcoming productions in which you will interpret this play with your love, creativity, and ingenuity.

Above all, I hope you will always remember that the letters are real.

– Nia Vardalos

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The book *Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar* by Cheryl Strayed was given to me by my friend Thomas Kail. The book had been given to Thomas by his friend Marshall Heyman.

They felt it had the potential to be a play, so together the three of us co-conceived the notion of bringing it to the stage. To turn an online column into a play, ironically, we made contact with Cheryl Strayed on social media. We met for a cup of tea and made an agreement.

I thank Cheryl, Thomas, and Marshall for entrusting me with the text and for the patience they extended to me as I continually made changes over the course of three years of workshops and performances. The resulting friendship between the four of us is the outcome for which I wished from this creative endeavor.

I admire and thank our beautiful actors and crews for their kindness, talent, and love. I have everlasting gratitude to Johanna Pfaelzer of New York Stage and Film for the workshop readings, and Oskar Eustis and all at The Public Theater for giving us a home for two consecutive seasons. I am sending heartfelt appreciation to Cheryl Strayed for her bold and audacious writing and for her candor and generosity during our rehearsal process. Thank you to Marshall for his keen eye. I'd like to especially thank Tommy Kail for his exquisite direction, friendship, and expertise in bringing this play to the New York stage.

(It is late in the evening, the house is quiet. **SUGAR** *comes down the stairs, holding two books. She has just put her children to bed and is tired. She passes a basket of laundry on the couch, turns off a lamp, gathers dirty plates and cups, takes them to the kitchen. While doing dishes, she checks email.)*

(Ding of an incoming email.)

*(***LETTER WRITER #1** *enters.* **SUGAR** *does not see him as she reads his email.)*

LETTER WRITER #1. Hi, it's been a while since we met at that writers' conference; I hope you're doing well and writing. For the last year I have been hiding behind a computer screen anonymously giving out advice in the online column called "Dear Sugar." I know you read the column because it's received exactly one fan letter: yours. To be honest, I don't have a passion for the gig and as you know I admire your work, so I'm brazenly emailing you with a job offer: do you want to take over the column, I mean, do you want to be Sugar? As you know it's anonymous, so there's no credit and the bonus is, there's no pay. So, you in?

*(***LETTER WRITER #1** *takes out a cell phone to check email and looks at it, waiting for a response.)*

*(***SUGAR** *types the first line of her response as she says it.)*

SUGAR. Hello and thank you for your strange offer.

(She stops typing but continues to speak as if she is composing an email.)

SUGAR. I'm trying to finish a book. My husband is an artist, we have two kids and ten mountains of debt. I can't take on…
Yeah, I'm in.

(She presses Send.)

LETTER WRITER #1. That's great! I'll forward you the letters.

*(***LETTER WRITER #1** *sends the emails from his phone, exits.)*

(Multiple dings of rapidly incoming emails.)

*(***SUGAR** *abandons the dishes, takes her computer to the table, sits, and reads.)*

*(***LETTER WRITER #2** *enters.* **SUGAR** *is reading from the computer screen and hears but does not see* **LETTER WRITER #2**.*)*

Epistles #1

LETTER WRITER #2 & SUGAR. Dear Sugar,

LETTER WRITER #2. I'm jealous of other people's success even if I like them. When my friends get good news I put on a smile but I'm really thinking *why not me*!!

*(***LETTER WRITER #3** *enters.)*

LETTER WRITER #3 & SUGAR. Dear Sugar,

LETTER WRITER #3. I want to make friends and my dad's advice is, just be yourself, but it's not that easy in a new school in eighth grade. Everyone has their own groups. Everyone already knows who they're going to pair up with in science class and I'm stuck with an anti-social kid who picks his nose.

*(***LETTER WRITER #1** *enters.)*

LETTER WRITER #1 & SUGAR. Dear Sugar,

LETTER WRITER #1. I get seasick and I have a boat trip coming up with my boss. He doesn't like me. I mean, he really doesn't like me. I don't want to go on the trip, I want to call in sick before I get on the boat and barf. What's your advice?

LETTER WRITER #2 & SUGAR. Dear Sugar,

LETTER WRITER #2. I'm a seventy-year-old married man and I suspect my newly widowed neighbor is spying on me when I'm in my yard. When I'm out there pulling weeds, to drive her batty, I don't wear a shirt.

LETTER WRITER #1 & SUGAR. Dear Sugar,

LETTER WRITER #1. I am a thirty-five-year-old woman, I lost my job and am entering into an arrangement with a married man: we will rendezvous twice a week and he will pay me $1,000 a month. I have many thoughts and questions, including: is this taxable income?

