Acting Edition

The Burning Cauldron of Fiery Fire

by Anne Washburn

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SAMUEL FRENCH

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THE BURNING CAULDRON OF FIERY FIRE was first produced by the Vineyard Theatre (Sarah Stern, Artistic Director) in New York City, and premiered on November 9th, 2025. The production was directed by Steve Cosson, with set design by Andrew Boyce, costume design by Emily Rebholz, lighting design by Amith Chandrashaker, sound design and composition by Ryan Gamblin, song and vocal arrangements by Nehemiah Luckett and David Dabbon, music direction by Dan Sander-Wells, wig and hair design by Tommy Kurzman, and puppet design by Monkey Boys Productions. The props supervisor was Trey Blevins, the special effects consultant was Steve Cuiffo, the movement coordinator was Lisa Fagan, and the production stage manager was Esti Bernstein. The cast was as follows:

MILO, ADULT MILO, RUTH,
SHORT WIZARD & CHORAL 5 . . . . . Bobby Moreno
MARI, LAUREL, PAGE & CHORAL 1. . . . . Marianne Rendón
PETER, WILL, ROBERT & CHORAL 8. . . . . Tom Pecinka
THOMAS, MARA & CHORAL 7. . . . . Bruce McKenzie
DIANA, CRYSTAL, KING & CHORAL 3. . . . . Donnetta Lavinia Grays
GRACIE, TANYA, PRINCESS & CHORAL 6.. . . . . .Cricket Brown
SIMON, ROLF, NARRATOR,
HEN, MEGHAN & CHORAL 2 . . . . . Jeff Biehl
GHAZAL, PAUL, ADAM,
PAGEANT PETER & CHORAL 4. . . . . Bartley Booz

CHARACTERS

The Many Roles in the order of their speaking:

MILO, 6.

Also: **ADULT MILO**, mid-30s.

Also: **SHORT WIZARD** and **CHORAL 5**.

MARI, 20s or 30s.

Also: **LAUREL**, 8.

Also: **PAGE** and **CHORAL 1**.

PETER, 20s or 30s.

Also: **WILL**, a few years older.

Also: **ROBERT**, 5.

THOMAS, 50s or 60s.

Also: **MARA**, 3; and **CHORAL 7**.

DIANA, 40s.

Also: **CRYSTAL**, 9; **KING**; and **CHORAL 3**.

GRACIE, 20s.

Also: **TANYA**, 9.

Also: **PRINCESS** and **CHORAL 6**.

SIMON, 40s.

Also: **ROLF**, 7; **PAGEANT NARRATOR**; **HEN**; and **CHORAL 2**.

GHAZAL, 20s,

Also: **PAUL**, 20s; **ADAM**, 7; **PAGEANT PETER**; and **CHORAL 4**.

SETTING

Northern California

TIME

The aughts

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The play is cast with 8 adult actors.

Those 8 adult actors will play 10 adults, and 8 children.

(Some of those adult actors will play children acting the role of adults.)

The adults look, well, kind of like hippies: the men with long hair and beards, the women a little long-haired and drapey. Will looks unplaceable, not like a hippie, but not-not like a hippie.

A ghazal is a very old Persian poetic form. An example of which is seen in the text.

Words in brackets [ ] are thought but not expressed.

/ indicates the beginning of the next line.

un- or underpunctuated sentences or paragraphs of text should be approached at a slightly slower clip than normal.

Sonic elements are in bold.

Not a moment of this should be played for satire. Give everyone full credit.

(Sometimes there are **CHORAL VOICES**. *They will generally speak singularly, rather than in union, although that should happen too sometimes.)*

CHORAL 1. Is that smoke?

CHORAL 3, 4. Or fog.

CHORAL 2. Fog.

CHORAL 3, 4, 6. Fog and woodsmoke.

CHORAL 6. A deer.

CHORAL 3. Another deer.

CHORAL 6. Artichokes, pumpkins.

CHORAL 4. Thistles.

