46 PLAYS FOR AMERICA'S FIRST LADIES

BY GENEVRA GALLO-BAYIATES, SHARON GREENE, CHLOE JOHNSTON, BILAL DARDAI, AND ANDY BAYIATES



Playscripts



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46 PLAYS FOR AMERICA'S FIRST LADIES
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The world premiere of 46 PLAYS FOR AMERICA'S FIRST LADIES was a virtual, streaming performance produced by The Neo-Futurist Theater (Connor Shioshita Pickett, Artistic Director; Juliet Barrett, General Manager), Chicago, Illinois, on October 8, 2020, as *45 Plays for America's First Ladies*. It was directed by Denise Yvette Serna with music direction by Spencer Meeks, and featured the following ensemble:

Brenda Arellano
Hilary Asare
Ida Cuttler
Andie Patterson
Robin Virginie
Vic Wynter

The live premiere of 46 PLAYS FOR AMERICA'S FIRST LADIES was produced by Forward Theater Co. (Jennifer Uphoff Gray, Artistic Director; Julie Swenson, Managing Director), Madison, Wisconsin, on May 8, 2021. It was directed by Jennifer Uphoff Gray with music direction by Joe Cerqua, and featured the following ensemble:

Matt Daniels
Elyse Edelman
Phoebe González
Jamal James
Nadja Simmonds

The authors wish to express additional gratitude to Khanisha Foster, Jeffrey Mosser, Madeleine Oldham, Kurt Chiang, Jorge Silva, Sean Benjamin, Karen Weinberg, and the workshop casts at Northwestern University and Berkeley Repertory Theatre for their help in shaping the play. They also wish to express their abundance of love for Ari, Andre, Paloma, Kai, Max, Dana, and Robin.

ON CASTING AND PERFORMANCE

46 PLAYS FOR AMERICA'S FIRST LADIES is written to be performed with as few as five individual cast members, rotating roles from one play to the next. In many cases, plays will denote certain roles as ACTOR 1 or similar, but unless otherwise specified, this is not meant to be static from play to play. The actor performing ACTOR 1 in one play does not have to perform ACTOR 1 in subsequent plays (although they may).

This play has been written using many of the aesthetics of Neo-Futurism, a modern, nonillusory theatrical form. Although the actors will often be playing characters, one of the overall directives for the ensemble is to remain aware of and connected to the audience. Instead of suspending disbelief or building a fourth wall, be as honest as possible about the experience of being in a room together to share a series of stories. When the play calls for comedy, avoid aiming for broad farce. When the play calls for tragedy, avoid aiming for maudlin melodrama.

Despite the historical nature of this show, roles should not be considered gender-specific. The authors encourage that men, women, and nonbinary performers be cast across any and all gender lines.

The authors also insist any production cast as diversely as possible in terms of race and ethnicity, and to approach the text with sensitivity and consciousness as individual roles are assigned.

—Chloe, Sharon, Genevra, Bilal, and Andy

SCENERY, PROPS, AND DIRECT QUOTES

Every play begins with a projected slide that tells the audience whose play is being performed and their years of service as First Lady. There may also be an area onstage for other projections as required by individual plays.

The set for this play should be flexible and functional, with space and shelves to place small props or hang costume pieces. At times it may need to be a well-ordered sitting room, at other times a spectacular performance venue, at other times a blank, quiet space.

Somewhere onstage there is a visible light-up sign that reads DIRECT QUOTE, which should be turned on and off as noted. In this script, any text that should be accompanied by this sign's illumination will be indicated as follows:

[DIRECT QUOTE] Spoken line. [DIRECT QUOTE]

46 PLAYS FOR AMERICA'S FIRST LADIES

Martha Washington (1789–1797)
Pretty as a Picture

Martha is posed as though inside a portrait. She wears the First Lady Mantle as a scarf. Actor 1 holds up a large frame in front of Martha so that she's a live representation of a painting. Classical music plays softly.

ACTOR 1. Martha Washington: The first First Lady. Note the scarf she wears.

Actor 1 indicates Martha's Mantle.

It symbolizes the role of First Lady. You'll be seeing a lot of it in this show. Fetching, isn't it?

Martha winks.

Martha was a humanitarian.

Martha grabs the frame and pushes it down. Lighting change. Music stops.

MARTHA. I loved slavery. Seriously loved it.

Martha whips back as the lights shift and classical music returns. Martha is posed once again.

ACTOR 1. When her husband died, she freed all her slaves.

Martha pushes the frame down. Lighting change. Music stops.

MARTHA. Because George was gone and I'm afraid of Black people.

Back in the frame. Lights return. Classical music returns.

ACTOR 1. Martha was considered a patriotic and selfless First Lady.

No frame. Light change. No music.

MARTHA. I felt like a [DIRECT QUOTE] state prisoner. [DIRECT QUOTE] I hated it. Hated it. Hated it. Hated it.

Back in the frame. Lights return. Classical music returns.

ACTOR 1. Martha Washington. Beauty. Grace…

No frame. Light change. No music, or possibly some sinister music. Martha makes the ugliest demon face she can and emits horrifying devil noises. A beat. Blackout.

Transition.

2. Abigail Adams (1797–1801)
The Ladies Do Remember

Abigail stands center stage, having received the First Lady Mantle from Martha. We hear the start of a rock song/anthem with a driving bass rhythm. Abigail fronts the band (playing bass if possible) and wears the First Lady Mantle tied around her head rocker-style. The rest of the cast serves as her back-up singers, joining her for the chorus and perhaps doing small, synchronized movements in the background. They could also play instruments, but only if that fits with their skill sets.

ABIGAIL. *(Spoken intro.)* Hey baby…I sure do miss you. But I've got lots to share…so you better listen up.

Abigail begins singing a bluesy rock anthem (think: Joan Jett or Melissa Etheridge).

[DIRECT QUOTE] You desire I should write
And I comply with your request. [DIRECT QUOTE]
I'm only running our whole farm
And raising the kids at your behest,
While you head off to rule
With the men in distant towns.

[DIRECT QUOTE] May I not come to see you? [DIRECT QUOTE]
I'm feeling pretty down.

BACKUP.
[DIRECT QUOTE] Remember the ladies [DIRECT QUOTE]

ABIGAIL.
In your code of laws all new.
You best invite more people in;
Make what you say be what you do.

BACKUP.
John…hey, John!

ABIGAIL.
I let you take the oath of office
Though lately I regret it.
Some call me "Mrs. President"
But those folks are pathetic.
As you're leading our brand new nation,
Make sure all people can rise
So we can live in liberty;
No longer be minoritized.

BACKUP.
[DIRECT QUOTE] Remember the ladies [DIRECT QUOTE]

ABIGAIL.
We'll be free from tyranny.
Without a single drop of violence,
We'll stomp your authority.

BACKUP.
[DIRECT QUOTE] Remember the ladies [DIRECT QUOTE]

ABIGAIL.
Start giving us our due.
You better share the power, son,
Or our rebellion will be true.

ABIGAIL and BACKUP.

Hey don't forget all the ladies who
Pushed for revolution right beside you
Deborah Sampson bound her chest and entered battle without fear!
Molly Pitcher cared for everyone; Phillis Wheatley pushed for abolition;
Sybil Ludington mounted her horse and she outrode Paul Revere!

BACKUP.

[DIRECT QUOTE] Remember the ladies [DIRECT QUOTE]

ABIGAIL.

And others underneath your shoe
Because eventually we'll rise
And then we're coming after you.

ABIGAIL and BACKUP.

[DIRECT QUOTE] Remember the ladies [DIRECT QUOTE]

ABIGAIL.

Your time is almost through
Better watch out for Jefferson
That man is way too smooth.

The Mantle is snatched off Abigail's head by Jefferson.

Transition.

3. Sally Hemings and Martha Jefferson Randolph (1801–1809) Sisters Under the Skin

Actor 1 enters as Sally Hemings, a young woman of guarded dignity.

SALLY. Thomas Jefferson's wife died ten years before he became president.

Actor 2 enters as Martha Jefferson Randolph, a manic ball of childish enthusiasm and chaotic feelings.

MARTHA. So who was his First Lady? Was it…

SALLY. Sally Hemings, a Black woman Jefferson owned and mother of his children.

MARTHA. Or Martha Jefferson, his daughter.

SALLY. We have tentatively agreed…

MARTHA. To tell this story together! In 1787, Martha was twelve.

SALLY. And Sally was fourteen years old. She was sent to Paris as Martha's lady's maid.

MARTHA. Sally was the daughter of Martha's mother's father and the enslaved woman who attended him in his house.

SALLY. So, biologically, Martha's aunt.

MARTHA. And also, her property. But they were close like sisters.

SALLY. Theoretically.

Beat.

MARTHA. In Paris, Martha was sent to be educated at a convent.

SALLY. And Sally was kept in Jefferson's luxurious hotel room, alone with him all week. She was pregnant by the age of fifteen.

MARTHA. In 1776 the age of consent was ten!

SALLY. I don't think that factoid is doing what you think it's doing.

MARTHA. I'm not saying it was OK, I'm saying it was normal.

SALLY. It was incest and child rape.

MARTHA. And tradition. *(Deep sigh.)* Our family has had sister-aunt lady's maids for generations.

SALLY. We agreed that you would let me lead.

MARTHA. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm weeping. *(She is. Or maybe it's a spray bottle.)* Wow that was fast but I'm really feeling it.

SALLY. I just…can't.

MARTHA. I was a motherless child, allowed to marry for love, as long as I chose someone very rich. He ended up being an abusive drunk who did not inherit.

SALLY. I was pregnant by my owner/cousin, a man more than twice my age. But in France slavery was illegal. I could not be compelled to return with him to slavery.

MARTHA. I had the first baby ever born in the White House—but it was probably to keep my husband from beating me into miscarriage.

SALLY. My brother and I could have demanded our freedom. But what then? Hang out, unemployed Black folks trapped in *Les Misérables*?

