*Acting Edition*

# FAILURE: A LOVE STORY

## A COMEDY BY PHILIP DAWKINS

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Playscripts

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PHILIP DAWKINS



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**Cast of Characters**

*The Failures:*

NELLY FAIL, the youngest

JENNY JUNE FAIL, the middlest

GERTRUDE FAIL, the eldest

JOHN N. FAIL, the brother

MORTIMER MORTIMER, the lover

THE CHORUS

**Casting Notes**

The Chorus can take any number of shapes. Multiple people, one person, puppets… Feel free to reassign some or all of the Chorus' lines to other characters. You want to have the Fails talking about themselves in third person? Awesome. You want the two dead parents to comprise the chorus (Oh, they're dead. Spoiler alert?)? Go for it. You want a trio of hear-no/see-no/speak-no evil monkeys narrating the story? Rock on. The chorus is there to be tailored to your specific production. Make it as simple or complex as you see fit.

Also, you'll notice a bunch of other characters such as "Henry Fail," "Grandfather Clock," "Gramophone," "Dog," "Grantland Rice." These roles can be played by members of the chorus, by other characters, pre-recorded, etc. Again, feel free to use your creativity and pull from the strengths and shape of your production.

It is possible, though not required, for the same actress to play all three Fail sisters. If you want the Fail sisters to be played by three different actresses (or even seven different actresses), by all means, sally forth.

All this to say, this play is meant to be tailored to fit the needs and size of your production. It is possible to tell this story with as few as four actors or as many as fifty. So, have fun.

**A Note on Music**

Some of the songs referenced in this play are in the public domain ("Let Me Call You Sweetheart" and the chorus of "How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm?"), some are original songs ("The Feeling [Johnny W.]" and "I Don't Need Anyone"), and some require a license to be performed ("I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan," "Lover Come Back to Me," and "I Can't Give You Anything But Love"). If the rights cannot be secured for those songs requiring a license, you may use alternative songs with similar themes.

**Acknowledgments**

*Failure: A Love Story* was developed at The Lark Play Development Center, New York City. The play premiered at Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago, Illinois (Chay Yew, Artistic Director; Jan Kallish, Executive Director) in 2012. The production was directed by Seth Bockley, with the following cast and production staff:

NELLY FAIL . . . . . Baize Buzan
THE CHORUS . . . . . Janet Brooks
MORTIMER MORTIMER. . . . . Matt Fletcher
JENNY JUNE FAIL . . . . . Emjoy Gavino
GERTRUDE FAIL . . . . . Mildred Langford
THE CHORUS . . . . . Guy Massey
JOHN N. FAIL . . . . . Michael Salinas

Lighting Design. . . . . Mac Vaughey
Sound Design. . . . . Charles Kim
Costume Design . . . . . Emily Tarleton
Set Design. . . . . Scott Davis
Stage Manager . . . . . Helen Lattyak



*Failure: A Love Story,* Victory Gardens Theater, Chicago, Illinois (2012). Photo: Saverio Truglia.

# FAILURE: A LOVE STORY
## by Philip Dawkins

**CHORUS.**
Nelly was the first of the Fail Girls to die,
followed soonafter by her sisters, Jenny June
and Gerty Fail
in that order.
Causes of death were
Blunt Object
Disappearance
and Consumption
also in that order.

Of course, plenty other Fails had died long before Nelly did.
Why, her own parents, Henry and Marietta Fail, drowned in the Chicago River
some thirteen years back,
casualties of the Eastland Riverboat disaster.

Oh, they weren't *on* the Eastland.
No.
They were in a brand new Stutz Bearcat
rattling east along South Water Street
toward the Ohio Street Beach
where their middlest daughter,
Jenny June Fail,
was about to participate in an otherwise all-male diving competition.

As they passed the Old Chicago Board of Trade to their right,
hundreds of pleasure-seeking picnickers boarded the Eastland to their left.
The air was busy with hubbub and merriment.
An unseen gramophone pleaded with the passengers,
"Let me call you 'Sweetheart.' I'm in love with you."