CHORAL 2. Great Horned Owl.

(The play begins in a swirl of incident: a **WOMAN**, *a* **MAN**, *a* **CHILD**.*)*

MILO. Auuugh

(Pointing, accusing:) Peter is scaring me!

MARI. What?

MILO. Peter is scaring me!

PETER. Milo wrecked my painting. He did it deliberately.

MILO. I was helping!

MARI. You didn't hit him.

PETER. I didn't no.

MARI. Did he – *(Shushing* **PETER**.*)* shhhhhhhh – what happened. What happened Milo.

PETER. Yes tell her what happened.

MARI. Shhhhh.

What –

(Wiping **MILO***'s face, soothing gestures –)* what happened.

MILO. I saw plums. So I put plums into it. I saw – in my *(Taps forehead.)* I saw it would be better. So I added them I mixed colors first.

PETER. The entire palette *smeared* – do you know how long it takes to mix a palette it's an act of art *unto itself.*

(Fierce silencing gesture from **MARI**.*)*

MARI. Did you paint, onto his painting.

MILO. Uh-huh. I was *helping.*

MARI. You were helping. That was a beautiful – it's *wonderful* when we help…

MILO. Uh-huh.

*(***PETER** *has kind of sunk into a despair.)*

MARI. And it's wonderful that you saw plums, in your mind, and you put those plums…into the world.

MILO. *(Agreement.)* Uh-huh.

*(***PETER** *looks incredulous.)*

(She's trying to figure out how to get to the next bit.)

PETER. He knew what he was doing that was *vandalism.*

MILO. I was helping! The plums are so beautiful! Your painting is dumb! That painting is so dumb!

*(**PETER** rears up in outrage, frustration.)*

PETER. Gaaaaaaaagh!

*(**MILO** cries out in mute rage/fear. **MARI** clutches him to her.)*

MARI. Go! Go! Your anger is just – *(Can't express it or even figure it out.)* – go! Go away!

*(**MILO**, worked up by all of this into hysterics, shrieking senselessly almost to himself:)*

MILO. *Go Away!*

CHORAL 3, 6. Redwood.

CHORAL 2. Hemlock.

CHORAL 6. Creek.

CHORAL 3. Eucalyptus.

CHORAL 4, 7. Goat Turds.

CHORAL 2, 6. Live Oak.

CHORAL 3. Squash.

CHORAL 2. How many species of

CHORAL 2, 3, 4, 6, 7. coastal pine?

ADULT MILO. I did it deliberately it was absolutely an act of mischief

as well as art criticism: it did need purples.

CHORAL 7. Old tractor.

CHORAL 6. New tractor.

CHORAL 4. Middle-aged tractor.

CHORAL 2, 3, 4. Hill Sage.

CHORAL 2. Who left The Gate unlatched??

CHORAL 4. Not me!

ADULT MILO. *I* needed purples. I could see the plums in my mind's eye perfect spheres of perfect gleaming… painting plums was wanting to take that rich dark shifting coloration inside myself to incorporate plums into my very being – I craved something…sweet…and kind of extraordinary…

CHORAL 4. The hoe left in the chard row: dew

CHORAL 3. rust

CHORAL 3, 4. more dew, plums

ADULT MILO. and I was only allowed to use kid paints tempura paints so easy to wash out and away so crude in their expression so limited in the range of color they could attain I was forbidden those alluring oil paints the saturated hues the heaviness the thick squidge squozen from the wonderful soft metal tubes

and I was supposed to be helpful and creative and think outside the box and also, I don't know, I didn't like Peter didn't like his droopiness I found him irritating he hadn't once played with me or roughhoused and anyway I knew I could get away with it

if I acted like an angel an artist

I knew there was very little I couldn't get away with.

CHORAL 7. Boughs thick with plums.

CHORAL 3. Plums on the grass, in the road.

CHORAL 4. Doe.

CHORAL 2, 5. Fawn.

CHORAL 7. And then another fawn.