MARTHA. I returned to my father's house and spent the rest of my life cared for by…

SALLY. I cut a deal. I'd come back if he freed our children, and then freed me.

Actor 3 enters wearing the Presidential Coat—a suit jacket decorated in an obnoxiously patriotic manner that henceforth identifies the wearer as the president.

JEFFERSON. Hello audience. I'm Thomas Jefferson and actually, I served as my own First Lady.

MARTHA. Oh look it's Mister "All MEN are created equal."

JEFFERSON. I did all my own entertaining in the White House, controlling every detail.

MARTHA. No one thinks this play is about who picks the dishes.

JEFFERSON. This play just started, no one knows what it's about yet. I thought I'd share some context about the Enlightenment…

MARTHA. Daddy.

JEFFERSON. Yes, my little cotton boll?

SALLY. Get out of our play.

He does.

MARTHA. Pre-Enlightenment, women were considered a subcategory of men. Weaker, slower, stupider men.

SALLY. But some felt this was not borne out by scientific observation. That women should instead be considered…People.

MARTHA. This idea, that women were People, who should therefore be able to vote, and control their own choices—it was just too far.

SALLY. And Black people certainly couldn't be capital-P People. Because then Americans would be the worst.

MARTHA. But back to us…

SALLY. Jefferson freed their children at the age of twenty-one. But never freed Sally. Instead—he left her in his will to Martha.

MARTHA. Who could only inherit because Jefferson had no living legitimate sons. When he died she was left with a mountain of debt.

SALLY. I mean, she was still a Lady.

MARTHA. A pauper Lady.

SALLY. You know who actually has no money? The enslaved.

MARTHA. I…

SALLY. Martha could have freed Sally and did not.

MARTHA. Martha wrote a will that would free Sally upon her own death.

SALLY. But Sally died first.

MARTHA. I'm so sorry. *(Tearing up, for real if possible.)* Really. Very sorry.

SALLY. Well that might be true. But I doubt it mattered to Sally then. It certainly doesn't matter now.

Transition.

4. Dolley Madison (1809–1817)
Party Tricks

Dolley enters and takes the Mantle. Ideally, she is played by the same actor who will play Michelle Obama. She puts on the Mantle. Throughout the play she is doing various difficult physical tasks involving balance. Maybe she is moving through a home, finding different balancing acts to do in different spaces.

VOICE-OVER. Every Wednesday James Madison was in office, his wife, Dolley, invited all of Washington, D.C., to dine at the Executive Mansion.
She offered them food and beauty.
It was called the squeeze because everyone came.

Different kinds of people, crowding in to see this new house, to imagine a new country. It shouldn't have worked, but it did.

She finishes her first trick. We hear applause. She holds up her hand and says:

DOLLEY. That's not the trick.

VOICE-OVER. It worked because of Dolley.
Providing dinner and lighting the candles and choosing the wallpaper. First Lady is not an official designation.
And yet everyone seems to know what it should be.
The greatest crime a First Lady can commit is to fail to make it look easy. Dolley made it look easy.

She pulls off another balancing trick. Applause.

DOLLEY. But that's not the trick.

VOICE-OVER. When the British burned the White House, Dolley built it up again. She knew it was the symbol of this little country's strength and food and beauty. Or rather, enslaved people rebuilt it, brick by brick. People she owned. Like the family who lived here before her. And the family who lived here after.

Another balancing trick. Applause.

DOLLEY. That's certainly *A* trick. But that's not *THE* trick.

VOICE-OVER. This play is about the First Ladies. A job that doesn't technically exist. That's the trick. To hold many truths in your mind at the same time.

The last trick. Applause.

DOLLEY. Exactly two hundred years after Dolley Madison left the White House, Michelle Obama moved in. The *FIRST* First Lady to be an acknowledged descendant of enslaved people. And she planted a vegetable garden.
To give us food
and beauty
and truth.

Transition.

5. Elizabeth Kortright Monroe (1817–1825)
Liberté

This play is styled in the manner of a 1960s French New Wave film (e.g., Truffaut or Godard). Madame de Lafayette and Elizabeth Monroe sit at a cafe table in a glorious, angular ray of sunlight, wearing sunglasses and holding cigarettes daintily in their fingers. Dolley is in the middle distance looking radiant. Elizabeth wears the First Lady Mantle as a scarf. Soft, unobtrusive jazz music plays quietly underneath the scene. All of these lines are spoken with a profound and effortless cool. Lines spoken in French are translated as projected English supertitles.

ELIZABETH. After the French Revolution came the Reign of Terror. The Marquis de Lafayette's wife Adrienne was imprisoned by Robespierre.

LAFAYETTE. *Ma grand-mère, ma mère, et ma soeur ont été guillotinées en juillet dernier. C'est la guerre.* (My grandmother, mother, and sister had been sent to the guillotine the previous July. Such is war.)

ELIZABETH. While James went about his duties as Minister to France, I reminded Robespierre that further harm done to the Lafayettes would be viewed with displeasure.

LAFAYETTE. *Tu m'as sauvé la vie, en même temps que celle de mon fils. Merci.* (You saved my life, along with that of my son. Thank you.)

ELIZABETH. When James was made president I wanted little to do with its protocols. Let my daughter Eliza handle dinner. Let James handle decor. All I ask is that the furnishings be French. *J'ai toujours préféré notre vie à la française.* (I always preferred our lives in French.)

LAFAYETTE. *D'accord.* (Agreed.)

ELIZABETH. *(Indicating Dolley.)* The citizens disapproved. They missed my predecessor. The butterfly. The bon vivant.

LAFAYETTE. *Quelle injustice. Quel aveuglement.* (Such injustice. Such blindness.)

ELIZABETH. I wished to carry myself with dignity. They wished me to be their gracious hostess.

LAFAYETTE. *Tu étais digne. Tu étais gracieux.* (You did have dignity. You did have grace.)

ELIZABETH. I was withdrawn, too arrogant, too European, too reliant on my daughter. But the worst of my sins was that I wasn't Dolley Madison.

LAFAYETTE. *J'étais un prisonnier de la révolution. Durant mes heures les plus noires tu es venue me libérer.* (I was a prisoner of revolution. During my darkest hour you came to set me free.)

ELIZABETH. I was a prisoner of expectation. In my brightest hour, nobody could have set me free.

Transition.

6. Louisa Adams (1825–1829)
Louisa Adams in the Snow

There is a large paned window onstage, being held by Actors 1 and 3. It is somehow fogged up. Music begins to play; maybe Symphony on Two Russian Themes in D Minor *by Mikhail Glinka. Louisa sits on a high stool behind the window, wipes some of the fog from inside the window.*

She holds a book, periodically rips pages out of it, and lets them fall to the ground. Actors 2 and 4 take turns picking them up before each of their lines; they say their line and then tear the page into pieces. Periodically, over the course of the play, they blow their handful of paper scraps into the air, so that over the course of the play there is a light snow falling.

ACTOR 1. Louisa Adams was born in London and grew up in England and France. When she first arrived in America and saw her husband's family farm in Massachusetts she wrote:

ACTOR 2. *(Reads off paper they have picked up.)* [DIRECT QUOTE] Had I stepped onto Noah's ark, I do not think I could have been more utterly astonished. [DIRECT QUOTE]

They rip up the paper.

ACTOR 3. From there, they moved to St. Petersburg when her husband was named ambassador to Russia. She wrote:

ACTOR 4. *(Reads off paper they have picked up.)* [DIRECT QUOTE] Every preparation was made without the slightest consultation with me and even the disposal of my Children and my Sister. [DIRECT QUOTE]

They rip up the paper.

ACTOR 1. In Russia, she charmed the royal family with her exquisite manners and her perfect French.

ACTOR 2. She sent her sister to flirt with the Emperor.

ACTOR 3. She convinced the Russian court that America was a safe trading partner, a real place. It wasn't true yet, but dancing and flirting and charm made it true.

Over these last lines, the snow picks up, falls from the sky, a snow globe onstage. Louisa puts down the book, gets up from behind the glass and walks to the center of the snow globe and watches the snow fall.

ACTOR 1. When it was time to leave St. Petersburg…

ACTOR 2. She traveled alone with her eight-year-old son the two thousand miles to Paris through war-torn Europe. With no protection.

ACTOR 3. Late in her life, she wrote a memoir so that her son would know all the things she had done. It was titled *Adventures of a Nobody*.

Transition.

7. Rachel Jackson (1828)
Rachel's Monsters

This is a puppet show. Rachel, however, is not a puppet. She inhabits a puppet world. As she speaks, we see images of a happy home.

RACHEL. Hello. My name is Rachel. I was what you might call an uncomplicated person. I loved my porch. I loved my chair. I loved the country air. One day I married…

Husband 1 puppet pops up.

…a monster.

Husband 1 menaces Rachel, perhaps by jumping up and down on her shoulders and making monsterish noises. She expresses alarm.

HUSBAND 1. I divorce you! Hahahaha!

Husband 1 exits and a comically tall Andrew puppet enters.

RACHEL. But I remarried the famous Andrew Jackson.

They coo over each other. A man puppet appears.

MAN. Hey, I heard something bad about your wife—

Andrew jumps all over him, then returns to coo all over Rachel again. Rachel is alarmed at his violence at first, but pleased at his return to gentleness with her. Husband 1 reappears.

HUSBAND 1. Ha ha! I never divorced you!

A crowd of creepy villagers appear and taunt Rachel and Andrew, chanting "bigamist." Andrew attacks them, including Husband 1, eating every last one of them, until—

RACHEL. Andrew! Stop!!!

Andrew complies. The happy home trappings reappear.

Take me to my quiet house!

Andrew complies.

And bring me my chair.

Andrew complies.

And let us breathe the country air.

Andrew complies as they take a breath together. He puts his head on her lap.

No one can tarnish my reputation if we stay here, out of the public eye.

