

Acting Edition

Gaslight®

by Patrick Hamilton

A new version for the stage
by Steven Dietz

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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GASLIGHT® received its co-world premiere at Cincinnati Shakespeare Company (Brian Isaac Phillips, Producing Artistic Director) and Merrimack Repertory Theatre (Courtney Sale, Nancy L. Donahue Executive Artistic Director), running from September 8th to September 24th, 2023, in Cincinnati, Ohio, and from October 18th to November 5th, 2023, in Lowell, Massachusetts. The production was directed by Courtney Sale. The scenic design was by Samantha Reno, with costume design by Rainy Edwards, lighting design by Laura Glover, sound design by Robert Carlton Stimmel, and properties design by Kara Eble Trusty. The stage manager was Elizabeth Robinson. The cast was as follows:

MRS. MANNINGHAM (BELLA) Kristin Yancy
MR. MANNINGHAM (JACK) Tom Coiner
ELIZABETH Karen MacDonald
NANCY Candice Handy
SERGEANT ROUGH Jim Hopkins
POLICE OFFICERS Jack Bausch & Christian Hall (Cincinnati),
Vanessa Waugh & Lauren Yee (Merrimack)

CHARACTERS

MRS. MANNINGHAM (BELLA) – Thirty-five, attractive, attentive, unsettled.

MR. MANNINGHAM (JACK) – Forty-five, charming, handsome, secretive.

ELIZABETH – Fifties, the senior maid, stout, direct, loyal.

NANCY – Nineteen, the young maid, pretty, sassy, bold.

SERGEANT ROUGH – Sixties, British accent, buoyant, clever, relentless.

TWO POLICE OFFICERS

SETTING

New York City.

The living room of a gloomy three-story house on the East Side.

TIME

The late 1880s.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Note on the Set

The house is a worn relic of a more abundant time. What was once opulence has given way – through poverty, age and neglect – to decadence.

The room itself is laden with dark woodwork, heavy curtains and well-worn rugs. Sturdy, if not elegant, furniture. Key pieces include two desks – a larger one (featuring a locked drawer), and a smaller “secretary” desk; a small eating table with chairs; a cabinet and sideboard holding glassware; and Mr. Manningham’s upholstered chair. A bell cord is in place to summon the servants. A coal fireplace attempts to warm the room.

Sliding double-doors upstage provide access to the hallway and front door. A stairway leads up to the second floor. A door at one side of the stage leads to a large walk-in closet.

The gas lamps which light the room are prominently featured.

*There are no beautiful surfaces
without a terrible depth.*

– Friedrich Nietzsche

ACT ONE

(The Manningham Home. 5 PM.)

(At rise, a clock is chiming the hour.)

(MR. MANNINGHAM (JACK) – handsome, well-dressed and groomed – seems to be asleep in his upholstered chair. A newspaper lies on his lap.)

(MRS. MANNINGHAM (BELLA) – a former beauty queen, also well-dressed – sits in a simpler chair, nearby. She is knitting.)

(The lamps are not yet lit.)

(BELLA takes a break from her knitting and stares admiringly at her husband. This picture of perfect contentment holds for a moment. Then... BELLA returns to her knitting, as –)

(Outside, the sound of a bell.)

(Hearing this, BELLA sets down her knitting and, with a mischievous smile, moves to the bell cord in the room – being careful not to wake her husband. She pulls the cord.)

(BELLA quietly tiptoes to her small “secretary” desk and removes a few coins from a drawer or work box.)

(**ELIZABETH**, the senior maid, enters. Before **ELIZABETH** can speak, **BELLA** puts a finger to her own lips.)

(**BELLA** hands **ELIZABETH** some coins, and begins to whisper to her, as –)

JACK. (*Calmly, eyes closed.*) What are you doing, Bella?

BELLA. (*Brightly.*) Nothing at all, Jack. Enjoy your rest.

(**BELLA** whispers again to **ELIZABETH**, handing over the coins.)

JACK. (*With a smirk.*) You are doing something, Bella. Tell me what it is.

BELLA. (*Enjoying this.*) No, I will not tell you what it is.

(**ELIZABETH** nods and exits.)

(**BELLA** closes the door quietly behind her.)

JACK. (*Eyes still closed.*) Where have you sent the maid, Bella?

BELLA. (*With a smile.*) Now, what makes you think I've done that?

JACK. I know Elizabeth's footsteps. I know the sound of my own door.

BELLA. But do you know the sound of the bakery man's bell? He's just outside with his pushcart. I thought it would be a nice surprise to have sweet rolls with our tea.

(**JACK** opens his eyes. He smiles.)

