

All Grace
a play in three acts

by
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All Grace

CHARACTERS

JACQUES LIPCHITZ, the sculptor, 50's

FATHER M.-A. (PIERRE) COUTURIER, a Dominican priest, 50's

The VIRGIN MARY, 13

OUR LADY, 40's

FATHER JEAN DEVEMY, a Dominican priest, 50's

GABRIEL, the angel

BERTHE LIPCHITZ, Lipchitz' first wife, 40's

YULLA LIPCHITZ, Lipchitz' second wife, 30's

ABRAHAM LIPCHITZ, Lipchitz' father, 50's

A BISHOP, 50's

SETTING

We begin in New York City, 1946. As the play continues, the past and present intermingle, taking us across different time periods and locations. For the characters, the past is a membrane through which they see the world.

CASTING NOTES

All Grace has been performed with an all-woman cast of 7, which I found immensely satisfying, (a single actress playing Berthe, Abraham, the Bishop, and Gabriel). Personally, I would recommend that casting, though the play can be performed with 8 actors (4M, 4F); the actor playing Abraham would double as Gabriel and the Bishop.

PRODUCTION NOTES

This play takes place in the imagination and could be performed with simply a table and two chairs, or better yet, a bench and a table. The scenes should move and change like air through the room.

PRELUDE

In darkness, a girl's voice singing in Hebrew sweetly flows into the theatre. As the singing goes on, a woman's voice speaks in English.

GIRL

(Sung)

Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'arets.

WOMAN

(Spoken)

In the beginning God created heaven and earth.

GIRL

Veha'arets hayetah tohu vavohu vechoshech al-peney tehom veruach Elohim merachefet al-peney hamayim.

WOMAN

The earth was without form and empty, with darkness on the face of the depths, but God's spirit moved on the water's surface.

GIRL

Vayomer Elohim yehi-or vayehi-or.

WOMAN

God said, 'There shall be light,' and light came into existence.

The lights reveal Father Marie-Alain (Pierre) Couturier, a priest of the Dominican Order, 50's, and the sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, 50's. Father Couturier wears a long, black robe and glasses. Lipchitz wears jeans and a button-down shirt, both perhaps spattered with dry clay. He wears a black beret.

They are frozen in time.

A young girl, 13, enters. She is dressed very plainly. She is Mary. A woman, 40's, enters. She is Our Lady, Mary at age 40. They walk around the two men.

MARY

Vayar Elohim et-ha'or ki-tov vayavdel Elohim beyn ha'or uveyn hachoshech.

OUR LADY

God saw that the light was good, and God divided between the light and the darkness.

The scene awakens.

Couturier and Lipchitz shake hands. Mary puts her hands on theirs. Our Lady stands behind Mary, also putting her hands on top.

Lipchitz and Couturier are held in a state of sustained energy, stillness.

MARY

Vayikra Elohim la-or yom velachoshech kara laylah vayehi-erev vayehi-voker yom echad.

OUR LADY

God named the light 'Day,' and the darkness He named 'Night.' It was evening and it was morning. One day.

Mary and Our Lady's hands lift as they step back from the men, the scene becomes:

1.1

A Street Cafe

New York City, 1946.

LIPCHITZ

Father Couturier.

COUTURIER

Monsieur Lipchitz.

LIPCHITZ

Sorry I'm late.

COUTURIER

Not at all.

*Couturier motions for Lipchitz to sit. Lipchitz sits,
Couturier pours wine for them.*

LIPCHITZ

I stayed on the Subway three stops too many. I was lost.

COUTURIER

Haven't found your way around yet?

LIPCHITZ

Oh, I know my way around very well. I mean lost in thought. Sitting on the subway, I find it's my best time to think. Inspiration comes so easily. I don't know if it's a fact of being hypnotized by the click, click, click and rumble. Or whether it's being grouped together with so many people, huddled, and the common energy is passing freely through us all-- me, her, you, me-- all contained in this box, accumulating and accumulating.

(Beat)

Or if it's simply that the rocking, back and forth, rocks me to sleep and I dream.

COUTURIER

I hate the subway. I feel too trapped. And being a priest... Let's just say everyone has an opinion about God. Good or bad. The fierce arguments. The unprovoked confessions. It's too much.

