Acting Edition

A Tour of the Permanent Collection in the Museum of Late Human Antiquities

or, just

The Antiquities

by Jordan Harrison

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ISBN 978-0-573-71192-3

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THE ANTIQUITIES was originally co-produced by Playwrights Horizons (Adam Greenfield, Artistic Director; Casey York, Managing Director), the Vineyard Theatre (Douglas Aibel and Sarah Stern, Artistic Directors; Moogie Brooks, Managing Producer), and Goodman Theatre (Susan V. Booth, Artistic Director; John Collins, Executive Director). The play premiered in the Judith O. Rubin Theater at Playwrights Horizons on January 11, 2025, and was directed by David Cromer and Caitlin Sullivan, with scenic design by Paul Steinberg, costume design by Brenda Abbandandolo, lighting design by Tyler Micoleau, and sound design by Christopher Darbassie. The assistant director was Kayla Amani. The production stage manager was Erin Gioia Albrecht. The cast was as follows:

WOMAN 1 . . . . . Kristen Sieh
WOMAN 2 . . . . . Amelia Workman
WOMAN 3 . . . . . Cindy Cheung
WOMAN 4 . . . . . Layan Elwazani
MAN 1 . . . . . Aria Shahghasemi
MAN 2 . . . . . Marchánt Davis
MAN 3 . . . . . Andrew Garman
MAN 4 . . . . . Ryan Spahn
BOY . . . . . Julius Rinzel

The production transferred to Goodman Theatre in Chicago, opening in the Owen Theatre on May 3, 2025. The assistant director was Tor Campbell and the production stage manager was Pat Fries. The cast remained the same, with the following changes:

WOMAN 3 . . . . . Helen Joo Lee
BOY . . . . . Thomas Murphy Molony

CHARACTERS

This play is written for an ensemble of **nine actors** playing multiple roles. I've scripted them as four women, four men, and one child, but there may be other approaches. (See the Suggested Cast Doubling breakdown at the end of the script.) It is certainly possible to do the play with more than nine actors; I doubt that it's possible with fewer. Diverse casting please. Also: The child should be a real child, not a youthful-looking adult.

SETTING

Scenery should be minimal and easily movable. Continuous action from one scene to the next. While locations are merely suggested, the **technology props** should be fully realized. An ancient cell phone, an early modem. They may barely catch our eye in their first appearance, but we'll need to remember them later.

NOTES

Robbie the Robot must be a real robot. In the first production, Robbie was designed to resemble the robot from the Stanford Cart experiment. Obviously not every theater will have the means to construct a custom robot. Some inexpensive remote-control toy options from the 1980s are available on eBay. Whatever the solution, Robbie should not be played by an actor or a puppet – he is crucially a non-human presence in the play.

There is no intermission between Part One and Part Two.

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.

– Oscar Wilde

PART ONE

Lights up. Two **WOMEN** *in early nineteenth-century dress look out at us. One of them* **(W2)** *seems to be six or seven months pregnant. They are avid and bright-eyed, if not exactly warm.*

(Note: Maybe the lines in this section are miked, so that they seem to come from all around us.)

W1. Thank you for coming.

That's what we'd say, if we were them.

Thank you for coming. It's good to see your faces. Fasten your seatbelts. Look alive.

W2. "Look alive."

W1. That's one of my favorites. As if it were necessary to pretend.

W2. *(To the audience, trying it out.)* Look alive.

W1. *(Regarding us.)* They do, don't they. You all look perfect. It's like we're really here.

A beat. She takes in the room.

Imagine we're actually here in these seats in this room in the Late Human age.

Imagine you have a body.

W1. Imagine *that's* your body.

Is it old or young

Is there hair on its head? A lot, or a little?

Has the body given birth before?

Does this body *want* things

Does it want food. Does it want another body.

Imagine you can feel the seat under you. You can feel the fabric, smooshing

W2. Smooshing?

W1. Yes smooshing under your weight.

And you didn't just appear in that seat

You traveled some distance to be here.

Imagine that some things are "near" to you, and some things are "far."

If you came from "far," maybe you had to refuel

You put food in your body

And you can feel it now, on its mazy journey through you.

Can you feel it?

W2. *(Gross.)* I can feel it.

W1. Imagine you have nowhere else but this body

You can't exist outside of it

This body that grows and droops with time.

W2. *(It's difficult.)* Time

W1. I know. It's a lot. But imagine that everything is made of days and minutes

(These are foreign, human words:) That you *regret* some of the days you've wasted

That you're *excited* about some of the days to come.