ANDREW. Yep. I'ma run for president.

Andrew rapidly kisses her on her cheek and vanishes. Rachel looks at the audience. A newspaper drops. She opens it. Out pop many, horrifying newspaper puppets, speaking their terrible stories.

NEWSPAPER 1. The candidate's wife, Rachel Jackson, is a [DIRECT QUOTE] fat, uneducated bigamist.

NEWSPAPER 2. A convicted adulteress.

NEWSPAPER 1. An American Jezebel. [DIRECT QUOTE]

Rachel, who has been unable to digest these insults, clutches her throat and stomach and falls. The papers still taunt her.

NEWSPAPER 2. [DIRECT QUOTE] A short, fat dumpling.

NEWSPAPER 1. Lewd. Notorious.

NEWSPAPER 1 and NEWSPAPER 2. Whore! [DIRECT QUOTE]

The newspapers laugh maniacally over her. They strike her hard, then hard again. Rachel barely pulls herself up, still shaken and ill. Andrew enters, wearing the Presidential Coat.

ANDREW. Darlin', I won!

The newspapers strike her a third time. Rachel falls. The newspapers exit. Andrew cradles her in his arms.

Rachel!

RACHEL. Do you have anything to say to me?

ANDREW. My dear…I will never forgive my…

Rachel dies.

…enemies!!!

In a rage, Andrew eats the world during a blackout.

Transition.

8. Angelica Van Buren (1837–1841)
The Queen of America

Two actors enter opposite one another, jovial.

AMERICAN 1. Hello fellow land-owning white citizen of these United States. Where are you off to this New Year's Day?

AMERICAN 2. I am for the White House, to be received by Angelica Van Buren, daughter-in-law of our president. I hear she is charming, gracious, and well-educated. Also, a roll-of-dimes hottie.

AMERICAN 1. 'Tis true. I went to this party last year and it was lit. This annual shindig is a sign of all citizens' equality in the eyes of our government. Let's bring another citizen of our great nation.

They go into the audience and look for a game participant.

AMERICAN 2. Will you be in this play with me? Come on. It's a party! *(Repeated until they get a "yes.")*

They bring the audience member up onstage, where the tableau has been revealed:

Angelica Van Buren, resplendent in a wig of her signature curls (Slinkys, curled ribbons, and earmuffs) holds a horn of plenty. A lady-in-waiting bows before her, gratefully receiving her bounty. A second lady-in-waiting stands on a chair above Angelica—placing an elaborate tiara made of tiny American flags and other symbols of America (anachronisms encouraged: hamburgers/Statue of Liberty/guns/buffalo, etc.) on Angelica's head.

The Americans look puzzled. American 1 attempts conversation.

AMERICAN 1. Angelica! Great to see you. Again. John Glover of the Pennsylvania Glovers.

No response.

OK. And this is… *(Gestures for the audience member to say their own name.)* How was your vacay in Europe?

The women in the tableau shift: Angelica as "Muse of the Revolution." Her ladies die at her bayonet point and exalt in freedom, respectively.

AMERICAN 2. It's a tableau, monarchs do it in European courts so that they may host their subjects without having to suffer interaction with the plebs. *(Falls under her spell.)* I don't know why but I want to be like her.

American 2 gets into the same position as Angelica and freezes, starting their own tableau.

AMERICAN 1. I don't know why but I want to be like her.

American 1 takes another position in the tableau.

AMERICAN 2. I don't know why but I want to be like her.

AMERICAN 1. I don't know why but I want to be like her. *(Repeat until…)*

They both look at the audience member until that person either gets into their position in the tableau and/or says the line "I don't know why but I want to be like her." Once this has been achieved…

AMERICAN 1. *(Breaking free of the spell.)* Angelica! This is… like…not working for me. I thought we were EFFs. Equals, Free Forever.

AMERICAN 2. I hear that she rolled into the courts of Europe as "The Queen of America."

AMERICAN 1. Not cool.

AMERICAN 2. That's kind our whole thing, no inherited monarchy.

AMERICAN 1. This is some snotty, Frenchified bull-pucky.

AMERICAN 2. Don't she and her family own, like, a bunch of human beings?

AMERICAN 1. I hate her.

AMERICAN 2. I always hated her.

AMERICAN 1. Hate. Her.

They both look at the audience member and wait for them to say whatever they feel at that moment.

Good thinking citizen. Let's go vote for Harrison.

The transition includes one of the Americans ushering the audience member safely back to their seat.

Transition.

9. Anna Harrison (1841)
When Life Explodes

Anna, wearing the First Lady Mantle, stands center stage with a large suitcase or trunk. She removes a large needle from the trunk. There are fifteen white balloons (blown up) visible onstage. As Anna addresses the audience, the rest of the cast moves to bring her balloons that she pops at specific points in the text. The staging should never make her wait; she should always control the pacing, which has the efficient pace of packing for a trip.

ANNA. Let's assume this is how it begins: With a formal education. Your mother dies,

She pops a balloon.

and you are taught to be self-reliant. Your father's watchful eyes require a clandestine marriage, but your husband the soldier vows to support you [DIRECT QUOTE] by my sword and my own right arm. [DIRECT QUOTE]

You are uprooted from your family to pioneer in the wilderness. You adapt. Educate the children. Handle the finances. Bite your tongue as military officers tromp through your home with muddy boots and loud laughter.

Tribal leaders come to dine. The men you've heard described as geniuses and savages sit at your table and drink from water goblets, and you practice saying their names in your head because you don't trust your tongue to speak them: Tecumseh. Tenskwatawa.

But it was falsehood masquerading as entertainment. Months later, your husband kills them each.

She pops two balloons.

Leaves their bodies mutilated and unburied. Uses their bones to ascend to political office. When the time comes to travel to Washington, you are too sick to join him.

You have buried six children

She pops a series of six balloons.

and your house feels empty. You are tired of being uprooted, and you are haunted by dreams draped in ghosts.

Then it is April. You are packing to travel to Washington when word arrives he is dead.

She pops a balloon.

He has only been president for thirty days.

Everyone else leaves, leaving her alone onstage.

No one knows what you say in that moment, but let's assume you grieve. As you place his body with your father's in North Bend,

She pops a balloon.

as you bury three more children,

She pops three more balloons.

as you answer questions and letters and visitors wearing formal attire.

She takes one final balloon and holds it close.

Let's assume this is how it ends: With silence…with sadness. With a soft, simple message. You chant it like a battle cry for your soul, like a prayer for your children, like a farewell to your soldier as your final minutes slip past: [DIRECT QUOTE] Be still, and know that I am God. [DIRECT QUOTE]

She pops the last balloon and closes the trunk.

Transition.

10. Letitia, Priscilla, Letty, and Julia Tyler (1841–1845)
The Four First Ladies of John Tyler

Letitia is alone onstage holding on to the First Lady Mantle, examining it but not putting it on. Music.

She stands in front of a podium or music stand with a paper in front of it that reads "Sick Wife"—black lettering on a white background. As each woman enters, she appears next to the one who had been singing last. Each woman has a similar stand in front of them with a paper sign that she flips over right before she sings.

LETITIA.
A hostess, is youthful and bright.
She's also lovely, and gracious, and light.
These days, I'm none of those things.
I still love John
But if he has to be the president I'm gone.

Priscilla enters. Her sign reads "Daughter-in-Law."

PRISCILLA. *(Hinting to Letitia.)*
I'm charming, and youthful, and bright.

LETITIA.
I also had a stroke.

PRISCILLA.
I'm an actress, I'm famous.

Letitia hands Priscilla her scarf as if saying "Here, you take this god-awful thing."

PRISCILLA. *(Feigning surprise, delighted.)*
All right.

LETITIA.
I love my daughter-in-law.

PRISCILLA.
Mom, I love you.

LETITIA.
Have fun, enjoy the politics. Adieu.

PRISCILLA.
They love me.

LETITIA.
Yes.

PRISCILLA.
What a great role!

LETITIA.
Good.

PRISCILLA.
It's grand.

LETITIA.
You can find me in my room upstairs.

PRISCILLA.
I don't know anything. They just smile and stare.

LETITIA.
Too bad I died one day.

Letitia flips a new sign in front of the old one (this one with white lettering on a black background). It reads "Dead Wife."

PRISCILLA.
It's true.

LETITIA.
I died in my room.

Letty enters as she sings, with a sign that reads "Daughter."

LETTY. *(Snatching the scarf away.)*
But it was time for her very young daughter, to bloom.

PRISCILLA. *(Surprised, spoken.)* Oh. OK. Sure…

LETTY.
Look at me. I'm only twenty-three.

Julia enters singing, and snatches the scarf away from Letty. Her sign reads "Second Wife."

JULIA.
Your father married me.

LETTY.
How could he? You're younger than me.

JULIA.
That's not at all creepy.

LETITIA. *(To all.)*
You please them all right now.
Then you don't in a flash.
Enjoy your only privilege while it lasts.

I'm dead!

ALL.
She's dead.

PRISCILLA.
I'm back.

ALL.
She's back.

PRISCILLA.
Onstage.

LETTY.
Will no one notice me?

JULIA.
They love me. And I am. The rage.
But it is ending soon.
They tell me he's through.
(Suddenly realizing.) There's nothing else that I will ever do.

ALL.
There's a life beyond this brief parade.
With no crowds and no flags held high.
Where the silence is cold.
And we're married to our homes.
With little but our memories inside.

Transition.

11. Sarah Polk (1845–1849)
Destined

We see the actress playing Sarah. She's dressed plainly, no makeup. Over the course of this play, other performers make up her face, arrange her hair, eventually dress her up. Alternate idea: Maybe she is a life-sized paper doll that gets transformed over the course of the play.