LIPCHITZ

Why not wear plain clothes? Disappear into the fabric?

COUTURIER

I've thought about it. Believe me. But I like the robe. It suits me.

(Beat)

I saw your work in Paris before I left.

LIPCHITZ

Did you.

COUTURIER

Several shows.

LIPCHITZ

I never saw you there. I would have noticed you.

COUTURIER

(Looks at his robe)

Of course. A child called me “Dracula” on the street the other day.

Couturier refills the glasses.

COUTURIER (cont’d)

I found your sculpture to be on the level of Picasso.

LIPCHITZ

Don’t let Pablo hear you say that. He’ll kill me the next time I see him.

COUTURIER

Your work is pure inspiration. Your sculpture is not a single thing. It’s always two, three things, working against and with each other. A struggle and a mingling in three dimensions.

LIPCHITZ

You see that.

COUTURIER

It’d be hard to walk around your work and not see that. Not feel that.

LIPCHITZ

I don’t know whether you’re serious or trying to flatter me.

COUTURIER

I always speak the truth, no matter the consequences. My mouth has gotten me into a fair share of trouble, but I prefer that to the alternative.

LIPCHITZ

Which is?

COUTURIER

Remaining silent.

(Beat)

Do you have any showings planned here in the city?

LIPCHITZ

It’s been slow. The work still wants out, but there’s no way to share it. I look for opportunities, but they’ve all seem to have dried up. This gallery owner has no more money, that agent has no more connections, and what am I left with? Rent. Bills. I could save money by giving up my studio. But then what would be the point? So. Struggle. Work. Then, leave it to fate to do the rest.

COUTURIER

What if I told you that I want to commission you to create a new work for me.

LIPCHITZ

Your representative in Paris already mentioned a commission.

COUTURIER

Did he? Did he mention the particulars?

LIPCHITZ

You want me to create a statue of the Virgin Mary for you.

COUTURIER

Yes.

Beat.

LIPCHITZ

And you're serious?

COUTURIER

Absolutely serious.

LIPCHITZ

Couldn't you find someone more suited to the task?

COUTURIER

What do you mean?

LIPCHITZ

I'm Jewish.

Beat.

COUTURIER

(With a smile)

If it doesn't bother you, it doesn't bother us.

LIPCHITZ

(A smile)

But it *does* bother me.

(A little laugh)

Do you know how difficult it was call myself a sculptor when my faith forbids the creation of "graven images?" And now, you'd like me to create a sculpture of the mother of your faith. They'd all think I'd converted.

COUTURIER

No one is asking you to convert.

LIPCHITZ

But they'd *think*.

COUTURIER

Then we can make some sort of statement.

LIPCHITZ

Isn't the sculpture a statement on its own?

COUTURIER

But this runs deeper than religions or creeds. Last week, I was speaking to Matisse, we sat outside, drinking coffee. And I asked him, What is different between creating a work of your own and when you create a work that is “religious?” And he told me, “Nothing. All my work is religious. It comes from the same spirit. The same emotional connection to something higher, call it God or what you will.” And all I am asking you, Monsieur Lipchitz, is to create a work filled with the common spirit between us as men.

LIPCHITZ

I’m sorry. I can’t. Thank you for--

He stands.

COUTURIER

No no no, please. Sit. Let me buy you lunch. You didn’t come all this way simply to refuse. Please.

Lipchitz sits.

COUTURIER (cont’d)

They have great sandwiches here. And soup. It’s too hot for soup, but the body craves what the body craves.

LIPCHITZ

True.

COUTURIER

My mother made the best chicken and potato soup when I was a boy. The second best soup? My friend, Father Jean Devémy.

Father Devémy appears.

COUTURIER (cont’d)

I haven’t seen him since I’ve been in the United States since... My God, five years. No. Yes. 1941. I came here for what was supposed to be a month tour, but my stay was... “Extended.” My goal since then has been to turn this exile into a blessing. It took me years to become accustomed to this city, finding my way through it, discovering new pathways. It’s become a kind of new home.

LIPCHITZ

I agree.

COUTURIER

To New York.

LIPCHITZ

To New York.

They lift their glasses and drink.

COUTURIER

But New York is nothing like Paris.

