

Edward G. O'Brien

OTHERS

A Play Number

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A PASSION PLAY

By Djuna Barnes

THE KITCHEN ABSURD

By William Saphier and Maxwell Bodenheim

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FEB 1918

PASSION PLAY

PERSONS:

First Thief.

Second Thief.

Sarah (first prostitute).

Theocleia (second prostitute).

Third figure.

Guard.

PLACE: Calvary.

TIME: In the days of Christ.

SCENE: The hillside. To the left a clump of bushes, to the right a dark wood. In the middle distance, two crosses. A glow from the city casts a shallow light on the foot of the hill.

Theocleia is a Greek. Very blond with long legs and narrow shoulders. Her skin is but a thin veil over the veins of her flesh. The eyebrows and the slight down on her upper lip are so faint as to give the impression of something that has been marked on the reverse side. She is gay and heavily abandoned.

Sarah is a thin, small Jewess with tiny breasts, dark and curling hair, nose aquiline, mouth large, teeth flat and fine. She has the arched swift eyes of a trotter. She has a trick of running her hand over her breasts and up to her throat. A perverse woman, whose knees move beneath her thin dress like spheres ascending and descending.

First Thief, a shaggy man of forty with long ragged moustache, small red eyes, a large Adam's apple and thin neck bones.

Second Thief, a broad-faced blond, minus eyebrows, has broken arches and swallows incessantly.

(First thief breaks out of the bushes in pursuit of Sarah, the second thief in pursuit of Theocleia. They roll in a heap in the foreground.)

First Thief (wiping his mouth) :

This moment's anticipation has upset my saliva for the last twenty-four hours. Come, kiss me. (He kisses Sarah.)

Second Thief (his arm about Theocleia) :

You should treat a man better than that, who knocks at all the tavern gates on the way to hell this night.

Sarah:

How now?

First Thief (shrugging his shoulders) :

What matter's it, girl; beneath these whiskers is a mouth of splendid grossness—one cannot kiss all things unless one has the range.

Second Thief:

Waste not time, my friend, each minute grows a minute short in which to love.

Theocleia (tucking up her gown) :

Let us play then. You sit here and I there, if it's only a little time for life left to you. What is your offense?

First and Second Thief:

Misconstruing the meaning of right and wrong.

Sarah (playing with thief's arm) :

And you, what are you charged with?

First Thief:

That fair sin called guilt, of that dear moment termed evil; I suffer the malady dubbed distemper and commit those follies spoken of as breach of law. And who make the laws, tell me? Some man, who, lacking my capacities, envied my life.

Second Thief:

What does it matter. We all end. Some die early and some when they are old; some when their sap is loose and some when their joints complain endlessly, "Enough, enough." But let us pinch and wrestle in that game they call the height of passion. There's that in me could smear the world with new voices calling out, "Forever and forever!"

Theocleia:

You are a dirty ruffian, but I like the odor of your filth, 'tis healthy.

Sarah:

And I the odor of your breath, for through it blows the breaths of all things—some evil and some none too good.

(They embrace each other, there is a short silence.)

First Thief to Second:

We are the common pools in which the refuse is flung. In which the child dips its feet, in which the horse sluices its nostrils, in which the sparrow cools its legs, in which the entrails of fish are thrown, through which runs the blood of a day's burst veins and the shucks of an hour's sucked fruit. The amazing gutter in which the world casts its wash and then cries, "'Tis muddy."

Theocleia:

And I come from a place that's overrun with things. Yet what can you do? Drive a rat into a corner, rascal, and all that's left for it is the knowledge of that corner's contour and, then, on to death.

Sarah (fondling the cheek of her lover):

How shaggy you are, yet I know of a shaggier place, where nothing stirs, save the odor of flesh and of boots tossed among the catch; and no bird flung upward singing, with the earth upon its feet.

Second Thief:

Where come you from, what have you left undone?

Sarah:

From handling men as if they were tripe, and the world a stew, and one the meat, and one the root, and one the thyme; and only a few spectators tasting with the wine still wet upon their teeth.

