

AFTER HAPPILY

By Dennis Bush

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SYNOPSIS: Inspired by fairy tales, *After Happily* weaves together the stories of seven characters as they passionately pursue what they believe will bring them perfect happiness. A sleeping beauty can be the tragic end to an idyllic relationship between a young couple in love. A prince can be charming and also a stalker. Through her emotional baggage and jaded life experience, a woman can keep herself from being open to the love of a man who is the perfect prince for her. A young woman can find herself clinging to the fairy tales of her childhood, unable to create happiness in her life as an adult. A guy creates a fairy tale of lies to his girlfriend to keep his *Star Wars* collection and other distractions a secret. A dancer whose career is ended in a horrific way finds solace in Hans Christian Andersen’s tale of cursed red shoes. A young man whose father was abusive struggles to keep his own demons at bay while pursuing a heroic quest to help everyone else. From laugh-out-loud funny to heartbreakingly tragic, *After Happily*’s characters will take audiences on a powerful journey and provide actors with rich, textured, challenging roles to play.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 female, 3 male, 1 either.)

- TALIA (f).....College student; clings to the fairy tales of her childhood; unable to create happiness in her adult life. *(20 lines)*
- PHOEBE (f).....Businesswoman; weighed down by the baggage of unsuccessful relationships and a jaded outlook; lets her prince get away. *(22 lines)*
- KASON (m)Single-minded in his search for his princess, after she leaves her shoes behind at a party; obsessive; delusional, but should appear attractive and charming. *(27 lines)*

- WEST (m).....A prince of a guy; “romantic times ten” after initially appearing to be a real ladies’ man; must deal with a heartbreaking tragedy. (26 lines)
- RANGER (m)A guy’s guy; constantly finding ways to keep his girlfriend in the dark about his expensive hobbies and activities; not malicious, just a different perspective about what makes a happy relationship. (21 lines)
- FARRELL (m/f)Early 20’s; trying desperately to put his abusive childhood in the past; wants to be a hero for everyone else as a way to distract himself from his own fears; gender flexible; can be female with some gender-specific dialogue adjustments. (30 lines)
- BRIDGET (f)20’s; was a ballerina before suffering a horrific situation; angry, volatile, while still steeped in the beauty and perfection of the ballet world. (20 lines)

PRODUCTION NOTES

After Happily can be presented with a very simple set. Directors are encouraged to be creative with casting and staging, and to avoid literal use of inferred props or to group actors together so it appears that conversations are happening in places where a character is speaking directly to the audience.

A book of fairy tales with an ornate, old-fashioned cover is the only special prop.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Reading/Workshop: Pearl Studios, New York City, December 2012

Premiere Production: Phoenix, AZ, January 2013

After Happily had a reading at Pearl Studios in New York City in December 2012. The play had its premiere production in Phoenix, Arizona, in January 2013. The original cast included Meggy Lykins, Isaac Gamus, Tony Potts, Robin Hartwell, Bishop Shepard, Hailey Araza, and A.J. Katek. The production was directed by the playwright.

The playwright offers special thanks to Melissa Teitel, Joe Pascale, and Kelsey Torstveit for their kind assistance and inspiration, during the creation of After Happily.

SETTING:

Here and there. Now and then. Once upon a time.

AT RISE:

Lights up on TALIA, as SHE sits down, opening a large book with a beautifully illustrated cover with the title, My Favorite Fairy Tales, ornately lettered.

TALIA: Once upon a time...

The OTHER ACTORS are scattered around the playing space. THEY interject their dialogue in a continuous flow, as if the lines are connected.

PHOEBE: Once...

KASON: One glance...

WEST: One touch...

FARRELL: One adventure leads to another.

RANGER: ...In a galaxy beyond our own...

KASON: ...Across the dance floor.

WEST: My hand brushed against hers.

PHOEBE: Just once...

KASON: The *whole room* was a dance floor. A giant dance floor.

WEST: I was walking *out* and she was walking *in*, and our hands brushed against each other. (*Clarifying.*) My *right* hand and her *left* hand.

BRIDGET: There was a spell involved.

RANGER: ...Where the aliens are more like us than we are like ourselves...

KASON: I wasn't dancing.

BRIDGET: An incantation of some sort.