VOICE-OVER. Someone decided to write "All MEN are created equal."
On our country's very first piece of paper.
From the beginning, we've been leaving people behind.
Cutting them out.
It was our destiny.
But not Sarah's.
SHE was a force of nature.
She never had children and she hated housework.
She wouldn't marry her husband until he won a seat in the House of Representatives.
And then she became his campaign manager.
One half of a nineteenth-century power couple.
DESTINED for greatness.

Except.
She rejected the growing feminist movement.
She replaced the White House servants with enslaved people.
She advised her husband to expand into Mexico.
They called it: *Manifest Destiny*.

There are women who have power.
But continue to leave people out.
And then the paper remains unchanged
And power is just a dress.

Transition.

12. Margaret "Peggy" Mackall Smith Taylor (1849–1850)
A Serenity Prayer

Margaret stands onstage in darkness, holding a candle, looking up at a single light that is slowly fading out throughout the play. She wears the First Lady Mantle as a sort of nun's habit. There is a somber musical underscore—a slow progression of piano chords, or a sustained string note, or a choral harmony.

MARGARET. Lord? Please hear my gratitude.
This nation has been forged in war.
So I thank you for having made my husband a warrior.
The battles waged from territory to territory.
From garrison to garrison.
From tribe to tribe.
So I thank you for giving me the courage to follow him.
I thank you for every bullet that passed him by.
I thank you for every blade that missed him.
For every disease, every injury, every misfortune of the field sent elsewhere,
I thank you, Lord.
I thank you for the certainty of our righteousness.
I thank you for the eminence of our destiny.
I thank you for making America the instrument of your will.
And yet I ask you, Lord…
Why you wished that so much of our scripture be written in blood.
And if the penance you now require—
—for our sins—
—for our slaughters—
—is that our people remain at war forever.

Because you made my husband the chief of this country.
Then you struck him down where he stood.

The light has faded out, leaving only the candle in her hands.

And I never again knew peace.

She blows out the candle.

Transition.

13. Abigail Powers Fillmore (1850–1853)
Meta-rant in the Absence of Information

Each actor is seated at a "station"—such as a podium, block, or chair—wherein they have access to a bag or pile of the most plain white bread one can find, and a plate or surface onto which they can put torn bits of bread. The First Lady Mantle should be hung or draped over the center station.

*The action of the play is thus: While each actor is speaking separately, the task is to sit and rip up several pieces of bread into bite-sized bits, perhaps balled up so they fly farther. For lines in all caps, the actors stand and yell (if together, in unison) while hurling their bread into the audience.**

ACTOR 1. Abigail Powers met Millard Fillmore as his teacher and married him seven years later.

ACTOR 2. She loved music, reading, and the arts. People referred to her as a scholar.

ACTOR 3. She kept teaching after marriage, but had to give it up to support Fillmore's political career. It's not clear if she was happy about that or not.

Actor 1 stands up and throws bread.

ACTOR 1. I GUESS THAT MIGHT MAKE HER TOO COMPLEX, RIGHT? LIKE, IF WE TALKED ABOUT HER PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE OR THE IMPACT OF HER PERSONALITY ON THE ARC OF HER LIFE? SHE'S JUST A FLIPPIN' PRESIDENT'S WIFE, YOU GUYS!

They sit back down and everyone returns to ripping.

ACTOR 2. Lung inflammation and a broken ankle that never healed properly left her chronically ill.

* If this is not possible, they can hurl their bread at each other instead.

ACTOR 3. So she handed off all the social obligations of the office to her daughter, Abby.

ACTOR 1. And sequestered herself in the oval room, selecting books for the White House library.

Actors 1 and 2 stand up and throw bread.

ACTORS 1 and 2. DAMN RIGHT SHE DID! THE ROLE OF "FIRST LADY" IS AN AFTERTHOUGHT *AND* AN IMPOSSIBLE EXPECTATION. YOU'RE SCREWED NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO. MOST OF THESE WOMEN HID THEIR PRIVATE LIVES, BURNED THEIR LETTERS, AND DISAPPEARED FROM THEIR OWN SHITTY ASS TIMELINES!

They sit back down; everyone returns to ripping.

ACTOR 3. But she had influence within the administration and a lot of political clout.

ACTOR 2. She was considered Fillmore's chief advisor and political ally.

ACTOR 1. Which makes it difficult to know how much she should be considered responsible for his actions.

Actors 1, 2, and 3 stand up and throw bread.

ACTORS 1, 2, and 3. LIKE IF YOU'RE CONSIDERED PART OF THE ADMINISTRATION DURING THE CALIFORNIA GENOCIDE, IS THE SEPARATION OF FAMILIES, TRAFFICKING OF CHILDREN, AND MURDER OF A HUNDRED THOUSAND NATIVES OVER THE COURSE OF TWO YEARS ON YOUR HEAD? CUZ MAYBE IT SHOULD BE.

This time they sit back down, rip bread…and then stuff it into their mouths. It's a consolation, a comfort.

ACTOR 1. She convinced Fillmore to ban flogging in the U.S. Navy.

ACTOR 2. She tried—but failed—to get him to veto the Fugitive Slave Act.

ACTOR 3. Jerk.

ACTOR 1. That damaged his ability to secure a nomination for reelection.

ACTOR 2. She died twenty-six days after leaving the White House.

ACTOR 3. Well, shit.

They all pause, surveying the mess around them.

ACTOR 1. *(Defeatedly.)* I'll clean this up.

Actor 1 grabs a broom and sweeps up any bread scraps left onstage.

Transition.

14. Jane Pierce (1853–1857)
I'll Be (Not) Here All Week

This play is a stand-up routine. Jane is on a microphone, has a stool with some water nearby. There's a chair and table next to her with a desk bell.

JANE. How's everybody doing tonight? I'm Jane Pierce. I'm depressing. Like if Mary Lincoln and Country Western music had a baby, it would have my eyes…hey let's meet my husband!

Franklin, wearing the Presidential Coat and looking extremely unwell, joins her onstage and sits in the chair next to the table.

Give Franklin a round of applause. He likes attention so much he'd ruin a marriage over it. Honey, see that bell? Every time I go too dark for laughs, do me favor, ring that bell and rein me in, OK? Use the power you've been given to control the direction of my life whether I like it or not, OK? OK. So my kid dies—

Franklin rings the bell.

What? It's a setup. Speaking of child mortality…how many dead babies does it take to—

Franklin rings the bell twice.

(To Franklin.) I'm messing with you. So my kid dies and I have an epic meltdown because it's clear to me, as a Christian, that Washington, D.C., killed my baby. Right? Franklin doesn't agree, but hey, to his credit, he quits politics. We move back to New Hampshire. I breathe the country air and then like BAM, my womb like instantly makes this new baby and he grows up awesome. And life is great.

For ten years. Fun fact: Back then you could run for president just by sending letters. Without your wife knowing, like you're sexting the nanny. So one day, it's like "Surprise, your husband's president!" My first thought: Washington, D.C., kills babies. I don't want this. But I figure maybe God does. So we're on this train—

Franklin rings the bell.

We're on this train—

Franklin rings the bell twice.

And the train derails—

Franklin rings the bell over and over. Here is the only place in the script where Jane can break—at the actor's discretion. She must remain in stand-up mode at all times prior to this.

And my son gets his head ripped off. Basically. Like right in front of us. So that sucked. And then I find out Franklin had run for president behind my back.

She takes the Mantle off and then drops it on the floor during the below.

So I bailed on his inauguration. And he cries while he gives his speech. The press calls him feminine like it's a bad thing. And then I spent four years in my room in an extended Goth phase. He has his own epic meltdown with all the clichés: moping, drinking, signing the Kansas–Nebraska Act. Women couldn't divorce back then, you know? But some of us could freeze a dude out like nobody's business. I died at my sister's house. Funny, right, Franklin?

They stare at each other. After a beat…he rings the bell.

Transition.

15. Harriet Lane (1857–1861)
Hal Goes Bowling

Actor 2 wraps the First Lady Mantle around their shoulders and ties it demurely at their chest in a bertha-style collar. The tone is gossipy, playful, and triumphant.*

ACTOR 2. All right, listen. You've probably never heard of Harriet Lane and that is a travesty.

Harriet Lane was the adopted daughter of President James Buchanan.

Harriet's nickname was "Hal." She was known for:
Out-drinking men.
Expert horseback riding and
Carrying heavy things in wheelbarrows. She once taught the visiting prince of England the new sport of bowling and then, defying women's societal duty to flatter,
beat him.
She wore a new style of dress, less femme, no ruffles and bows. Every woman in D.C. copied it.
She was described as "thick-necked" and "handsome."

A lean in. A wink.

Hal couldn't live with James Buchanan because he lived in a boarding house, with his best friend William King…

Two actors playing Buchanan and King appear side by side, with long nightcaps and candle holders.

…in adjacent rooms…

They adjust one another's caps, affectionately.

…for ten years.
They were "confirmed bachelors."

Buchanan blows out King's candle, and King blows out Buchanan's. They snuggle up together.

* If the ensemble includes a gender-queer or nonconforming cast member, they should be cast in this role

Oh. Did you not know we had a queer first family? In the 1850s? Sorry you were late to the party.

Now we don't know if they were lovers in the physical sense of the word. But Andrew Jackson called them [DIRECT QUOTE] Aunt Nancy and Miss Fancy [DIRECT QUOTE] in public and in letters.

So, they were life partners,
mocked as effeminate,
who adopted an orphaned tomboy,
educated her for leadership,
and let her dress and act how she pleased.

All that makes them part of my personal queer history no matter what they did in bed. But then William King died.

King climbs on Buchanan's back and Buchanan carries him offstage, grieving.

Poor James Buchanan. The Civil War was brewing and he had only Harriet Lane. Fortunately, Hal…was fucking amazing.

She was his closest confidant and diplomatic right hand. She advised him to renounce slavery and create a schedule for emancipation. (He did not.) When the Southern states seceded, she was sent to plead with members of his cabinet to stay loyal to the Union.