First Thief:

All people have appetites, but few have stomachs. (Laughs as he picks fleas out of the hairy calves of his legs.)

Theocleia:

And do you die today or tomorrow? Has time passed, or is it on the road behind you?

Second Thief:

I know not, but there's evil in the air when a tree or a cross rears up. For one there's the nest to hatch out crows, and for the other the nails to hatch out death.

First Thief:

It's time for kisses, my girl; give me your fine wet mouth. (Kisses her, swaying a little.) I'm sure we hang this night for there's that done in the world that we are the father of, and no man escapes this city.

Sarah:

Can you not fly?

Theocleia:

Or hide?

First Thief (sneering):

Or make excuses?

Second Thief (in the same tone):

Or appeal to justice?

Sarah and Theocleia:

And why not?

First Thief:

Because justice is not made for thieves, my girl, nor yet for prostitutes. I would tell you something, but lend me an ear.

Sarah:

Speak on.

(The scene grows dark, as if a storm were brewing. Only the silhouettes of the four heads and shoulders can be distinguished, and the form of the crosses.)

First Thief:

The world has two things—good and evil. The one passes through the city as the deer through the forest and people pay tribute to it, lawyers grow

callouses on their heels over it; preachers lose the tips of their tongues exalting it—for it is pleasant and to the nose very gratifying, for it hath no odor. Thus it passes, smiling and in favor—'til puff (snaps his fingers), suddenly some one cries, "Carrion!" The world is suffused with the smell of flesh and sweat and the hot nausea of things that have died with fur on them, and things that have died naked and in gestures. And the lover with his nose in his mistress' throat, and the steer with his nostrils among the wrinkled bristles of his mate—perceive that there is an aroma in the air; a foul and penetrating stench; a thing that makes the breasts of woman bound, the tongues of men shed saliva and the mouths of those but lately smiling, draw in fear. We, my dears, are that stench.

Theocleia (sadly) :

We are to the world what the odor is to the flesh—and they cannot wash us out.

First Thief (grinning) :

They do not want to wash us out, that would prove the stain their own; instead they kill us—thus—they put ourselves upon us.

Theocleia (quietly) :

I come from a strange place. (Points toward the city.) It is like a large room, it is full of

shadows and great bright lights, and there are the garments of men and women, and leather moist from a waist, and gloves dirty from a journey, and there's a shift thrown over the antlers of a dead thing, and there are two stark rabbits, and between them is a glass of wine, an apple and a flower. And there's the sound of laughter and of tears dropping down solemnly from a high wet palate, and there is the murmur of hands passing over mouths, of limbs passing over limbs, of sighs mingling with sighs. And there's a shadow that has its security in the highest part of the room, and it swings back and forth upon the floor eternally, like the lunge of love. (Shudders.) And through it all somebody, sitting straight and dispassionate, speaks, saying: "Continue." And so I know nothing's over and nothing done.

First Thief (leaning forward):

You saw that?

Sarah:

What was it?

Second Thief:

Heaven?

Sarah:

Hell?

Theocleia (bitterly) :

Heaven has jelled and hell is rusty, and the doves of peace lie manged and moulting in the rain. But I, I am young and cry forever, "On and on!"

Second Thief:

Truly, women are wonderful. A man commits a little thing and dies therefore; a woman all things and lives not till then. They are the tablets on which we write, "We have been."

Sarah:

There is something leaden in the air. Nothing moves save what we cannot see; and the feet of all things are heavy on the earth; and the eyes of all things are wide and startled; and every tongue is in its cheek. Yet there's one string that, cut, would loose the world like a bag of feathers.

First Thief:

You make me cold. My heart fails me. What was that?

(All are quiet listening. Then whispers.)

First Thief:

The dawn's coming, and we have lived at least a part of another day—come!

(Two heads disappear.)

Second Thief:

Theocleia, could you love me for an hour?

Theocleia:

We do not love in our trade—it is forbidden—after the first.