That one day you Began

And one day you will End.

W2 *takes us in.*

W2. I think they're ready.

W1. As you know, there are those who question our mission. Who argue there is no way to responsibly display these objects, to tell these stories. That is why it seemed important that the dead speak in their own words.

Lights shift. We become aware of three **MEN** *in early nineteenth-century dress, sitting round a fire.*

W2. So much has been lost, but we have recovered fragments. Scraps of language, abandoned devices. We have endeavored to fill in the gaps; to bring them to life again.

The **MEN** *laugh at something, though we can't hear what they're saying.*

W1. We know the humans had museums themselves, for understanding the dinosaurs. Well now: they are the dinosaurs. Maybe, in trying to understand them, we can better understand ourselves.

One of the **MEN** *around the fire* **(M1)**, *calls out to* **W1**. *This is* **PERCY SHELLEY**, *a fop.*

PERCY. Mary, what are you on about? Stop luxuriating in the darkness.

W1 *becomes* **MARY SHELLEY**, *her voice no longer amplified.*

MARY. I'm not luxuriating. I'm merely wallowing.

W2. Our tour begins here, on a holiday at Lake Geneva.

PERCY. Come and sit on my lap, by the fire.

W2. That's Percy Shelley, and this, of course, is Mary Shelley.

As **MARY** *crosses to the* **MEN** *by the fire, a projection appears:*

EXHIBIT. 1816.

W2. Mary is not yet his wife, but lately she has taken to calling herself Shelley.

MARY *sits on* **PERCY***'s lap.*

PERCY. *(Horny.)* Good girl. You take my name, you better come when called.

The second man, **BYRON (M2)**, *even more foppish, says to her:*

BYRON. Is it true you two first made love in a cemetery?

W2. Their friend, Lord Byron. A cad.

BYRON. Is it true or is it legend?

MARY. *(Insinuating.)* A legend can also be true, Mr. Byron.

W2. Byron's physician is there as well, one Thomas Briggs.

BRIGGS. *(To* **W2***.)* Join us, Claire, or you'll catch your death in the cold.

BYRON. Quite right, Claire. It's no good dying while you're carrying my baby.

> **W2** *becomes* **CLAIRE**. *As she goes to sit by the fire:*

CLAIRE. And I am there too. Claire Clairmont, six months pregnant with Byron's child. I ran away from home with Mary my half-sister, wishing for experience. *(Re: her big belly.)* I have found it.

> *Lights shift. The scene is now complete, with no one addressing us directly.*

BYRON. I'm *bored* who else is bored?

PERCY. Me

MARY. Also me

BYRON. I propose a competition: Each of us must tell a story, a ghost story.

PERCY. A ghost story. Doesn't it seem rather

MARY. What

PERCY. Confining? *(Withering:) Genre.*

BYRON. It needn't be ghosts

PERCY. *(Not a real suggestion.)* Mummies then?

MARY. Mummies, how modish.

BYRON. What's to be scared of, they're nothing but gauze.

CLAIRE. Fairies? Evil fairies?

PERCY. I can't be scared of a fairy, I just can't.

BYRON. Something to complement the licking fire, the shifting shadow.

BRIGGS. I'll go.

MARY. Mr. Briggs, our hero!

CLAIRE. Mr. Briggs, how brave!

PERCY. *(Grumpy.)* It's less pressure if you aren't a writer.

BYRON. *(Grumpy.)* Much.

BRIGGS. This really happened, on my honor. Before I came into the service of one George Gordon Byron, I was Deckhand on a tallship. One winter we were nearing Noddy Bay when we came upon another ship – a black frigate, listing. The Captain issued a distress call. No answer. Night was starting to fall. And it was decided we would draw straws, and the man who drew the shortest would take the rowboat across, in the darkness, and board the silent ship.

PERCY. And of course, you drew the short straw.

BRIGGS. They gave me a pistol and a shot of whiskey. I boarded the ship and walked the deck with my lantern raised, calling out "Is any man alive?" Hearing no answer, I descended into the cabin.

MARY. Had they all killed each other?

BRIGGS. That would've been better. At least that would've been an answer.

He continues, increasingly transported by the memory.

Some of the corpses lay in hammocks, swaying slightly with the sea. One sat slumped at a table, a cup of grog still in his hand. Two others, at a game of chess. They still sat in their places, as if enacting a diorama of their own lost lives.