JACK. That would be a very sweet surprise.

BELLA. Good.

JACK. Though I'd prefer oysters.

BELLA. (*A disgusted face.*) Oysters?!

JACK. Did you know, Bella: on the Avenue, there are now two dozen pushcarts selling oysters. Packed in ice. Fresh from the bay.

BELLA. I had no idea you liked oysters, Jack.

JACK. Adventure, Bella! – That is what makes life worth living.

BELLA. (*Lightly.*) Well, I'm sorry you don't find my sweet rolls adventuresome enough.

JACK. It's a nice thing you've thought of.

BELLA. (*Brightly.*) And what's more: I found your cuff links that had gone missing. Your favorite ones.

(**BELLA** hands **JACK** the cuff links.)

JACK. Found them where?

BELLA. In my desk, of all places.

JACK. Thank you.

(**JACK** notices the fireplace.)

Oh, the fire is in ashes. Could you ring the bell?

BELLA. But I've just sent Elizabeth out for the rolls.

JACK. Then ring for Nancy, the new one.

BELLA. (*With a laugh.*) I can do it myself! If it's merely to put a piece of coal on the fire, I can do that easily!

(**BELLA** goes to the coal bucket. She lifts a tool to procure a piece of coal.)

JACK. (*In a calm voice.*) Bella, why do you suppose I employ our two maids?

BELLA. To serve us, of course. But I think from time to time we should consider their feelings – in the same way we ask them to consider ours.

JACK. Do you think I don't consider them?

BELLA. No, I'm not saying that –

JACK. Do I not consider Elizabeth to the tune of twenty-three dollars per year? And the young one, Nancy – at a rate of eleven dollars per year? That's nearly thirty-five dollars per year of my consideration.

(With a wry smile, BELLA pointedly sets the tool down.)

(She pulls the bell cord.)

What's the weather doing?

BELLA. The fog is awful. I'm sure you won't want to venture out tonight.

(A knock at the door to the room.)

(Immediately.) Come in, Nancy.

(NANCY enters, coy and mischievous. She stands there, staring at BELLA.)

NANCY. What is it, ma'am?

BELLA. Your uniform. It needs pressing.

NANCY. Oh, yes. I'll get right to that. I thought you rang the bell.

JACK. She did ring the bell.

BELLA. We need some coal. Some coal put on the fire.

(NANCY sees the piece of coal that BELLA had readied.)

NANCY. Like that piece of coal right there?

BELLA. Yes. That's what we need. Right away.

NANCY. *(An impudent smirk.)* Yes. Indeed. *Right away.*

(NANCY lifts the tool and puts the coal in the fireplace. This takes all of about three seconds.)

There we are.

BELLA. Thank you, Nancy.

JACK. And you might as well light the lamps.

NANCY. Right away, sir.

(JACK watches NANCY as she lights the gas lamps in the room.)

(BELLA begins to put away her knitting.)

BELLA. Nancy, I wonder if you've learned to knit? It's a fine hobby.

NANCY. I think I'll take it up when I am much older.

(BELLA turns to JACK.)

JACK. You're acting rather sassy today, Nancy. Like you have a delicious secret of some kind.

NANCY. *(As she works.)* No secrets at all.

JACK. Perhaps you've added another broken heart to your list.

BELLA. Jack, that's enough.

JACK. *(With a laugh.)* I imagine that when you go out, you must leave a dozen boys in your wake.

NANCY. *(To BELLA.)* Will there be anything else, ma'am?

JACK. It must be those mysterious lotions you employ to keep your skin so lovely.

NANCY.
Sir?

BELLA.
Jack...

JACK. You know, Mrs. Manningham was a beauty pageant winner in her day. But in recent years, she has lost her radiance. I wonder if you'd share your secrets with her.

(**BELLA** gives **JACK** a hard look.)

BELLA. *That will be all, Nancy.*

JACK. Except for the sweet rolls my wife has so kindly ordered.

NANCY. Is Elizabeth getting those for you?

JACK. Yes, though I had hoped for oysters instead. Have you ever had an oyster?

BELLA. (*Sharp.*) *Please bring our rolls at once.*

NANCY. Yes, ma'am.

(**NANCY** leaves the room.)

BELLA. Why do you do that?

JACK. Do what?

BELLA. Humiliate me in front of the servants.

JACK. I was saving you from humiliation. You are too familiar with her.

BELLA. No, I certainly am not –

JACK. You say you want the servants treated as *equals*, so I ask the girl about her activities. Then you say you *don't* want to be her equal, but you won't order her to manage the fire!

BELLA. That girl laughs at me, Jack! Every day she sneers at me behind my back.