**GRAMOPHONE.** *(Underscoring the following:)*
*Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you*
*Let me hear you whisper that you love me too*
*Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true*
*Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you*

**CHORUS.**
On street level,
the only passenger in the brand new Stutz Bearcat,
Marietta Fail, was in peak spirits.
The smoke-filled summer air smelled almost sweet,

and she thought to herself,
"This is living. This is absolutely living."
She was about to remark as much to her husband, Henry, when—

Henry was in *no mood!*
The brand new Stutz Bearcat
had not been his idea.
"We certainly didn't need a car to come to America,"
he'd tried reasoning with his wife,
"And we don't need one to stay here."
But Marietta had already made up her mind
they absolutely *required*
the brand new Stutz Bearcat.
She knew it wouldn't be long before her husband came around to her way of thinking.
What Henry Fail was thinking:
Absolutely nothing of note had ever happened to him in a car.
He was about to remark as much to his wife, Marietta, when—

To their left,
the overcrowded Eastland
strained against its moorings
as the white picnic-dressed passengers raced to the waterside edge of the ship.
An amateur canoe race was amateurly canoeing by,
and the picnickers wished to wave them "good luck."
All at once, the weight of the women in white became too much for the top-heavy Eastland, and
SNAP!
It broke free of its holdings,
toppled side first
into the Great Chicago River,
taking all of its picnickers with it.

Henry and Marietta Fail,
rattling by on South Water Street,
were each about to remark to the other
about the brand new Stutz Bearcat
when the Eastland rolled over and died.

Marietta cried,
"Henry, look out!"
and he did,
swerving the brand new South Water Rattling, Ohio Street Beach-bound Stutz Bearcat right off the road and into the concrete feet of the Old Chicago Board of Trade,
destroying the building's façade, and upsetting

—but not dislodging—
the overhead bust of Dr. Ian K. Bonner,
Father of Illinoisan Psychiatry.

In shock from the collision, Mother Fail cried again,
"Henry! Henry!"
The smoke-filled summer air
struggled with sounds of drowning and crooning and dresses and dying.
Henry Fail grabbed at the clutch,
it came off in his hand.
—He stomped on the brake—
the Bearcat slid backward
—"Henry, look out!"—
into the street
—he laid on his horn—
over the hemp rope barricades
—he looked to his wife—
over the river's edge.

And before either Fail realized what had hit them,
the Chicago River did.

Nearly 850 people on board the ill-fated Eastland,
along with Henry and Marietta Fail
and their brand new Stutz Bearcat,
sank deep, deep into the Chicago River that morning,
the same river into which,
at that very moment,
their middlest daughter,
Jenny June Fail,
was diving.

**GRAMOPHONE.** *(Finishing the song:)*
*Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you*

**CHORUS.**
So, to suggest that death had not played a very prominent role in the Fail Family Saga
before the year of the Fail Sisters' deaths, would be absolute applesauce.

Marietta Fail had not always been a Fail.
She started out a Marishka Peabody Failbottom, of the Nelson-Peabody Failbottoms.
She first met her future husband
(and cousin by marriage)
Heiner Failbottom,

when she was thirteen years old at a dog derby
in a land their eldest daughter, Gerty, only ever heard them refer to as
The Old Country.
By fourteen, Marishka and Heiner were betrothed.
By fifteen they were wed,
and by sixteen, the newly married cousins were on a boat bound for America.

**JOHN N.**
Their only son
John N. Fail
would like to state,
in the interest of historical context,
that the marrying of cousins
—or, for that matter, distant siblings—
was not an uncommon practice.
In fact, it occurred with some frequency.
Take for example,
Mr. and Mrs. H. G. Wells.
And, lest it seem too outdated for modern tastes,
please be reminded that the joining in holy matrimony of first cousins is still legal in forty-three of the now fifty United States.
And Guam.

**CHORUS.**
Upon entering the United States,
first order of business for Heiner and Marishka Failbottom
was to have their bottoms chopped off
by an overzealous Ellis Island desk clerk.
Once bottom-less,
Henry and Marietta Fail were free to enter the streets of New York City,
teeming with immigrants, opportunity, and lice.

Mr. and Mrs. Fail came to the States with nothing to their name
except for one time-honored skill,
which had been the primary trade of the Failbottoms
(on both sides)
for over a hundred years:
Clockworking.

Since time was of the essence,
Henry Fail decided they must settle down somewhere in need
of a solid Clockworks Shop.
In exchange for resetting the pocket watch
of a tug boat captain in Queens Village,

they were tugged all the way to Toronto,
where they revived the marine chronometer
in the Captain's quarters of a freighter headed for Superior.
There, an offer to realign the grooves
on a rickety paddle boat
bought them safe passage down the Mississippi
where the gift of a perfect-fit quartz to the daughter of a river-barge operator
admitted them to the Chicago River
straight to the corner of
Lumber and Love
where a two story rickety wooden structure
quickly became the
Fail Family home and Clock Shop.

Having floated halfway around the world,
then halfway across the continent,
Henry cut the plank, and Marietta painted the letters
for the sign above the door at Lumber and Love:
"Fail Clock Works, Est. 1900: Open."