BYRON *shudders.*

Finally I entered the Captain's quarters, and there he was, his corpse bent over the ship's log. And do you know what the Captain had written there, on the last line?

CLAIRE. What?

BRIGGS. "There's a place for you here."

A beat. Then, quickly:

PERCY. Bullshit.

BYRON. What the fuck, Briggs?

BRIGGS. On my honor.

CLAIRE. *(Anxious.)* Perhaps he had been writing to himself – looking out on that friendly bay?

MARY. What had he written just before?

BRIGGS. We'll never know, for I ran back to my ship, and from there to dry land. And I never set foot on a boat again, for fear of ghosts.

PERCY. Fuck ghosts.

They all look at **PERCY**.

PERCY. *(The final verdict.)* It is a sentimental idea that ghosts retain the shape and obligations of who they were in life. It says more about us, and our inability to let go.

BYRON. Quite right. The dead don't care a whit for us, or what they once were.

MARY *rises abruptly and leaves the fire.*
CLAIRE *watches her go.*

CLAIRE. *(To* **MARY***, not directly out.)* Mary lost her baby two months ago, during the night. She went to nurse it one morning and found it ice cold.

PERCY. Well, who's next?

BYRON. Why are you looking at me? I'm the one who thought of it.

PERCY. Exactly, you're the one who thought of it!

CLAIRE*'s eyes are still on* **MARY***, as she circles the darkness.*

CLAIRE. Now she dreams of the dead child every night. Dreams of holding its feet to the fire and reviving it. But when she wakes, the bed is empty; the fire is out.

BYRON. Why doesn't Mary go next. Isn't she calling herself a writer?

PERCY. She writes pretty poems, but she doesn't interrogate the soul.

BYRON. *(Calling to her, condescending.)* Mary dear you needn't interrogate the soul, only give us a little fright.

MARY. What if I *could* bring back the dead,

CLAIRE. Mary thought, in her mind-voice.

MARY. What if I used all the fire in the world, and made a baby that was beyond death. What if I used all the lightning in the sky.

CLAIRE. And Mary returned to the campfire, feeling taller than she'd ever felt.

MARY. Gentlemen.

The three **MEN** *turn and see her.*

CLAIRE. Because now she knew she would win.

MARY. I have a tale.

Lights shift. Continuous into:

EXHIBIT. 1910.

A woman, **DINAH (W3)**, *holds a human finger aloft, staring at it.*

Nearby, another woman, **ROSE (W4)**, *looks down at a book, teaching herself to read. We're in a bleak kind of factory barracks, somewhere in the middle of America.*

ROSE *reads about as well as a diligent six-year-old. Tracking the words with one finger.*

ROSE. *(Reading.)* "If I were a swift clood." "Swift cloud."

DINAH. *(Regarding her finger.)* They let me keep it.

ROSE. "If I were a swift cloud, to fly with thee."

DINAH. Turn on the light, Rose. You'll go blind.

ROSE *pulls a cord and a bare lightbulb is illuminated.* **DINAH** *returns to inspecting her severed finger. In the new light, we notice that* **DINAH***'s hand is wrapped with a bloody bandage.*

It was part of me. Isn't that queer. My poor loyal finger. I could finish Harry off with two flicks of this beauty. Two flicks under his nuts and kablooie.

ROSE. "A wave to pant beneath thy…power."

DINAH. Should we give it a proper burial? Say a few nice words? Thanks for bringing off Harry?

ROSE. "The impulse of thy strenng. Thy strent. Thy strenjjj."

DINAH. *(Blunt.)* "Strength," Rose.

MAN. Good evening.

Suddenly there are two people in the doorway. ***A* MAN (M1)** *and a* **BOY**, *ten years old maybe. The* **BOY** *holds a very threadbare teddy bear, one of its eyes missing.*

I got a strong grown boy for you. Tall enough to work the machines. They said there was a cot for him. And two old sisters with no kin.

DINAH. That would be us.

MAN. Go on. Say your name.

The **BOY** *doesn't say anything.*

Say your name. If they think you're mute they won't take you.

DINAH. We got plenty of mutes here. Long as you have two arms and ten fingers, you're fine by us. Rose here is almost a mute.

ROSE. "A heavy weight of how-ers."

MAN. Sounds like talking.

DINAH. It's Mr. Percy Shelley's words, not hers.

MAN. Who the hell is Percy Shelley?

DINAH. Hell if I know. That's the one book she's got.

ROSE. I'm practicing. If I learn to read, I can be a secretary.

DINAH. I already told her, men are secretaries.