Like An Iron Bell

LETTER WRITER #3 & SUGAR. Dear Sugar,

LETTER WRITER #3. My question is about love.

*(***SUGAR** *now sees* **LETTER WRITER #3.***)*

I'm at the age when most of my friends are married. The closest I've been to the altar was when I was the best man. I've had three relationships. One casual, one serious and one current. There was no issue with the casual one: I was up front about not wanting to settle down. The second one started out casual and I broke it off when she got serious, so I lost both a lover and a friend.

For about four months now, I've been dating another woman. She seems like she's falling in love with me. I avoid that word "love." I don't want to say that word out loud because it comes loaded with promises that are fragile and easily broken. My question is, when do I have to take that big step and say, "I love you"? And, what is this love thing all about, anyway?

Signed,

Confused

SUGAR. Dear Confused…

I agree, that word "love" is highly loaded with – Ah, I agree with you, well that's helpful advice –

Dear Confused…

You certainly must be confused if you're confused – Oh, that's good writing, I will just repeat your word back to you.

Please don't let the timetable by which others live their lives affect yours. No…

Dear Confused,

The last word my mother ever said to me was love. She was forty-five, and so sick and weak she couldn't muster the "I" or the "you," but it didn't matter. That puny word has the power to stand on its own.

I was twenty-two and I wasn't with my mom when she died. No one was. She died alone in a hospital room and for many years it felt like my insides were frozen solid because of that. I ran it over and over in my mind, the choices I made that kept me from being beside my mother in her last hours, but thinking about it didn't do a thing. Thinking about it was a long dive into a bucket of shit that didn't have a bottom.

I would never be with my mother when she died. She would never be alive again. The last thing that happened between us would always be the last thing. There would be the way I got my coat and said, "I love you," and there would be the way she was silent until I was almost out the door and she called:

LETTER WRITER #2. *(As Sugar's mother.) Love.*

*(***SUGAR** *sees* **LETTER WRITER #2** *as her mother in the past.)*

SUGAR. And, there would be the way that she was still lying in that bed when I returned the next morning, but dead.

My mother's last word to me clanks inside me like an iron bell that someone beats at dinnertime:

LETTER WRITER #2. *(As Sugar's mother.) Love, love, love, love, love.*

SUGAR. I'll bet you think this has nothing to do with your question, but your question and my answer are about *love*.

Love is the feeling we have for people we care about and hold in high regard. It can be light as the hug we give a friend or heavy as the sacrifices we make for our children. It can be fleeting, everlasting, conditional, unconditional, stoked by sex, sullied by abuse, nourished by humor.

The point is, you get to define it, you get to describe the oh-wow-I-didn't-mean-to-fall-in-love-but-I-sorta-did love you appear to have for this woman. You've convinced yourself that withholding one small word from her will shield you from getting hurt.

You asked me, when do you have to take that big step and tell your girlfriend that you love her, and my answer is: when you think you love her.

Be brave. Brave enough to break your own heart. Tackle the motherfucking shit out of love. Look, we're all going to die. Hit the iron bell like it's dinnertime.

Signed,
Sugar

Epistles #1A

LETTER WRITER #2. Dear Sugar, Something is different. Who the hell are you?

SUGAR. Hi, I'm the new Sugar –

LETTER WRITER #3. I knew it! Who are you?

LETTER WRITER #2. What's your real name?

SUGAR. Let's keep it at Sugar.

LETTER WRITER #1. Do you write other things?

SUGAR. Yes.

LETTER WRITER #2. Are you a published author?

SUGAR. Yes.

LETTER WRITER #3. As in author of a real book, or a blog?

SUGAR. I have published some things including a novel.

LETTER WRITER #3. So, do you write the letters for the column?

SUGAR. No.

LETTER WRITER #2. Wait, the letters are real?

SUGAR. Yes.

LETTER WRITER #3. All of them?

SUGAR. Yes.

LETTER WRITER #2. Do you have an office, is this your job?

SUGAR. No, I write at home, at night, when I'm supposed to be working on my next book.

LETTER WRITER #1. Have you ever written an advice column before?

SUGAR. No.

LETTER WRITER #3. Are any questions off limits?

SUGAR. No.

LETTER WRITER #1. Do you like it up the ass?

SUGAR. No.

LETTER WRITER #3. Can we really ask you anything?

SUGAR. Yes.

LETTER WRITER #3. What is your name?

SUGAR. Sugar.

LETTER WRITER #1. Dear Sugar, What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck? I'm asking this question as it applies to everything every day. Best. WTF.

(**SUGAR** *looks at* **LETTER WRITER #1**.)

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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