Postwar she married and had two children that died from rheumatic fever.
She did not crumble.
Instead, she endowed the first pediatric medical center in the United States. By 1930 her hospital had developed the drugs that prevent heart damage during rheumatic fever to this day.

Actor stretches out their arms in benediction over the audience.

This is a blessing from Harriet Lane. All those who feel orphaned by American history. Listen: We are so much more complex than the roles they assign us. Waste no time following rules that keep you powerless. We can overcome any loss, make so much happen, just by being smarter and kinder than they expect. By dressing how we please, not hiding what we are good at, and using all our gifts to make things better for others.

This is the lesson of Harriet Lane: Gender is a set of wobbly pins to set up and knock down as many times as you like on your way to doing great things.

Transition.

16. Mary Lincoln (1861–1865)
The Verdict

Mary enters, carrying some note cards with facts on them. She wears the Mantle. She stays cool—even at times good-humored—during this monologue. She never breaks down. Never cries. Never shows outrage, anger, indignation. (She could, if it feels right, get glassy-eyed at most during the description of her last day with Abe.) She's never hit with a wave of visible suffering though. Let the facts convey the suffering. Let her strength comment on her fortitude. Give the haters no ammunition. This Mary Lincoln is above it all, and cares more for the audience's enlightenment than her old, unfair, tragic life.

MARY. Hello. I'm Mary Lincoln. Welcome to my play! You may have heard that some…OK, fine, many historians believe I was mentally ill. How many people have heard that I was quote, unquote crazy? Show of hands? Assume that I am, for a second, that shallow adjective with deep connotations. Conjure in your mind what "crazy" means to you based on what you already know about me. You're an enlightened audience, so you're probably thinking "No idea. It was the nineteenth century. They could lock women away for PMS." And that's true by the way.

But let's let facts do the talking. You decide. I'm going to read some things about me and as you learn more, let that picture of Mary Lincoln in your mind evolve. Let the fuzzy bits become clearer. That's all you have to do in this play. Most painless audience participation ever. Let's go:

She reads the bold text off the note cards.

I was loud, bossy, and had a shopping addiction.
I couldn't be alone, especially during thunderstorms.

OK. These don't sound so bad, do they?

I was obsessed with my son's health.
I threw tantrums when I didn't get my way.

You know who's sounding "crazy" right now? Historians. Am I right?

She can high-five a nearby audience member if it feels right (or is safe).

OK, let's see what else is in here.

I heard voices through the wall.

Hey. Lots of people hear voices.

I told a doctor that an evil Native American spirit was pulling wires out of my left eye.

OK. OK.

I left my hotel room half naked and then sent my belongings to Milwaukee because Chicago was on fire…except it wasn't on fire. That's when they committed me to Bellevue.

We learned a few things about me, didn't we? That image in your mind is less fuzzy, right? That's the kind of clarity that really sucks if you're me and they want to commit you. That's the kind of clarity the judge had. Let's keep going. Keep imagining what I was like.

My mother died when I was six.
My son Edward died when I was thirty-two.
When I was forty-four, my son Willie died and two of my brothers were killed in the war.
My brother-in-law Benjamin was killed in action when I was forty-five.
My brother Levi died when I was forty-six.
When I was forty-seven, and the war ended, I had one of those wonderful days with my husband…

She puts down the cards for a moment and speaks to the audience.

If you're married, you'll know what I mean…something trips you from that forgetful haze of grown-up worries and you see each other as the friends you once were. You laugh more. And hold hands again. And you know how your night will end when the kids are asleep. That night ended in the theater. We held hands as the shot rang out.

Back to reading.

I lost a third son, Tad, when I was fifty-three.
My only surviving son, Robert, committed me. He complained that I was spending his inheritance.
I was released after I retained the services of a lawyer named Bradwell.

She puts the cards down.

Myra Bradwell. The first woman in Illinois to be admitted to the bar.

What do you think? How do you think I should be remembered?

Transition.

17. Eliza McCardle Johnson (1865–1869)
Housekeeping

There is silence. Eliza comes out with a huge basket of fabric rags that she starts folding for an uncomfortably long period of time. Silence. Finally she looks up at the audience.

ELIZA. The daughter of a shoemaker grows up poor and marries a tailor when she's still a teenager. She just saw him walking down the street one day and decided he was hers. He is semiliterate.

Another actor comes out with a huge basket of rags and dumps them on the stage. Eliza starts folding in a new place.

By 1835 he was elected to the Tennessee House of Representatives and they have a little money and that's pretty nice. And one day her husband takes some of that money and goes out and buys a person.

A girl.

He brings the person he bought home, and her name was Dolly and Eliza puts her to work.

Another pile of rags is dumped onstage.

Dolly was fourteen.

If you want to do something hard, try parsing the inner life of a relatively obscure nineteenth-century woman born into a family of no importance and married to a man no one wants to remember. If you want to do something harder, try researching the person she owned.

Another pile of rags is dumped onstage.

We do know that this girl, Dolly, eventually gave birth to two children, listed as "mixed race" on the census, and we don't know who the father was. Maybe Eliza knew, and maybe she didn't.

Another pile of laundry.

Life goes on and Andrew becomes vice president. On August 8, 1863, Eliza gathered her family's enslaved people and told them they were free. But they could stay if they wanted to. Some of them stayed. Which is perhaps less a statement about the Johnson household and more of a statement about the fact that a war was raging.

Another pile of laundry.

You've now watched sixteen plays about the First Ladies. Not one play per Lady, one play per president. It is still the men that give us structure. But at least you learned the ladies' names.

When I said the name "Dolly," that was only the second time you learned the name of an enslaved person, that's two of the hundreds of people owned by the First Ladies you've met thus far. People who worked closely with the men who ran the country. People who lived in the White House.

Another pile of laundry.

Ten of the First Ladies you've met owned another person. And the charming girl you're about to meet, who is going to sing you a song. She did, too.

They look around.

This is a mess. This is still a mess. And it's going to stay here, after this play is over.

Transition.

18. Julia Dent Grant (1869–1877)
Those Blue and Gray Blues

A cabaret act, with Julia in the mold of Mae West or Bette Midler. She wields the First Lady Mantle expressively, twirling it, cracking it like a whip at the audience, wrapping it around the neck of Ulysses, who sits behind the piano in the Presidential Coat, a cigar in his mouth. A waiter enters and hands her a cocktail; she downs it in one gulp and hands it back to them. They exit.

JULIA. Ulysses. Something with swagger.

Ulysses nods and begins playing her song or at least adequately faking it.

(Speaking to the audience) Oh my. Who are you all looking at? I'm nothing special. Just your average, everyday, war hero's wife and model First Lady, that's all. A Southern belle with some tales to tell. And a one two three four.

(Singing.)

Who knows where the future may lead, but
The heart will always get what it needs…
See the games that it plays,
The way it behaves,
Makes you love a Union gen'ral though your family owns slaves…
Oh, what can you do?
When you've got blue and gray blues?

How does someone open the door, when
Keeping civil means forgetting the war?
Between the North and the South,
Your mind and your mouth,

While all around your in-laws can't stop calling you out…
Oh, what can you do?
When you've got blue and gray blues?

(Speaking.) I'm not sugarcoating it, darlings; relations between our families were like cats and even meaner cats. When we got hitched, guess how many Grants showed up to the wedding. *(Points at Ulysses.)* Groom makes one.

The waiter returns with another cocktail. Ulysses makes a move for it. Julia slaps his hand and takes the cocktail for herself.

(To Ulysses.) None for you, gorgeous. People will talk.

(Singing.)
When you join him out in the field, that's
where your character is revealed—
Because skilled he may be,
But killed he may be,
And Ulysses needs his missus to be Penelope…
Oh what do you need?
When they elect him to lead?
And how do you cope?
With the weight of your hope?
Oh what can you do?
When you've got blue and gray blues?

(Speaking.) Be friends with everybody: That's the secret. That was my party trick. That was my *bipartisan* trick. If that's the First Lady you can make of yourself that's the First Lady they'll remember for years.

She downs her second cocktail.

(To Ulysses.) Bring it home, lovebird.

(Singing, the big finish.)
Tell me, what could I do?
I had those blue and gray blues!

(Speaking.) Good night!

Transition.

19. Lucy Ware Webb Hayes (1877–1881)
The Swan in the Specimen Jar

Actors 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 distribute themselves throughout the audience so that each one has a section to which they will be playing. Each holds a can of lemonade (unopened).

Parts of the text are in unison and parts are not. The idea is for all actors to be performing simultaneously, which means the audience will inevitably "miss" parts of the play. (That's OK. That's meant to be.) Don't cheat.

ACTOR 1. Hello, audience members!

ACTOR 2. In this piece, I'll be performing—

ACTOR 3. —the most important part.

ACTOR 4. So follow my voice…

ACTOR 5. …and play close attention.

Each actor begins to speak their section of text. The storytelling should be intimate, not shouted or declaratory. Lines are delivered simultaneously to only their section of audience.

ACTOR 1. Lucy's father "inherited" almost twenty enslaved people from his aunt upon her death. He died unexpectedly of cholera, but her mother ensured they were freed. Lucy grew up to be a staunch abolitionist and was considered a "radical Republican." She wanted to join the Union army but couldn't, so she convinced Rutherford to join instead. She believed in integration—and full legal rights for former enslaved individuals. As First Lady, she worked to protect tribal rights, established scholarships for minoritized students, and gave servants time off to attend school.

ACTOR 2. Although historians dubbed her "Lemonade Lucy" for serving no alcohol at the White House, it was actually Hayes who made the decision. Lucy was against prohibition, but did practice temperance. Although she supported equal education for women and suffrage rights, she never formally joined any movements—believing instead it was important to lead by example. But she did successfully advocate for American businesswomen to be included

in an exhibition in Paris and convinced Hayes to allow female attorneys to argue before the Supreme Court.