FARRELL: ... And another one after that.

WEST: A wedding ring goes on your left hand.

PHOEBE: Is that too much to ask?

WEST: I turned around and grabbed her left hand – the one that brushed against my right hand – and I *held* it. Not forcefully. Just *definitely*. Like it wasn't an accidental grab. It was a definite choice to take her hand and hold it.

TALIA: ...when the moon was as bright as the sun.

RANGER: ...and the planets in the distant galaxy zoom around in their orbit like...drivers at a NASCAR race. Around and around and around. In a giant left-turn loop. An oval of universal proportions.

BRIDGET: And somebody needs to shut it down. Spells and incantations should be banned.

KASON: I wasn't dancing and neither was she. But everybody between us was. And that was a lot of people. Hundreds. Maybe a thousand. A lot of people, between where *I* wasn't dancing and where *she* wasn't dancing.

PHOEBE: I'd like a guy to treat me like an equal – like *his* equal. Just once.

FARRELL: You have to be ready for every adventure.

RANGER: And the spaceships that fly around the planets make the same sound that the race cars make as they go zooming around the track. (*Completely new concept.*) Or maybe they don't make any sound at all. (*Ominously.*) No sound.

PHOEBE: Because, as it is, the only two options are princess or property. A guy will treat you like you're super special and mostly fragile and a little stupid or like an indentured servant who gets ordered around and then ignored.

TALIA: And the princess put on her prettiest dress for the ball and her maid squealed with delight and said she was the most beautiful princess ever.

KASON: And our eyes met. Through all of the hundreds of thousands of millions of people at the dance, our eyes met. And it was like the world stopped. Everything stopped, except my eyelids, because I was still able to blink.

WEST: And I kissed her hand. Because that's how I roll.

BRIDGET: A chainsaw and a smile. That's how I roll.

FARRELL: Especially when you're not sure if it's an adventure or something else.

TALIA: And the princess twirled around and around, in her dress made of moonbeams spun into silk. And she laughed. And the nightingales sang. A sweet song of pure joy.

RANGER: Or maybe it's like the sound of a light saber. A giant light saber.

RANGER makes the sound of a light saber. HE continues to softly make the humming sound of the light saber through the next several lines.

WEST: She didn't pull her hand away.

KASON: So, while the world except my eyelids was stopped, I walked toward her. Which means my legs weren't stopped either.

WEST: So I kissed her hand again.

KASON: Walking requires legs that aren't stopped.

WEST: And I said, "At your service."

KASON: Our eyes met, again. Except this time we were closer. I was close enough to reach out and touch her – if I was less of a gentleman.

BRIDGET: Which makes me an incantation's worst nightmare.

RANGER stops making the light saber humming sound.

Most incantations and spells are just mind manipulation. Mumbo-jumbo that doesn't make much sense, but it gets inside your head and makes you start looking for signs that the spell is working. You start *expecting* the spell to work.

RANGER: My girlfriend says that NASCAR is a kind of mass hypnosis. Thousands of people all following cars around and around a circle – an *oval* – for hours. She says it makes everybody who's watching – even on TV – susceptible to the advertising on the cars. It makes us want their products. She thinks they play subliminal messages over the loudspeakers and she believes that if you listen to one of the drivers' audio channels during the race, you're subjecting yourself to mind control.

PHOEBE: There's so much effort to get your attention and win you over, in the beginning. You're the princess and they're the knight in shining armor or the awkward son of a neighboring nobleman or the UPS guy who delivers to your office or the lowly stable boy with a crush on the princess. And they're in pursuit. And they do whatever it takes to win your heart. And, then, when they finally get you to fall for them, they're like, "Game over," and they're "bored with the relationship" and they get restless and, before long, they're in pursuit, again. For somebody else. And you're left behind like horse droppings on the trail.

TALIA: And a carriage, pulled by four white horses, appeared in front of the palace. A footman, with a row of shiny medals and a royal coat of arms on his uniform, opened the door and offered his hand to the princess.

FARRELL: So I've got to be ready. For the something else or the adventure.