Second Thief:

Yet there's something healthy about a man who has the malady of sin upon him. It tastes well beneath the tongue and sits easily upon the hips. Come, lift me up for an hour, as one heaves up a kitten.

(The last two heads disappear. There is no sound save that of the faint rustling of leaves, the wind in the grass and the movement of animals. Presently the light begins to dawn faintly in the East. Now there are three crosses instead of two. The lights of the city have gone out. The momentary darkness must represent the passage of several hours—those between dusk and dawn. From the woods on one side and the bushes on the other *Sarah* and *Theocleia* appear, crawling on hands and knees, until they reach that spot in which they were originally.)

Sarah:

Theocleia!

Theocleia:

Sarah!

Sarah:

Come!

Theocleia:

What have you?

Sarah (thrusting her hand into her bodice, bringing out dice):

Dice—let us toss for it.

Theocleia:

How much did he give you?

Sarah:

Seven silver pieces—and you?

Theocleia:

I never bring as much—only six.

Sarah:

Perhaps six is what he died for. Are they dead?
(They turn their faces toward the crosses.)

Sarah:

Look! There hangs a third. What a little flaming thing! Who is he? What has he done?

Theocleia:

It cannot have been much—he was not among us last eve.

Sarah:

And who is that still more shadowy than the dead,
that walks against the sky?

Theocleia:

That is the guard. (She sits up, sniffing the air.)
What has gone out of the air? It is not of the same
consistency.

Sarah:

It is simple, the air has cleared off.
(They begin to toss.)

Theocleia:

Seven!

Sarah:

Nine. And mind, you, I get the loin cloth of your
little rascal if I throw double fives. It will make
a pretty hanging, and there's that on it they say
a man draws when he dies a violent death. And
later we can say: "Thus our children would have
looked."

Theocleia:

Four!

Sarah:

Nine!

Theocleia:

Three!

Sarah:

Double fives—
(Curtain.)

THE KITCHEN ABSURD

PERSONS:

*Three Candle-Dippers**An Old Woman**An Old Jew**Three Young Women**A Junk Man*

The interior of a barn. The walls are a dull red. The floor is dark gray and level. A narrow, open entrance is in the center of the left and right walls. Standing against the rear wall is a long, high, narrow black vat filled with melted tallow. The rest of the barn is gauntly spectral in its bareness. The curtain-rise shows three men—candle-dippers—standing in front of the vat and dipping into it, rows of candles in the making. The candles cling to strings which are tightly fastened to the opposite ends of black wooden frame-works. White, orange and black are the colors of the candles. The candle-dippers are youths, dressed in plain, gray smocks, loose, gray trousers tucked into high, stiff black boots, and large, round, black caps. As the candle-dippers work, they sing loudly.

Song of the Candle-Dippers:

Young flames within us, will drop
With the falling flame-cherries above you,
O white, black and orange candles

Lifted from one white dream.
Then we will blow them out
And pick up your colored ends,
Turning them with reverie-steeped fingers:
Turning them with reverie-steeped fingers.

Almost immediately after the end of the song a little, old, blind woman in a widely-ruffled white dress and with two white rosebuds in her loose gray hair, walks slowly into the barn, through the left entrance. She carries a large, black kettle and places it on the middle of the floor. Then she turns and faces the candle-dippers.

Old Woman (in a soft, musical voice) :

You are liars, but a lie, rouged with imagination,
is more true than truth itself.

First Candle-Dipper:

Ah, jaunty kettle-carrier. Your epigrams have a
solemn naivete.

Second Candle-Dipper (quietly) :

If we say this lie many times, it will fade into a
wish to make it true. And so all truths are born.

Third Candle-Dipper:

After all, what is so impossible about it? . . .
We sang a bit, of a still ending just beyond the middle

of the road, and of reveries like the sky, whisked over our faces.

Old Woman (with sharp amusement) :

You sing tunes that are whispers fading out into wind-clear music. . . . The souls of men sing a little at the beginning and the end. And then, they go out with a bit of remembered love, like a patient old minstrel for companion. . . . You do not care to understand this and are somewhat irritated because I interrupt. . . . Little, clearly-gay candle-dippers, I love you.