ACTOR 3. Lucy loved animals. While at the White House she and Rutherford had three cats, eight dogs, five birds, Jersey cows, carriage horses, and a goat. She even commissioned an artist to create new china patterns with pictures of North American flora and fauna, which led socialite Clover Adams to complain she didn't want to eat her soup and see a coyote jumping at her from behind a tree. I'm guessing Lucy ignored that one. She was also really good at bird calls. According to Carl Jung, birds can represent the balance between Heaven and Earth and our attempt to walk between the two.

ACTOR 4. Lucy loved children. Like so many of her contemporaries, she buried two sons, both only toddlers, and raised five kids. She created orphanages for children of Civil War veterans; worked to improve welfare programs; and taught blind, mute, and deaf students. She collected donations and added personal funds to buy food and supplies for impoverished families. When a law was passed banning the annual Easter Egg Roll from taking place on the Capitol lawn, she and Rutherford invited local children to use the White House lawn instead. She was a mother—through and through.

ACTOR 5. In 1850, Lucy received a ring found in a wedding cake as a sign of courtship, which eventually became Rutherford's wedding ring. Lucy was intelligent, careful, and kind. Her husband was influenced by her, and her personal popularity influenced the presidential bid. Yet, the election results were so contentious that shots were fired through the couple's dining room as they traveled to Washington. Lucy became First Lady two days ahead of the inauguration to avoid protests during the swearing in. Instead of an inaugural ball, Lucy was invited to a luncheon held by Julia Grant.

> *Each actor should wait to ensure the others have finished before delivering the final lines of the play. For this last section, the actors return to a more performative delivery, speaking to their section, as well as the audience at large.*

ACTOR 5. Let's be honest:

ACTOR 4. You've inevitably missed something in all of this.

ACTOR 3. Lucy has been reduced.

ACTOR 2. And not just because we've got twenty-seven more plays to get through.

ACTOR 1. She's been abandoned by history.

ACTOR 5. Remember that for us, okay?

Everyone simultaneously raises their lemonade can.

ALL. To Lucy!

They drink.

Transition.

20. Lucretia Garfield (1881)
The Tyranny of Our Love Is Sweet

James and Lucretia take the stage, wearing the Presidential Coat and the First Lady Mantle. There's a moody hipster vibe about how they conduct themselves. He wears a guitar that he plays. They sit together on stools, but they're turned away from each other as they sing.

LUCRETIA.

My love, I want to build, I want to make
Design a new life with you and then partake
Of half the thrills and half of every pain
Let's do this thing together.

JAMES. *(Patronizingly affectionate, not angry.)*

Good lord, you're talking crazy
Stay home, have kids, be lazy
This nonsense has to stop now,
That's my command.

LUCRETIA.

You must mistake me for another bride
Hear my thoughts, I won't be brushed aside.
Be my friend, my equal lover, dear.
Because I really love you.

JAMES.

You love me with sincerity
And my love for you is killing me
This talk of equal treatment
It hurts my soul.

LUCRETIA.

You're free to love
You're free to love but not to thrive.

JAMES.

You're free to thrive

LUCRETIA and JAMES.

You're free to thrive inside my love.

During the below, James sings "do-do-dos" to his melody under hers. She does the same when he sings in the next verse. Here, she turns toward him before she sings.

LUCRETIA.

You told the suffragists that they were wrong
I bit my tongue and smiled to get along
The higher you climbed up the more I bent.

Here he turns toward her.

JAMES.

And I really liked that
I loved being home more
You gave advice to die for
You became so much softer

LUCRETIA and JAMES.

And I really loved you

LUCRETIA.

You're free to love,
You're free to love but not to thrive.

LUCRETIA and JAMES.

We found our way

LUCRETIA.

I only had to lose myself

LUCRETIA and JAMES.

We found our way—

The sound of a gunshot interrupts the song. James hands his guitar to Lucretia and exits. She takes the guitar but sings a capella for one verse.

LUCRETIA.

For eleven weeks I watched while you died
I held your hand but I didn't cry
The papers said that I was so brave
But I was really frightened

Here Lucretia plays the guitar. If she can play it more adeptly than we've heard before that would be amazing.

When I was alone I fought for equal pay
Designed my own house; made my own way
Built the first presidential center
Because I really missed you

You're free to thrive
You're free to thrive without your love

You're free to thrive
You're free to thrive, without your love.

Transition.

21. Mary "Molly" McElroy, et al. (1881–1885)
The Eventual Ellen Arthur

The stage has gone blank except for rehearsal lights. Actor 1, playing Chester, walks onstage holding a script and the First Lady Mantle, wearing the Presidential Coat. Another actor at the front of the stage plays the director. This play has a purposeful yet casual pace.

DIRECTOR. All right, [Actor 1's name], you're going to read for Chester Alan Arthur.

CHESTER. Do I get the, what are they called, the… ?

DIRECTOR. Side-whiskers?

CHESTER. Side-whiskers. Do I get the side-whiskers?

DIRECTOR. No, but do everything you can to embody the side-whiskers. Can I get [Actor 2's name] out here?

Actor 2 comes out as Sarah Roosa, also holding a script.

CHESTER. *(Hands them the First Lady Mantle.)* Hey.

SARAH. Hey. *(Speaking to director.)* Listen, I have a question? My understanding is that I'm up for the role of First Lady.

DIRECTOR. Correct.

SARAH. But not the role of Ellen Arthur.

DIRECTOR. Also correct. Ellen Arthur died in January 1880, ten months before Chester becomes vice president. Six months after that, Garfield's assassinated, Chester's president, and Ellen Arthur—

SARAH. —is still dead. Got it. So I'm —

DIRECTOR. —Sarah Roosa, Ellen Arthur's lifelong friend.

SARAH. I can do that.

DIRECTOR. And go.

CHESTER. [DIRECT QUOTE] I may be president of the United States, but my private life is nobody's damned business. [DIRECT QUOTE]

SARAH. [DIRECT QUOTE] When I— [DIRECT QUOTE]

DIRECTOR. —No. Never mind. That's not working. [Actor 3's name], can you come in for [Actor 2's name]?

Sarah shrugs, walks off, and hands the script and the First Lady Mantle to Actor 3, who is playing Elizabeth Botts.

ELIZABETH. So you want me to play Sarah Roosa?

DIRECTOR. No; you're going to be Elizabeth Herndon Botts, Ellen Arthur's cousin.

ELIZABETH. But I'm still First Lady?

DIRECTOR. Eh? Maybe? Sure, we can call it that. Go.

CHESTER. [DIRECT QUOTE] I may be president of the United States, but my private life is nobody's damned business. [DIRECT QUOTE]

ELIZABETH. [DIRECT QUOTE] When I— [DIRECT QUOTE]

DIRECTOR. —Nope. Sorry. Nuh-uh. Not it. Thanks, though.

CHESTER. Can I ask why I need to have a First Lady?

ELIZABETH. Seriously. It's only been about a year. Let the man grieve.

DIRECTOR. Listen, if it were up to me, but it's not, it's the people, understand? The people want a First Lady. The people and the Washington press, they want a First Lady. And they feel it should be either Sarah Roosa, or Elizabeth Herndon Botts, or Malvina Haynesworth, or…hey, [Actor 4's name], can I have you come out here?

Actor 4 comes out as Mary McElroy. Elizabeth shrugs, hands her the script and the First Lady Mantle, and walks off.

Okay, let's try this. [Actor 4's name] —you're Chester Arthur's sister Mary McElroy, but you go by Molly. You've helped raise Chester's daughter since Ellen died. You keep a low profile, but the staff finds that refreshing. You enjoy horseback riding, hosting White House events, and fighting against women's suffrage until the day you die. So. Use all that. And go.

CHESTER. [DIRECT QUOTE] I may be president of the United States, but my private life is nobody's damned business. [DIRECT QUOTE]

MARY. [DIRECT QUOTE] When I went to the White House, I was absolutely unfamiliar with the customs and formalities. [DIRECT QUOTE]

DIRECTOR. Good. Good. We have ourselves a play.

Transition.

22. Frances Folsom Cleveland Preston (Part 1) (1885–1889) Frankie Goes to Washington

This is a dance number with a series of specific physical "beats" that tell Frances' story, underscored by a song like Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun." Slides help us understand who each person is as the story beats progress. Ideally, everyone is always moving, so even if someone is not in a particular beat, he or she does a set movement behind the action—and the cast is responsible for singing the lyrics. It can either be sung a capella, sung by the cast with live accompaniment, or sung by the cast "karaoke style" with background music playing.*

Beat 1.
The music starts and, after the tune has been established, lights up on Frances. At her appearance, we see a slide that says "Frances: Age Eleven." She is kneeling and grieving at a grave site. Everyone else is doing a simple dance in the background, keeping in time to the music.

Beat 2.
Emma steps into the scene as we see a slide that says "Emma: Frances' Mother." Emma lovingly comforts Frances. Frances clings to her and continues to grieve.

Beat 3.
Cleveland steps into the scene as we see a slide that says "Grover Cleveland: Family Friend." He puts his arm around Emma, comforting her. Emma leaves Frances to stand with Cleveland.

Beat 4.
Frances stands up and walks away, making a long arc and either letting her hair down or doing something else to indicate growing up, eventually reentering the scene as we see a

* See note on songs/recordings at the back of this volume.

slide that says "Frances: Age Twenty-one." She interrupts Cleveland and Emma, who were about to kiss.

Beat 5.
Cleveland notices Frances, twirls Emma away and kneels down to propose. Frances nods yes, Cleveland stands up, mimes removing a veil from her face, and they move toward each other to kiss.

Beat 6.
Rose enters, interrupting them as we see a slide that says "Rose: Grover's Sister." She removes the First Lady Mantle from her shoulders and places it on Frances—very happy to be rid of it. Rose gives Frances a thumbs-up and rejoins the dancers.