BRIDGET: It doesn't make any more sense than a nursery rhyme. "Stuck in his thumb and pulled out a plum?" I've never stuck my thumb in anywhere and pulled out a plum. Not once. (*Citing another example.*) "All the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again." Since when are horses helpful in emergency medical care situations? Do we call 9-1-1 and ask for a doctor and a pony? "The dish ran away with the spoon?!" That's like interspecies fraternization. Like an elephant eloping with a dog. It wouldn't happen. No dish is going to run away with a spoon.

FARRELL: Especially when the adventure you're expecting isn't the adventure you find... When there are broken dishes all over the kitchen floor. And somebody's crying. And it might be your mom. If you'd let yourself look up from the floor. But you can't. Because the mess on the floor is something you can clean up. You can fix that. Or at least make it look like it never happened.

RANGER: My girlfriend doesn't know that I still play with light sabers. Or that I have about eight thousand dollars worth of *Star Wars* action figures stored in boxes at my parents' house. I keep that on the DL – the *Down-low* – or I'd lose credibility with her.

FARRELL: So that's what you do. You make it look like it never happened. And you never let it happen again.

TALIA: And, as the princess got into the coach, she couldn't remember a single thing that made her sad. All her troubles vanished. Poof, like magic.

KASON: (*Simultaneously with WEST.*) And I smiled. I was about to say something really deep and meaningful – because that's what you do in a situation like that. But she took her finger and put it over my lips... (*Demonstrating.*) Like this. I got chills. I'm man enough to admit that. Men get chills and I'm definitely man enough to admit that I got chills. Someone putting their finger on your lips is an intimate gesture. It's more intimate than a kiss. Because it's not something that happens all the time. Getting a woman to kiss you doesn't take much effort. Not really. You just have to make her think you really want to kiss *her*... That you're *just about* to kiss her... But you're such a gentleman – such a *prince* – that you're restraining yourself out of a deep sense of respect for her. And, if it wasn't for that, you'd make out with her, right then, right there, and not give a damn what anybody else thinks. Because that's how you roll. It's who you are. It's who *I am*. And, even if I tell you all the secrets... all the *methods* to my *magic*, it still wouldn't help you, because there's only one me. As far as the ladies are concerned, I'm Prince freakin' Charming. That's right. You heard me. And I'm saying I got chills, because this special lady had her finger on my lips... I mumbled an introduction. It was the best I could do with her finger on my lips. And she said her name was Ella... (*Pause.*) Ella... Like Ella Fitzgerald, I guess.

WEST: (*Simultaneously with KASON.*) And I smiled. I was about to say something really deep and meaningful – because that's what you do in a situation like that. But she took her finger and put it over my lips... (*Demonstrating.*) Like this. I got chills. I'm man enough to admit that. Men get chills and I'm definitely man enough to admit that I got chills. Someone putting their finger on your lips is an intimate gesture. It's more intimate than a kiss. Because it's not something that happens all the time. Getting a woman to kiss you doesn't take much effort. Not really. You just have to make her think you really want to kiss *her*... That you're *just about* to kiss her... But you're such a gentleman – such a *prince* – that you're restraining yourself out of a deep sense of respect for her. And, if it wasn't for that, you'd make out with her, right then, right there, and not give a damn what anybody else thinks. Because that's how you roll. It's who you are. It's who *I am*. And, even if I tell you all the secrets... all the *methods* to my *magic*, it still wouldn't help you, because there's only one me. As far as the ladies are concerned, I'm Prince freakin' Charming. That's right. You heard me. And I'm saying I got chills, because this special lady had her finger on my lips... I mumbled an introduction. It was the best I could do with her finger on my lips. And she said her name was... Aurora... (*Pause.*) Aurora... Like Aurora Borealis, I guess.

RANGER: Credibility is key. Especially where your girlfriend is involved.

KASON: And then I noticed her feet. Her bare feet. She wasn't wearing any shoes. She'd been dancing, for who knows how long, in her bare feet. I think she noticed that I was noticing her foot situation. My staring and pointing at them probably called attention to the fact that I was noticing her foot situation. Staring and pointing at something will do that. She lifted my chin, so I was looking into her eyes – though, to be honest, I was still thinking about her bare feet – and she kissed me in that way that could be either “hello” or “goodbye,” but I assumed was “hello,” since we were just meeting for the first time. But, then, she turned and walked away. Walked away in her bare feet. Across the dance floor and out onto the patio... the *veranda*... the whatever-you-call the place outside the ballroom. She was *outside* in her bare feet. She was walking around, barefoot, *outside*. She was beautiful – and I mean breathtakingly beautiful – the kind of beauty that, literally, makes you gasp and leaves you unable to speak. And all I could think about was... foot fungus. And her willingness to subject herself to it.