JACK. (*Lightly.*) What an imagination you have! That girl *admires* you.

BELLA. She most certainly does not.

JACK. Of course she does! She's told me as much! But your imagination – the power of your busy mind – it blinds you to what is *real*.

(**BELLA** *is looking away.*)

Bella...?

(**JACK** *sings what must be a simple little "pet song" between them.:*)

(*Quietly.*) BELLA, BELLA... SMILE FOR YOUR FELLA...

BELLA. (*Not in the mood.*) No, Jack...

JACK. (*Continues singing.*)

BELLA, BELLA... SWEET AND DARLING ONE.

BELLA. It's not going to work this time...

JACK. (*He smiles.*) You really are a *perfect little silly*, you know that? You read dire meanings into everything.

(**BELLA** *stares at him...slowly warming to his charms once again.*)

BELLA. I do, don't I?

JACK. I've just thought of something nice. Why don't you come over here.

BELLA. Tell me.

JACK. (*Mischievously.*) I will tell you when you come over here.

BELLA. (*Playing along.*) If I come over there, you'll tell me the nice thing?

JACK. Yes, I will.

(**BELLA** *considers.*)

BELLA. (*Coyly.*) I will come halfway.

JACK. (*Also coy.*) Then I will only tell you half of it.

(BELLA considers. Smiles. Goes to him. She sits on his lap.)

JACK. Now: I've just read that Mr. Booth – the celebrated actor – will tour to New York this season.

BELLA. Yes, I read that as well.

(She stops, looks at him.)

Oh, Jack...you don't mean...?

(JACK smiles at her. He nods.)

Are you serious? You'd take me to see Edwin Booth on Broadway?!

JACK. Not only will we see Mr. Booth – but I will see that we are invited backstage.

BELLA. Oh, that's a perfect heaven!

JACK. Now – the engagement is brief, so we must choose a night.

BELLA. You choose, Jack – any night! – Any night at all!

JACK. You haven't even asked what he is playing.

BELLA. It's a tragedy, I bet. He is noted for tragedy. Oh, Jack – I'm so happy! – But what made you offer this?

(Before he can respond.) Is it because I've been better? I have been better, haven't I?

JACK. Yes, you have.

BELLA. And you've been better, too.

JACK. What do you mean by that?

BELLA. This past week you have been so kind to me, so attentive. The ghastly dreams I was having – they seem to have vanished for good.

JACK. That means your medicine is working.

BELLA. No, it's not the medicine! It is the serenity of a clear mind. I want you to understand that, Jack.

JACK. *(With a laugh.)* Don't I seem to?

BELLA. Yes, but –

JACK. Haven't I just said I'm taking you to the theatre?!

BELLA. Yes, you have! And you have made me so happy!

(Bella kisses him, as –)

(Knocking is heard at the door.)

(With confidence.) Come in!

(Nancy enters with a tea service, as well as a covered plate.)

(Nancy starts toward the sideboard.)

Thank you – but not there, Nancy. We will have our sweet rolls on the table today.

NANCY. All right, then...here we are.

(Nancy sets the covered plate on the table. During what follows, she will pour the tea.)

BELLA. Did you know, Nancy, that Mr. Manningham will be taking me to the theatre.

NANCY. Well, good for him.

BELLA. Tell me: if you were to see a play, would you wish for a comedy or a tragedy?

NANCY. I'd wish for a big ol' bang-up musical. Lots of dancing – with maybe a dog act in the middle.

BELLA. We will be seeing the great Edwin Booth.

NANCY. Oh, the brother of the shooter.

BELLA. Mr. Booth is the greatest tragic actor in the world.

NANCY. But can he play the zither? Make a bird appear outta his mouth?

BELLA. How dare you –

JACK. *(With a laugh.)* Maybe the girl is right, Bella. Perhaps a musical would lighten your mind.

(From his newspaper.) There's something here called *Tita in Tibet*.

NANCY. That might do it!

BELLA. *(Strong.)* Listen to me, both of you: I want a tragedy and I shall have one.

(Beat.)

JACK. That will be all, Nancy.

(NANCY does a little curtsy toward BELLA, then leaves.)

BELLA. You're right, Jack: I have been too familiar with her. From now on I will put my foot down.

JACK. Hear, hear! I must offer to take you to the theatre more often.

BELLA. Yes, you must! Now – let's sit and enjoy our rolls. Here, at the perfect table for two. You on one side...

(JACK takes a chair at the table.)

And me on the other.

(BELLA sits across from him.)

There we are. What could be better?

(BELLA uncovers the plate and discovers: oysters.)

Oh, no...