**GRAMOPHONE.**

*I can't give you anything but love, baby*
*That's the only thing I've plenty of, baby*
*Dream awhile, scheme awhile*
*You're sure to find*
*Happiness, and I guess*
*All those things you've always pined for*

*Gee, I'd like to see you looking swell, baby*
*Diamond bracelets, Woolworth's doesn't sell, baby*
*Until that lucky day, you know darn well, baby*
*I can't give you anything but love*

**CHORUS.**

In the span of a year, Mr. and Mrs. Fail had gone from
Heiner and Marishka
to Henry and Marietta
and finally to Mother and Father.
Their first daughter,
Gertrude Annelea Fail
was born in the creaky upstairs bedroom
on Lumber and Love
at the very front of 1900.
The Fails were a family. And they were in business.

"The Fail Clock Works Est. 1900: Open" was a roaring success.
Situated, as it was, near the Chicago dockyards,

tardy men were forever stopping in for a tune-up,
usually requiring nothing more than a winding and a reminder to do so with regularity.

"The Wind and Remind"
as Henry called it.
"Penny a turn."

Always prompt and orderly, Henry's clocks gained a reputation in the industrious city:
"A Fail Clock is a Working Clock."
And everyone HAD to have one.

It wasn't long before Marietta joined him in the shop.

As a toddler, Gerty Fail spent her days
with nothing but time on her hands,
time in all shapes and sizes.
Tea timers, two timers, and time tuners.
She loved to sit at the feet of the Grandfather Clock,
press her ear against its great glass stomach
and listen to the steady oscillation of its guts.
Her favorite game was a sort of
"Toss the Cogs"
which made good use of the discarded parts
on the end-of-day shoproom floor.
Though the Fails could not provide much for their young Gerty,
they gave her all the time she wanted.
And more.

Which is why, at the funeral for the youngest Fail girl,
Nelly Fail,
there was a small uncomfortable laughter from the crowd, when her parents were described as "The *Late* Mr. and Mrs. Henry Fail."
Surrounded by so many clocks, the Fails had never been late for anything.
Ever.

Which is also why, on the day of her very first diving competition, the middlest Fail girl,
Jenny June,
did not understand why she couldn't find
the proud faces of her parents in the crowd.
"Surely they can't be *late*!"

She took second place in that diving contest, by the way.
Extremely proud of her red ribbon, the photographs from the event show two slippery

boys perched on graduated wooden blocks, and one gangly girl in an ill-fitted swim cap
squinting into the crowd for signs of her parents.
First place went to a Northside German boy named Johnny Weissmuller.
It was on that day that Jenny June Fail decided both the sport and the sportsman she would spend the rest of her life attempting to conquer.

A life which began, incidentally,
in the creaky upstairs bedroom
on Lumber and Love
in 1907.
Her older sister,
a then six-year-old Gerty Fail,
was not pleased.
She placed a customer's broken kitchen clock in her new sister's crib.
The problem with the clock: it ran in reverse.
Gerty was roundly scolded.

Unlike Gerty, who spent every hour indoors,
Jenny June Fail was an immediate water bug.
She took to the nearby river like a cog to a wheel.
Much to the chagrin of her mother,
Marietta Fail.
The river was
—how should we put this?—
disgusting.
But Jenny June never paid any mind.
She dove right in among the hog guts and grease cups
and never a day was she sick.

As a young girl of the river,
Jenny June felt a certain connection to the city that somehow only her father understood.
Henry knew what it meant to know a city from the water up.
He understood his daughter's need to pump herself through the veins of a place.
And so he encouraged her river endeavors,
a pastime which Marietta Fail was quick to point out to her eldest daughter, Gerty, was
"Not becoming of a young lady."

Gerty and Jenny June did not get along.

Thank heaven then for the arrival of the youngest Fail girl,
Eleanor Elisabeth Fail.
Nelly for short.

But Nelly was not short.
Not in any way.
She was long and lean,
—even as a child—
full of patience and listening and laughter.
Her first word was "Yes" and her second was
"Hooray!"

As a baby she was all laughter.
Every hour on the hour,
Henry Fail would set his baby daughter on the floor of the shop and wait for the hundreds of clocks to clang out the time.
Little Nelly's face would light up and her riotous giggle could be heard even above the din of the clock chorus.
Neither Nelly nor her family ever tired of this.

Nelly united the affections of the Fail Family so unanimously
that none could imagine a happier family.

But in 1910, Marietta Fail gave birth to a dead child
she would have named Margaret.

And nobody knew
quite
what to say.

**GRAMOPHONE.**

*Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you*
*Let me hear you whisper that you love me too*
*Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true*
*Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you*

**CHORUS.**

They buried the little girl in the North Avenue Cemetery
on a tiny hill with a view of the water.
They never spoke of her again,
but once a year, on the anniversary of her birth and death,
Henry Fail would take a watch and a sandwich
and spend the day at his late daughter's grave.