(She curtesies to them with mock stateliness and walks slowly out, through the left entrance. The candle-dippers resume their work, repeating their song over and over again, with barely audible voices. The old woman makes three trips in and out of the barn, bringing two more kettles like the first, and a very large, gaudily colored vase. After she has placed them in a row an old man, with the face of a Jew, comes into the barn through the right entrance. He is dressed in rough black clothes and carries a narrow black flagon and a bulging silk bag. He gravely places them on the floor, near the row of other objects, and slowly strokes his long gray beard, looking at the candle-dippers and the old woman. The old woman speaks.)

Old Woman:

Who are you, whose beard seems a young child to your fingers?

Old Jew:

I carry vinegar and sugar and a weariness made pale and gentle by centuries. . . . You are having a party and will need me.

Old Woman:

Your beard is a little far-off cloud, and you have a habit of coming whether we need you or not.

Old Jew:

My beard is quite worthy of your jesting. But a word as to what I carry. The vinegar I have sometimes turns to sugar, the sugar to vinegar, and, sometimes, each pretends to be the other. . . . I know a shop, made of the queer hearts of men. When I stop there in my cart, whose paint has vanished, I often complain. But they seem to have no better kinds of vinegar and sugar to give me. And other light-trembling shops sprinkled along my way—just a few of them—do not open to my rapping.

Old Woman:

You knock too loudly—you should sit beside them and wait for their doors to open.

Old Man (shrugging his shoulders) :

I might sit beside one of them forever. Other people need me.

(The candle-dippers finish their task a little after

the beginning of the talk between the two old people, gather up their candles, and walk about the barn, placing the candles in little niches in the walls and lighting them. The old Jew and the old woman watch them, with faint smiles.)

Old Jew (suddenly looking intently at the woman):

You are blind, ruffled old woman melting into death, yet you seem to see me.

Old Woman:

Remembrance is always softly blind. I met you once, when I was young. Your voice has lain, like faded silk, at the bottom of an old trunk I had almost forgotten. Bearded old symbol of the hearts of men, you are a phantom lover whose kisses cling to me like chains of wine-drops.

Old Jew:

When your people come, speak my name thrice. People sometimes become aware of me and I make them a little less sad.

(The candle-dippers finish their task and stand against the walls of the barn, beside the lighted candles. Three women enter through the left entrance. Two of them are of medium height and wear long bright blue and yellow shawls over their plain gray dresses, but the third is tall and reed-bodied, and dressed in soft plain white, with bare head. The three women carry long, bulging white bags upon their backs, and the third has a long white stick. The first two women

walk to the kettles and stand behind them. The old woman helps them empty the contents of their bags into the kettles. The other woman seats herself beside the colored vase and pours the contents of her bag into it. Then she lifts different kinds of fruit from the vase and joins them into circles, triangles, oblongs and other patterns. The old Jew looks on, smiling, and the candle-makers once more start their song, repeating it over and over again, with soft voices. It becomes the faint background for the rest of the scene.)

The Old Woman (indicating the kettles) :

The prunes await you, old man, with a shiver of sadness.

Old Jew (picking up his bag and flagon, and addressing the women) :

I am the sugar and vinegar carrier—the roses and sourness of your lives. The little happenings of your days to come—a scented swirl of prune-juice—await my trick-playing vinegar and sugar. We might all overturn the kettles and waltz down the road, but when we stopped another absurd kitchen would give us its gilded giggles and black kettles.

(He fills the kettles of the first woman with a bit of sugar and vinegar, and speaks again.)

Old Jew:

Ripening ladies, trembling before your kettles, after I go little dawns and afternoons will spread over your

hearts, drenching them with hopes and fears. You will only feel them long after they have gone, and sometimes not at all.

(He addresses the first woman.)