Beat 7.
Frances and Cleveland step forward as everyone else dances behind them. Frances pulls the Mantle down to reveal her shoulders, like an off-the-shoulder dress. Everyone is titillated and the backup dancers clap excitedly.

Beat 8.
Frances points to the slides and we see "White House: Open!" The crowd cheers and moves into a receiving line off to the side.

Beat 9.
Everyone eagerly reaches their hands forward. Frances, happy to help, begins tossing money, diplomas, and jobs to everyone. (Note: Jobs can be represented by cards with the word "Jobs" on them or something similar.) They excitedly catch them/pick them up.

Beat 10.
Cleveland grabs some Jobs cards and eagerly joins in, desperate to be seen as part of the effort. He then shouts "Conga!" and all the dancers fall in step behind him as he congas offstage. Frances joins on to the end and, once she is in front of the audience, steps out as the music drops down to say:

FRANCES. [DIRECT QUOTE] Take good care of all the furniture… We are coming back just four years from today. [DIRECT QUOTE]

Frances rejoins the line, and the whole group dances off. All of this should finish before the song's final verse.

Transition.

23. Caroline Harrison (1889–1893)
Carrie Harrison Lights the Lights

Carrie is wearing the First Lady Mantle and contemplating a light bulb in her hand. Next to her is a lamp without a light bulb.

CARRIE. Candles are one thing. Dangerous, of course, but at least you know which way they're going to burn. Still, it seemed the right thing to do. Other homes got electricity a decade earlier. So I did it.

She starts to screw the light bulb into the lamp. It comes on. Now her face is illuminated.

Also, I told a medical school that I wouldn't give them money unless they admitted women. So there's that, too.

She turns on the lamp. Maybe that's kind of a "ta-da" moment and she encourages a little applause from the audience. Over the rest of the text, the light onstage is fading, so that by the end she is only illuminated by the lamp.

And maybe they'll remember that my husband was the second shortest president.
In height, I mean.
Slipped into the presidency and slipped away and hardly anyone noticed.

"There she is," they'll never say, "holding small lights in her hand, their filaments like brush strokes on paper."
They won't remember the sound of my piano.
It will all be gone so quickly.

But once upon a time,
because of me,
it was all so bright.

She turns out the light.

Transition.

24. Frances Folsom Cleveland Preston (Part 2) (1893–1897) Frances Stays Home

This starts in a blackout, and the first thing we see is Frances turning on a light from Harrison. She sits in a chair, holding the Mantle rolled up, like a baby.

The mood is quiet, with just the light of the single lamp. Frances rocks the "baby" and sings the final verse of a song like Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" as a lullaby. It should sound different than the previous version…a little bit mournful. Meanwhile, underneath, an ominous sound starts up (like a menacing tone or series of chords one might hear in a horror film). Softly at first, but slowly building in volume.*

From offstage, there is a loud rapping noise, which startles Frances. Cleveland enters quickly, moving to her side and then somewhat behind her, concerned and scared. We are now totally in a horror film. The tension increases as the rapping becomes pounding, then some shouting: "Open the doors," "We demand to talk to you," and eventually progressing to full-on chaotic yelling.

We hear distinct phrases from amidst the general roar:

ANGRY VOICE 1. You bastard! You cost me my job!

ANGRY VOICE 2. The Pullman car strike is on your head. You're a dead man!

* See note on songs/recordings at the back of this volume.

ANGRY VOICE 3. I'm starving. I've got no dough, and I need to eat!

Cleveland moves away from Frances and next to the lamp. He's thinking about just turning it off and hoping everything will disappear. Frances holds the baby tighter. She is waiting for him to do something. She motions to the direction of the noise, as if to say "Go take care of this, dude," but he does not move. The sounds offstage should be at the highest pitch possible—as if zombies are about to break through and eat everyone's faces off.

Frustrated beyond measure, she stands up, hands him the Mantle-baby, and marches offstage toward the yelling. There is a beat of silence, then a loud cheer goes up as everyone celebrates her presence.

Again, we hear distinct phrases from amidst the general hubbub:

FRANCES FAN 1. Frances! Frances! Hi!

FRANCES FAN 2. Oh she's so beautiful! You're so beautiful, Frances!

FRANCES FAN 3. Where's the baby? We want to see the baby!

FRANCES. *(Cheerily, from offstage.)* OK now…bye bye!

OFFSTAGE VOICES. Aw…!

The offstage crowd does some general grumbling and then all is silent. Cleveland is relieved, in awe, and somewhat fawning as Frances marches back in, takes the baby from Cleveland, and (with a scathing look) sits back down and turns off the lamp.

Transition.

25. Ida McKinley (1897–1901)
Lace and Crochet

A Bach sonata, played on guitar. Ida sits, regal. She has a large embroidery hoop.

IDA. Ida McKinley loved lace, knitting, and crochet.

She proceeds to embroider, as meticulously as she can, while saying these lines.

Active in her youth, Ida suffered a head and back injury.
She had seizures and was sometimes unable to use her legs.

When other First Ladies might have stood or walked or danced, she sat regally in her chair, finding other ways to do her duty.

She could not attend charity events but sent elaborate slippers that she knitted herself, to be sold at auction.

The administration did not hide her immobility. But made it known that the president was loyal and tender to his wife.

She holds up the hoop and inspects her progress for the night. The pattern says "Votes For Women."

Perhaps she liked the symbolism. Many small, fine, acts of will, order, and repetition, yielding strength and beauty.

Ida remains seated, she will stay where she is until directed to leave by Edith Roosevelt.

Transition.

26. Edith Kermit Carow Roosevelt (1901–1909)
The Definition

Edith enters and gently ushers Ida offstage, then faces the audience, taking them in for a moment. She wears the First Lady Mantle. She turns around and takes in whatever the set currently looks like, before making a pronouncement upstage.

EDITH. This won't do.

An army of actors, stagehands, and anybody else available on the production flock the stage behind Edith and begin to change the set, replacing furniture, redecorating walls, etc. One of these actors holds a clipboard, periodically checking off the renovations, and occasionally goes to Edith for initials or signature. Edith turns back to the audience and addresses them directly. Her tone is efficient and authoritative.

You are granted four years, eight if you're fortunate. Twelve if you're my niece Eleanor, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Four to eight years. That's your window.

Stagehand 1 brings out two sets of curtains on rods. Edith points at her preference, and those curtains are used to dress the stage.

(To Stagehand 1.) Those. *(To the audience.)* Opportunity does not always knock, understand. Opportunity may sometimes send a letter. Opportunity may ask you to take a stroll in the light of the early evening. Opportunity may laugh like the devil, and then push you into the path of a train.

Beat.

I ought not have been First Lady. Theodore chose Alice over me, after all. Had childbirth not taken her he might never have thought of my name again. Or I could have been a vice president's wife who few remembered, as is the fate of most vice presidents' wives. If not for choices, if not for chances, if not for a troubled fellow in Buffalo firing two bullets point-blank into poor Bill McKinley. If, if, if.

Beat.

The manner of the invitation is not important. What matters is how you dress for the dinner.

Stagehand 2 brings out two different china plates. Edith points at her preference, and that selection is added to the set.

(To Stagehand 2.) That one. *(To the audience.)* I make no claims to being most beloved, nor most skilled, most generous, most quoted in commencement speeches. Those are judgments made by history, not by those of us in its current.

Beat.

First Lady. Primary. She who sets the pace and leads the procession forward. I was first to recognize that "president's wife" is a political appointment, and so I was first to hire my own staff. I cultivated contacts in Britain; helped Theodore negotiate the war between Russia and Japan. *(Indicates the set.)* We had called this the Executive Mansion, but I insisted we refer to it as the White House. Subtle motions may bring great change, given time.

Beat.

We envisioned an America that preserved its wilderness to better preserve its sense of adventure, an America where greed did not grind ingenuity beneath its heel. It was a new century. An opportunity to reflect on who you were and how you appeared—then decide how to fashion yourself in the future.

Stagehand 3 brings out a selection of different First Lady Mantles. Edith points at her preference and exchanges the Mantle around her shoulders for that one. This will be the Mantle for the remainder of the show.

[DIRECT QUOTE] A lady's name should appear in print only three times—at her birth, marriage, and death. [DIRECT QUOTE] Some women choose to change the order of the world. Others of us are content to provide new definitions of what "order" means.

Edith looks back at the set, which has now been changed in some significant way. She and her staff exit the stage.

Transition.

27. Helen Herron "Nellie" Taft (1909–1913)
Sylvan/Syllables

Nellie kneels onstage in a soft early morning light while planting a tree bulb in a pot. She is assisted in this task by the actor. Nellie's lines are spoken to the plant, while the actor's lines are delivered to the audience. There are projections throughout this piece, gently cycling from one image or set of images to the next as Nellie speaks each poem—these images may be abstract, illustrative, or some combination of both.

ACTOR. Seven haikus for Nellie Taft. One.

NELLIE.
Light casts two shadows:
One follows, and one obscures.
Neither are darkness.

ACTOR. Two.

NELLIE.
Women may be as wind,
when companion to mountains.
Both whispers and gales.

ACTOR. Three.

NELLIE.
An eagle sees worlds
as it soars in the sunrise,
and dreams of the nest.

ACTOR. Four.

NELLIE.
And the zephyr learns
the diplomacy of storms.
Words said through thunder.

ACTOR. Five.

NELLIE.
Should speeches fail us,
let poetry be the branch

to bridge east and west.

ACTOR. Six.

NELLIE.
Seeds of fellowship
between nations and empires.
A pact of arbor.

Nellie has finished her task. She speaks directly to the audience this time, and a projection of the cherry blossom trees surrounding the Potomac tidal basin gently appears.

ACTOR. Seven.

NELLIE.
The tidal basin.
Cherry blossoms in flower
each spring thereafter.

The actor assists Nellie in rising and walking offstage. Nellie looks gratefully at the image as she goes.

Transition.