Marietta Fail was never the same after that.
She was quiet,
listless.
Everything she did, she did through a cloud of sadness.
Time became a torment to her.
She left broken clocks unfixed,
preferring the ones that refused to tick.
When customers came to retrieve them,

Gerty quietly apologized and promised to fix them herself.
Marietta sat in her room
in her bed
watching the hands of the cuckoo clock spin.

It was during this time that the Fail Girls cranked into gear.
Gerty kept the Fail Clock Works in motion,
becoming more and more her father's girl.
She cut her teeth on cutting teeth.
She discovered a method to replace a broken mainspring
without removing the arbor from the barrel.
From her father, she learned the proper way to lubricate the pivot seats on the movement plates.
She became
in time
an expert
in time.

Jenny June set aside her daily river swims
to redirect her attentions toward Nelly.
It was Jenny June who witnessed Nelly's first steps,
and promptly ran in to announce to her father and Gerty at the workbench that
"Nelly's almost ready to swim!"

Time went by like this for a while.

**GRAMOPHONE.** *(To the tune of "How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down On The Farm?":)*

*Where did the time go*
*—Does anyone know—*
*When we were having fun?*

*Why must the hands tick*
*By on the clock*
*Just like they're not*
*Ever gonna stop?*
*Where is the day*
*We used to make hay*
*All the day long in the sun?*

*The stubborn hour hand says time to go*
*I swear it wasn't there an hour ago*

*Where did the time go*
*—Does anyone know—*
*When we were having fun?*

**CHORUS.**
One day, a minute before noon on a weekday,
with Marietta Fail cloistered in the upstairs bedroom,
Gerty was helping her father polish the crystal of a newly restored LeRoy Pocket piece.
Jenny June was playing "I'm going to eat your head" with her baby sister, Nelly.
All the clocks struck twelve.

**CLOCKS.** Bong Bong Bang CLANG RING Cuckoo DING DONG TICK BRANK BLING

**CHORUS.** When—

**WINDOW.** CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAASH!

**CHORUS.**
Dashing up the staircase so quickly
that he dropped the LeRoy into Gerty's shaking hands,
Henry Fail threw open his bedroom door.
Marietta Fail, in her dressing gown,
hair and ribbons akimbo
pointed accusatorily at the jagged hole in their window.
"I won't take it anymore!"
she screamed.
"I won't listen to that damned thing mock me!"

It was Jenny June Fail,
her sister Nelly on her hip,
who crept out of the shop,
beneath the "Fail Clock Works Est. 1900: Open"
to find the guilty cuckoo clock,
its springs and movements splayed across Lumber and Love.
The dead cuckoo bird hung limp from the tiny shutters
like the lazy tongue of a dead dog.
Jenny June looked back toward her parents' bedroom window,
where she saw a hole in the glass and two adults wrestling standing up.
She swore she could hear Marietta crying.
But, the sounds of the tears were too small to belong to her mother.

She looked behind her.
Nothing.
She crossed over Lumber and Love,
Her parents behind and above her struggling for understanding.
Gerty stood in the front door, still holding the half-polished LeRoy,
and looking to see if anyone else had witnessed the murder of the cuckoo clock.

When Jenny June ducked beneath the rope dividing the road from the river bank,
she found a wicker bread basket,
dirty from the water,
and a baby,
wet, hungry, and fussy.
When the baby saw Jenny June's face it screamed with all its tiny might
and Nelly giggled.

It was a boy.
In one fist was a small river snake that seemed neither threatened nor threatening.
In the other hand, a scrap of wood bearing a message written in coal.
"I loved him best I could."
And a name
"John N."

The Fail Family now had a son.
And a snake.

Marietta Fail's recovery was quick and born of necessity.
The family raised the young John N. as if he was their own.
Indeed, he was.

But he was slow to blossom in the Fail home.
Always a bit uncomfortable with the bells and whistles of the workshop,
he preferred instead to be outside with the birds and river rats,
or watching his sister Jenny June
spring in and out of the same black tar waters
which had delivered him to the Fail Family home.

A lover of all things fauna,
John N. Fail was forever bringing home new "animal friends."
Henry and Marietta Fail did their best to accommodate as many of these as they could.
But Marietta absolutely put her foot down when it came to rats.
Such a shame, considering the plentiful supply of homeless *rodentia*
from the oh-so-near riverbank.
But, as young John N. grew bigger and healthier,
so did the snake which they had found in his grasp.
And, after one very necessary trip to the library,
Gerty Fail learned it wasn't a river snake at all. But a baby ball python,
a non-venomous but, all the same, deadly constrictor native to the wilds of Africa.

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