CHORAL 1, 3. We should make jam from these right we should make liquor like they do in the Balkans when will we find a way to attend to all these

CHORAL 3. wonderful

CHORAL 2, 4, 5. wild plums

CHORAL 3. before they

CHORAL 5. fall

CHORAL 7. and rot.

CHORAL 6. Quail.

CHORAL 3. Deer scatter up the hillside.

CHORAL 2. Red Shouldered Hawk, circling.

CHORAL 5, 6. Fog, and smoke.

CHORAL 2, 6. And smoke in the fog,

CHORAL 1, 5, 6. and fog in the smoke.

(Sound of a crackling fire.)

(Which cuts out very abruptly, and very completely.)

(Night, mist, **THOMAS** *kneels, holding a carboard box of matches. The rest of the* **COMMUNITY** *is gathered behind him, standing, illuminating the Earth ahead of him with flashlights; we can't really see their faces.)*

THOMAS. We have been, favored, in our time together, with three births – each one glorious. A birth increases us, and joins us together in celebration.

This is our first death. We are subtracted, in an important and cruel way.

We are the stronger for it.

A collective takes joy in one another. A community sorrows together. A *community* gathers its dead and commends them to God.

I'm not going to "talk about the man we knew."

THOMAS. Because we all knew him.

Because it's impossible to know anyone and I won't try to round into a smooth and coherent story a wild and diverse phenomenon. Smoke. Fog. I knew Peter like a brother but I'm sure it's as truthful to say that I hardly knew him as it is to say that I know all of you so well, and barely.

Yesterday, Peter was alive. He walked among us with a beating heart. If you'd asked me what do you love about Peter I would have said: his heart.

But I don't think I ever looked at him and thought: Peter…your heart is *beating*.

Man I wish I had.

I'm what I'm trying to say I didn't cherish

the Earth in him all these years of millions of years of biology star fragments remorseless series of cell divisions and…fucking…perishing…which led to him.

We know his soul lives on but he will never again be this creature, this fragile clay, soon to twist away from us in smoke and ash and spark.

Listen. Carefully. Listen:

the beating

the all but silent booming

of twenty-six

bleeding

grieving

hearts.

(And then he lights a match.)

(Lights flare and flare and raise and then drop to a dim.)

(Dawn.)

CHORAL 3. Great Horned Owl.

CHORAL 6. Another Great Horned Owl.

CHORAL 4. Crow.

CHORAL 3. Concerned conversation between two Great Horned Owls.

MILO. The tingling start of Dawn.

CHORAL 6. The one Great Horned Owl flies away in one direction.

CHORAL 3. The other Great Horned Owl flies away in another direction.

CHORAL 6. Spotted Towhee.

MILO. Then:

CHORAL 2. American Robin.

CHORAL 4. Crow.

MILO. Now:

CHORAL 1, 2. Steller's Jay.

CHORAL 3, 6. Golden-crowned Sparrow.

CHORAL 1, 7. Scrub-Jay.

MILO. First light. The Dawn Chorus. Next:

CHORAL 3, 4. Northern House Wren.

MILO. Now:

CHORAL 1, 2, 7. Dark-eyed Junco.

CHORAL 2, 3, 4. Wrentit.

CHORAL 3, 4. California Towhee.

CHORAL 4. Crow.

MILO. Light. Fog. A gray morning.

CHORAL 4. Crows.

A conclave of crows heard first above and all around us, and then, muted, heard from inside.

CHORAL 2. The green couch, the firm couch, the saggy couch.

CHORAL 6, 3, 2. Muddy boots on the porch.

CHORAL 1, 5, 4. Coffee cups in the sink.

CHORAL 6, 7, 3. The ponging of the woodstove.

CHORAL 6. On the underside of the firm couch a small cluster of spider infants.

CHORAL 4. Crows. The crows think they have found something interesting. Down there on the ground.

(We are in the living room.)

THOMAS. Paul has most kindly volunteered to…keep watch over Peter while we deliberate.

DIANA. A cup of coffee?