28. Edith Bolling Galt Wilson (1913–1921)
First Lady Waltz

Edith Wilson sings in the emotive style of 1919—all arm gestures and flattering angles of the head. It is an oompah-style waltz, backed by piano, tuba, accordion, or kazoo.

EDITH. *(Singing.)*
My husband the president had a stroke
Leaving a vacuum of power.
Flanders Fields in blood was soaked
But I was never a coward.
The Treaty of Versailles was yet to be signed
The Bolshevik menace was creeping like vines.
A League of Nations was our lofty goal.
But all could be wrecked on this rocky shoal.
We couldn't look weak

If we wanted peace
So…I…

Woodrow Wilson appears, in Presidential Coat. Edith and Woodrow dance a waltz where they both face forward, she guides him around the floor, hand on his chest. The rest of the cast waltzes on, in back-to-front pairs. If the cast is small, each cast member may dance with a suit jacket, or other faceless puppet. Edith spins Woodrow offstage.

(Chorus.)

Lead from behind
Lead from behind
Intelligent women must lead from behind.
I'll suffer insults and slurs unkind.
To guard husband and country, I'll lead from behind.

What issues were urgent? What wheels would be greased?
Was a puzzle I daily solved.
His support for women's suffrage was greatly increased
What can I say, he evolved!
I couldn't be seen to be in charge
Or look flighty or erratic
Also I wasn't elected
So it's kind of undemocratic!

The music vamps. Edith addresses the audience in an aside.

(Speaking.) It's a bad precedent. We really don't want a First Lady colluding with others to conceal that our president is unfit to govern, his body and mind deteriorating daily, leaving the affairs of state to unelected functionaries and ignoring the clear edicts put in place by our founding fathers to protect us from tyranny.

But…Edith was kind of awesome at it? *(Shrug.)*

(Singing.)

Lead from behind
Lead from behind
In the year Twenty Twenty* it still wasn't time.
To imagine a woman could handle this grind

* Change this lyric to the current year, until this statement isn't true anymore.

In America women still lead, lead, lead…
Lead, lead, lead…from behind!

Transition.

29. Florence Kling Harding (1921–1923)
The Duchess of Public Image

Florence is pretending to bake. She throws a little flour on her face to really sell it. The reporter enters.

REPORTER. Mrs. Harding.

FLORENCE. Oh, hi. I didn't see you there.

Yes, she did.

REPORTER. It's widely considered that you controlled your husband's campaign; that he ran every decision by you as president, and high-ranking officials would speak to you before speaking to him. How did you get away with this in 1920?

FLORENCE. Look! Behind your ear.

The reporter reaches back and, to their surprise, finds a small paper scroll taped there.

REPORTER. What's this?

FLORENCE. My cookie recipe. You can share that with your readers.

REPORTER. *(Genuinely excited.)* Gee thanks! Where was I?

Florence snaps her fingers and helpers from the cast whisk away all her baking accoutrements.

FLORENCE. Just move on.

REPORTER. All right. You didn't want kids. You don't wear a wedding ring because you said it's a symbol of bondage…you said you hate cooking so are the cookies…?

With assistance from her helpers, Florence begins a series of tableaux. Helpers pose behind her and with her, producing the odd prop every now and then to create a series of photo ops.

They create a tableau, hold for a second, then create another. Hold. Another. After a few of these…

What are you…what's…?

FLORENCE. It's called a photo op. I invented it.

REPORTER. Oh, that's really…

FLORENCE. Look at me.

New scene.

Look at this.

New scene.

And this.

One of the helpers produces a stuffed dog. She crouches to the stage to shake its paw.

And this.

REPORTER. *(Delighted, mesmerized.)* Maybe…maybe I'll write a story about you and that dog.

FLORENCE. That's right. Write that story about me and this dog. Maybe it's a homeless dog. It's so cute and homeless.

REPORTER. Yes! Wait, is it true you had a child out of wedlock?

Helpers scatter. Florence stands. A dramatic light shift. We hear a Star Wars*-style refrain.* Florence's expression has changed. She's very serious now. Florence waves her hand in front of the reporter as though doing a Jedi mind trick.*

FLORENCE. You don't want to ask me that question.

REPORTER. You know what…I don't want to ask you that question…

FLORENCE. Those aren't the stories your readers care about.

REPORTER. Nobody cares, right?

FLORENCE. Good night Mrs. Harding.

REPORTER. *(On their way out.)* Sorry. Gotta go turn my attention elsewhere.

FLORENCE. Yes. Yes, you do.

Florence smiles.

* See note on songs/recordings at the back of this volume.

Transition.

30. Grace Coolidge (1923–1929)
Grace and Rebecca

Rebecca and Grace each in a spotlight. Grace wears the First Lady Mantle. The lights stay up on both of them throughout. When Florence Harding speaks, it should be the performer who played her in the previous play.

GRACE. My name is Grace.

REBECCA. My name is Rebecca.

They look at each other, and smile. Maybe stiffly? Maybe warmly?

GRACE. Before I lived in the White House, I had fashionable clothes and a career.

REBECCA. Before I lived in the White House, I had mysterious eyes and beautiful hair.

FLORENCE. *(Jumping into a spotlight.)* They both enjoyed a photo op more than one might expect.

GRACE. One night I was awoken quite late, told to put on my nightgown, and come downstairs, where I watched my husband get sworn in as president by kerosene light.

REBECCA. I was also taken quickly from one home to another, surprised to find myself in the White House.

GRACE. While I lived in the White House, I encouraged women to vote by completing my absentee ballot on the front lawn in front of photographers.

REBECCA. When I lived in the White House, I was known for shrieking wildly when photographers got too close.

FLORENCE. *(Jumping into a spotlight.)* Calvin was deeply attached to both of them.

Grace and Rebecca look at each other.

GRACE. Neither of us would have lived in the White House if it hadn't been for Calvin.

REBECCA. Some of us were very surprised to find ourselves there.

GRACE. Me? I impulsively married a taciturn man against my mother's wishes.

REBECCA. Me? I was delivered to the White House in a cage, intended to be eaten for Thanksgiving dinner.

Pause.

Because I was a raccoon. And when I say raccoon, I mean it literally. The animal. With tiny hands.

GRACE. I should also tell you shortly after we left the White House, the Great Depression began.

REBECCA. And I perhaps should mention that I ended up in a zoo.

GRACE and REBECCA. *But*…while it lasted…

Music starts. A short balletic dance number ensues, involving MANY MANY stuffed animal raccoons.

Transition.

31. Lou Henry Hoover (1929–1933)
Multifaceted

Lou stands before a table with the First Lady Mantle draped over it. On the table is a deck of cards. If possible, someone should be filming her hands and live streaming it to the projector so that everyone can see a close-up of her card trick.

At the top of the play, either Lou asks for an audience member, or—if possible—another performer or the stage manager prep an audience member so that they can enter at the top of the play. Lou will be doing a shell game with the audience member being asked to select the correct card when prompted.

LOU. Hi, what's your name?

She waits for the audience member to respond. Lou shows the card that needs to be followed (the Queen of Diamonds).

OK, [name of audience member], follow the lady. Ready?

She gets assent from the audience member participating and begins the shell game. It should be easy at this stage.

Lady…lady who sees the lady?
People forget
She was an academic too.
Holding her own
In a world of men—
Imagination brimming with
Stone and steel and flowers,
Keeping pace with the "Great Engineer."

She stops moving the cards.

Where's the lady?

She turns over whichever one the audience member indicates. Reacts to their being right or wrong. Starts again. This time a little faster.

Everyone always underestimates the lady.
She was an athlete, a hunter,
A socialite, a philanthropist.
Bareback rider, rifle owner,
Boxer Rebellion civilian guard defender…
Relegated to war relief funds and
Women's committees: nurse, housing assistant, benefactor.

She again stops.

Where's the lady?

She turns over their selection, reacts, and begins again. At this point she starts with all three cards down, but then begins to empty the rest of the deck—one card at a time—all over the table.

And then the world crashed…
Farther and faster than the
War she'd already survived—
And everyone leaned forward

With scrutiny and suspicion.
She paid for the meals,
Read and answered each letter,
Set aside private funds, and
Preserved their history.
They called her aloof.
Labeled her spoiled.
Named her a white woman
Out of touch with her own saviorism.
In the end, a footnote
For a girls' society that still
Doesn't get as much attention
As its male counterpart.

She stops.

Where's the lady?

When the audience member selects a card, she moves her hand over to that card, but does not yet turn it over.

Men fail and we get forgotten.
Distorted by history and
Reduced to sidekickery.
I keep waiting for that to change.

She plunks a box of Girl Scout cookies down on the table and turns over whatever card they've indicated. If it's the Queen of Diamonds she gives them a cookie and says something along the lines of "good job." If not, she eats the cookie in front of them and says something along the lines of "better luck next time."

Transition.

32. Eleanor Roosevelt (1933–1945)
Little Nell

Over the course of this play, Eleanor repeatedly climbs something and falls, caught by the cast.

ELEANOR. When she was two years old she was lowered from a steamship into a small lifeboat in the icy Atlantic
She remembered the screams around her and the lurching of the lifeboat the rest of her life.

She falls; the cast carries her back to ladder.

When she was two she was lowered into the arms of her beloved father
And she cried and even so
Her parents got on another ship and sailed away.

She falls; the cast carries her back to ladder.

At some point
She must have decided
Not to fear
Even though
Fear is never just itself

She falls; the cast places her on her feet.

She landed in a small unsteady boat.
She landed at a typewriter, at a microphone, in front of a camera.
She landed in a small, unsteady marriage and became the most famous woman in the world.
So she looked around her. She saw people crying. The whole wide world was an icy ocean and she thought, "Well, here I am, and I have my hands."

She climbs again.

She wrote the Declaration of Human Rights. For the whole world.
Inventing the idea that we should all try to catch every person who falls from any boat.
Every single human on earth.
Because we are all here in an icy ocean

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!



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