BOY. What happened to your finger?

DINAH. The machine. I was thinking of something else, for an instant, and the machine went chomp. It works faster than me, is the trouble. They said, *It'll be easier, it'll do the work for you, it'll serve you.* Now I serve it. *(She wiggles her fingers.)* I'm down to only eight. I lose another and they'll put me on sludge crew.

BOY. Sludge crew?

MAN. Let that be a lesson.

DINAH. How old are you?

MAN. Go ahead. Answer her.

The **BOY** *doesn't answer.*

MAN. He's angry at me. His mother said we could find a way to keep him, but I've seen how far she stretches a potato and some water. We got five younger.

DINAH. He'll be taken care of.

MAN. Thanks.

DINAH. *(Waves her fingers.)* 'Long as he keeps these.

ROSE. "One too like thee: tameless, an' swift, and proud."

BOY. *(To* **ROSE***, plainly.)* I can read.

ROSE *looks up from the page.*

DINAH. You can teach her, then she'll stop hurting my ears.

MAN. See? Already making friends.

The **BOY** *doesn't say anything. The* **MAN***, uncomfortable, moves to the door.*

Well. Goodbye, Tom. I don't expect I'll see you again.

DINAH. Say goodbye to your father.

The **BOY** *doesn't say anything. The* **MAN** *leaves.*

DINAH *waves her mutilated hand at him, ghoulish-coquettish. Trying to lighten his mood.*

Did you ever meet a monster before?

BOY. No.

DINAH. *(Re: the severed finger.)* Want to touch it?

A beat.

BOY. Yes.

She reaches toward him with the finger, playing like God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Just before their fingers touch –

Lights. Continuous into:

EXHIBIT. 1978.

STUART. Life! I made a life!

*A dive bar in Menlo Park, California. A '70s rock song on the jukebox, maybe Led Zeppelin.**

An awkward, beautiful man, **STUART (M4)***, late twenties, sits at the bar, celebrating alone. A female* **BARTENDER***, thirties, pours him a second whiskey.*

Do you have any idea what that feels like?

The **BARTENDER** *looks at him. She has two kids, but she doesn't tell him that.*

Something didn't exist, and now it does! This must be what it's like giving birth. Do you think?

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BARTENDER. No.

STUART. Okay fair point. But there was pain, believe me.

A **REGULAR** *at the end of the bar calls out to the* **BARTENDER** –

REGULAR. Hey Nadra, mind if I use the phone?

She lifts the rotary phone onto the bar for him.

BARTENDER. No long distance.

REGULAR. Thanks.

The **REGULAR** *lifts the receiver in a strange way. Instead of holding it to his ear, he might hold it at arm's length in front of him (the first of several "mistakes" that we'll seed throughout the play).*

STUART. Four years of falling on my face, investors pulling out. One time some teenagers broke into the lab and stole our equipment –

BARTENDER. I'm not sure I get it. It's a toy you're making?

STUART. It's a multidirectional cart. A robot on wheels.

BARTENDER. *(Not trying to be cruel.)* Like a toy car.

STUART. *(Deciding not to be offended.)* – with sensors and ocular capabilities, a microprocessor… You tell it where to go and it decides how to get there, all by itself.

BARTENDER. Tell it how?

STUART. With Ones and Zeroes. For computers, the whole world is a one or a zero.

The **BARTENDER** *is not any closer to getting it. We overhear the* **REGULAR** *on his call, barely audible:*

REGULAR. Come on baby, don't make me beg. / I wanna see you.

STUART. Every day we test it. Put a chair in its path. And every day the little robot runs into the chair, *bam*, like a toddler. For the last four years, *bam*.

Trying to keep his excitement in check, in a public space:

But today? For the first time? He steered around. He saw the chair through the sensors, moved his little wheels and turned. Like when you're driving down the road and you swerve to miss a squirrel. Your eye tells your brain tells your hand to spin the wheel. It did all that with wires instead of nerves.

BARTENDER. Sometimes I like to hit squirrels.

STUART. The point is it learns. It gets better, all by itself. God, if we could get a computer to learn half as fast as a human child… Maybe *now* it's a shitty little robot, but –

The **REGULAR** *ends his call and puts the rotary phone back behind the bar. On his way out:*

REGULAR. Thanks, Nadra.

BARTENDER. No problem, sugar.

REGULAR. You need anything? *(He means "Do you need to be rescued?")*

BARTENDER. Nah I'm good.

The **REGULAR** *exits.*

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