THOMAS. I've had a lot of coffee. *(An internal calculation.)* I could have more coffee.

*(***DIANA** *returns after a moment with a blue ceramic mug of coffee.)*

DIANA. Does Paul need more coffee?

THOMAS. He said no.

*(***THOMAS** *sits. After a moment he sips. He sips.)*

DIANA. *(Making an effort to speak pragmatically.)* I think the first question is: do we re-burn him, or do we bury him as is.

THOMAS. That was his pyre. It wasn't to obliterate him. It was to honor him.

GRACIE. So we bury him?

SIMON. He's too clumpy to scatter.

*(**GRACIE** utters a small kind of cry.)*

Crematoriums are…it's very specialized…

DIANA. So we're not going to try again.

THOMAS. That would be a mockery. No one reburns their dead.

SIMON. And we're unlikely to get much further unless we really pile on the fuel which after last night I don't much fancy. I'm going to put it out there that the next time we, burn, one of our own, or anything else for that matter, we've got to have buckets of water, buckets of dirt, lots of them, we've got to have a protocol for all outdoor fires sacred or profane that was a bad moment when the blaze spread, if the wind had come up? Those hills are tinder.

MARI. Alright, Simon.

SIMON. We'll bury him now but…very deeply. There's meat on him still and he will attract…the appetite of many.

(Pause while they all digest that.)

THOMAS. I wonder if there's something in that. In yielding to the appetite of Nature. I think that might have interested Peter, might have really appealed to him.

(Gives it a beat.)

SIMON. Nature won't be tidy.

DIANA. No.

SIMON. Bones will be quarreled over and dragged away washed downstream and onto the beach. When a dog trots up to someone with a femur the cops get interested.

DIANA. So it *was* a crime

SIMON. It was probably a crime. Technically. It was definitely extralegal.

GRACIE. But a marker. Do we not have a marker?

THOMAS. The entire Earth is his marker. We're not going to have a marker.

GRACIE. We need to know where he *is* though. Even if it's not marked.

DIANA. So just to be clear: we're acknowledging, that what we have done was right – was definitely right – but

THOMAS. But the world wants us to have called the authorities, the authorities want to take Peter away and stash him on an ice tray in a morgue.

SIMON. To give to the family.

THOMAS. And they're not having him. He would never want them to have him.

DIANA. I'm not saying we did the wrong thing, I'm saying we did the thing…

SIMON. It has become…complex to explain.

THOMAS. The decision which we made collectively – and we did make it collectively – was made in great emotion and,

like a lot of decisions made in great emotion, it was very satisfactory, but um…

then there's a lot of responsibility around it.

GRACIE. What about his things. If we burned his bones, or if we tried to burn his bones do we burn his things?

(Bit of a pause.)

SIMON. Right. Good question.

DIANA. *(Trying it out.)* Burn them…

GRACIE. *(Also trying to think it through.)* Would he have wanted us to burn them.

SIMON. He in many ways lost the right to have us consider his feelings, no?

THOMAS. Yes, absolutely. And yet. *(Leading through with expansive gesture.)* Shall we not be better than his worst moments, shall we meet his – anger – despair – with scorn?

(Some physical gesture/way of relieving his feelings.)

GRACIE. I still don't understand why there was no note. I still think it's cruel.

DIANA. I, also, don't understand why there is no note. Peter loved his self-expression it doesn't seem like him to pass up that kind of captive audience.

THOMAS. The action was the note. It was the perfect note. Language would only have been inadequate. He knew that. Let us give him credit for that…insight, at least.

GRACIE. What will we say if someone comes. And asks.

DIANA. Oh hell.

SIMON. He was here for nine months. In that time he got like three phone calls.

DIANA. One of them from his mother.

GRACIE. One of them from his mother. He didn't return that call.

DIANA. That we know of.

SIMON. That we know of. At some point somebody is going to call and we're going to say sorry ma'am he took off and didn't say where he was going, we were sorry to see him go but that's the way the young people are these days.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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