LIPCHITZ

Paris is nothing like Paris anymore.

COUTURIER

Mm.

(Beat)

To Paris.

They raise their glasses and drink. Couturier refills the glasses.

COUTURIER (cont'd)

I left when the war was just a viciousness in the air. It hadn't completely manifested itself, and I was intent on doing what I could to bring a sliver of peace. I put in for a military chaplainship. I wanted to be on the frontlines, with the men, defending our country. But, the Pope...

(He drinks)

The Pope wouldn't give me a chaplainship.

LIPCHITZ

Why not?

COUTURIER

Was it personal? May have been. Was it tactical or practical? Just as likely. Personally? I think it was part of a continuing vendetta against me by the Pope.

(Beat)

I ran to the Alps to spend time healing with Jean. In the stolen moments one morning, I trudged through the fresh snow, further and further up the mountain, found a rock, and sat. For hours, I was there, letting the chill enter my bones.

Lipchitz disappears, Devémy takes his place, sitting with Couturier.

The scene becomes:

1.2

The Alps, 1941

Couturier has crafted a letter, which Devémy scoops up and reads.

DEVÉMY

You can't send this!

COUTURIER

Can't I?

DEVÉMY

You send this, you destroy everything you've worked for.

COUTURIER

It would be more than worth it.

DEVÉMY

You can't--

COUTURIER

I have to!

DEVÉMY

I'm not letting you lose your robe.

COUTURIER

He's trying to silence me! It's a deliberate slight against me.

DEVÉMY

The Pope doesn't hold grudges.

Couturier gives Devémy a knowing look.

DEVÉMY (cont'd)

Get this out of your mind. What do you profit from sending this letter? What do you profit from worrying? Look.

(Beat)

The mountains surround us like God's fingers.

(Beat)

Listen.

Silence, they listen.

COUTURIER

What are we listening for?

DEVÉMY

Shh. Listen.

COUTURIER

I don't hear anything.

DEVÉMY

Of course you don't hear anything, we're in the middle of the Alps! Quiet, perfect for inward contemplation. It'll be good for you. And for me. You could fill me in on all the news from Paris.

COUTURIER

The good news or bad?

DEVÉMY

Any news! It's like living in a vacuum here, cut off from everything.

COUTURIER

But the work.

DEVÉMY

Yes, the work.

COUTURIER

The work makes the exile bearable.

DEVÉMY

This isn't exile. This is retreat. This is mission. I know it's not the glamorous side of the priesthood. Art shows and magazine articles.

COUTURIER

You like my articles.

DEVÉMY

Yes, I enjoy your bite-sized, artistic manifestos. Very much. You're an artist. A damn good one.

COUTURIER

Don't flatter--

DEVÉMY

A damn good one. But me? I'm a healer. I don't pretend to know art. What is impressionist or expressionist or whatever other "ist" there might be out there. That's why I invited you here.

COUTURIER

Not because you wanted to see an old friend.

DEVÉMY

Well, of course, that was part of the reason.

COUTURIER

I sniffed an ulterior motive in your letter.

DEVÉMY

Let me show you. Rome has finally given me the funds to build a church here for the patients. A place for them to worship, where they can find some peace.

Devémy unrolls some blueprints.

Who's the architect?
COUTURIER

Maurice Novarina.
DEVÉMY

He was the best you could find?
COUTURIER

Maurice is very gifted.
DEVÉMY

But not terribly inventive.
COUTURIER

(Beat)
It's certainly... Functional. The long, arched roof is quite nice.

DEVÉMY
It's a strong design, mirrors the mountains. And it's practical, able to withstand the meters and meters of snow that accumulate at this height. I've made sure this church would be perfectly at home here in the mountains, a part of the mountains themselves. This church will have stone from a local quarry, wood from local timber. This church is made to sit in this exact spot.

Couturier looks at the plans and points.

Actually, it'll sit over there.
COUTURIER

Well, of course, but you get my meaning.
DEVÉMY

What is the church going to be called?
COUTURIER

Our Lady of All Grace.
DEVÉMY

I hesitate to ask... What do you have planned for the artwork?
COUTURIER

Well.
DEVÉMY

You have a program.
COUTURIER

No.
DEVÉMY

No program?
COUTURIER