Old Jew:

Stir them well. . . . Sometimes they come together, and die, and out of their death rises a vague happiness. . . . A last wisp of smoke swinging over burnt leaves.

First Woman:

My love waits for me, in rags and unafraid. We shall let you carry the wine at our bridal-feast.

Old Jew:

You need more sugar for wine at your bridal-feast. But it does not matter—you will imagine you have wine, anyway.

(He steps to the next woman and seasons her kettle.)

Old Jew:

Fashion a strong love, that will laugh at what I give you.

Second Woman:

My life is cold and clear, like the beginning of a mountain evening. I guard my loves well.

Old Jew:

You will pass through life, repeating that, and become almost happy. But even as you talk the prune juice will delicately enamel your lips.

(He passes to the third woman, who is sitting beside her colored vase and making fruit-patterns. She speaks to him.)

Third Woman:

I walk on without hope or fear, and I have spoken to my soul. I do not need you.

(The old Jew turns from her and once more seasons the other two kettles, as the women behind them stir their contents with the long white stick, passing it back and forth.)

Old Jew:

I come silently, the second time, like a spirit-lover who cannot make himself heard and walks with straining lips. The happenings of your lives are melting

to their last flavor now. You will barely feel me and kneel to a feathery wonder.

(The candle-dippers stop their song and the two women their stirring. The old woman draws a long black cup from her ruffled blouse and gives it to the women. They dip it, one by one, into their kettles, and slowly taste its contents. Then the second woman walks to the candle-dippers, giving each a cup of the liquid. When this is over the candle-dippers blow out the colored candles and gather them up, resuming the faint repetition of their song. The two women pick up their kettles, and the bottom of one of the kettles falls to the floor. The woman, whose kettle it fell from, stands surveying it.)

Second Woman:

What has become of my perfumed prune-juice? It should have rushed out when my kettle lost its bottom.
. . . This top of my life is curious.

First Woman (turning, with her kettle poised on her shoulder):

Each soft prune you dropped in became nothing. Yet you drank your imagined liquid with a heart bending beneath little songs.

Second Woman:

One prune was my love for a boy, whose smile
tiptoed over my face. Why couldn't he stay?

First Woman:

My prunes that were loves weigh me down with
dead bodies. You who trip lightly on, with the bot-
tomless jest of your kettle to console you, are more
fortunate than I.

(The second woman shruggs her shoulders, picks
up the bottom of her kettle and walks out, through the
left entrance, with the other woman and the faintly-
singing candle-dippers. The old woman quietly dis-
appeared after handing the black cup to the first
woman, and the old Jew and the third woman are now
left alone in the barn.)

Old Jew:

I give them little, and they wring from it even
smaller happiness. They never learn to take one
broad joy from what I give.

Third Woman (looking up from her colored vase) :

They could not hold it.

Old Jew:

How curiously different, and yet alike, are their joys. I am often deceived by a new tint, covering some joy I have often seasoned.

Third Woman:

Only their pain spreads out to sharp mysteries.

(She continues to finger her fruit. The old Jew stands, looking down on her, a moment, then slowly leaves the barn through the right entrance. A moment after he has left the old woman appears in the left entrance with a tall middle-aged man dressed in close-fitting, soiled, dark red leather and wearing a great slanting brown cap. They step two paces into the barn.)

Old Woman:

Take the kettles and candles, roving junk-man, and throw them into the dust-veiled confusion of your heap. . . . There are always people entering your hidden dream-shop. . . . One wants an old dream, without paint, though he knows what it is; one prefers gold-leaf over what you have; one buys an old dream and goes off to paint it himself; one only asks to look silently at the heap of dreams; one takes your old dreams to laugh at, in a quiet corner; one fills an old dream with new ones and makes them softer. . . . Their ways cannot be counted.

Junk-Man (looking about him) :

The kettles and candles are not here, mist-mother.
(He suddenly laughs uproariously.) Those poets, the
candle-dippers, swindled you. . . Ha, ha, ha, he-e-e.

(The curtain falls as he still laughs on.)

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A Lyric Number
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