BRIDGET: Considering that only a very small portion of the population has ever seen a ballet and even fewer people understand what it takes to be a ballerina, it's peculiar that little girls in dancing schools around the world would want to strap their feet into toe shoes and subject themselves to the torture that comes with dancing en pointe. But they do. And I did. And I still would, if it wasn't for the injury situation. A dancer with an injury is a situation. The other dancers avoid you, as if the injury is contagious. As if you're contagious. And they talk about you like you're dead. Your career becomes past tense. Everything about you becomes past tense. The injury is bad enough, but what all the rest of it does to your head is unfathomable.

PHOEBE: Sometimes, I just want to sit and cry. Just full-out sob. For no reason. I'm not sad. Really. But it feels like tears are about to start. Like I can't control them. But the tears don't come. It feels like there's a blockage.

RANGER: Or, at least, she has to *think* that credibility is key. She has to believe that you wouldn't do anything she wouldn't want you to do. She has to trust that you wouldn't hide anything from her, so that when you do things she wouldn't want you to do and you hide things from her, it's completely off her radar of possibilities.

TALIA: The book of fairy tales is the one thing I've saved from my childhood. It's the *link* to my childhood. It's magical that way. I hold it in my hands, and it transports me back to when I was a happy little girl and my mom would read the stories to me before bed. Every night. And sometimes on rainy Saturday afternoons, too. Everything was perfect – not just in the fairy tales, but in my life. I believed that I was always going to be as happy as I was then. Happily ever after.

FARRELL: About a month after he got married, a buddy of mine walked out on his wife. He didn't tell her he was gonna do it. He just stayed home from work one day, packed up everything that was his – and some stuff that was hers – and drove off. He didn't even have the courtesy to leave her a note. She came home from work and thought they'd been robbed. That was her first thought. Not, "Hey, it looks like my husband left me," but, "A bunch of stuff is missing. We've been robbed." My buddy's name is Rob, so in a way, she had been Rob'd. I hadn't seen her since the wedding, but she called me to help her figure out what to do. Don't make any assumptions. Don't read anything into it. She just wanted some help. Some support. And that's what she got. I didn't know any more about Rob leaving than she did, which at the time was zero. Nothing. I sent him a pretty explicit text asking what was going on. A few well-chosen letters can convey a lot of confusion, frustration, and anger.

KASON: I followed her. That's how I knew she was walking around barefoot outside. She got into a car – one of those Hummer stretch limousines. And she drove off – without her shoes. She didn't do the driving – the driver was a guy who looked like he had mob connections, like maybe he was a mobster in the witness protection program and driving the limo was his job. But she was in the car and the car drove off. I followed her. On foot for about a hundred feet but that was just silly. I must've looked like a little kid chasing after an ice cream truck. So I got in my car, and I followed her. In hot pursuit. In pursuit of hot.

WEST: She wasn't just a hot girl. Aurora was *the* hot girl. If there was a calendar of the hottest girls ever, she'd be the girl in the picture for every month. She was that hot. But – and here's the cool thing – she didn't *act* like she was a hot girl. I was standing there, holding her hand, and when I said, "At your service," she put her finger over my lips and blushed. She *blushed!* Like an ugly girl does when you give her a compliment she almost believes you mean. And, after she introduced herself, she led me over to a quiet place away from the party so we could talk. At first, I thought we were just going to make out, but I looked into her eyes and thought, "I want to know you. There'll be plenty of time to make out, but, right now, I want to get to know you."

KASON: I was driving over the speed limit. I admit that.

WEST: Passing up a chance to make out with a hot girl is not the way I usually approach these kinds of situations.

FARRELL: His response to my message was, "Whatever." Whatever is not the way to respond to a question about your behavior when your behavior in a situation is what prompted the question about it in the first place. If my buddy was standing in front of me at the moment when I received his "Whatever" message, I'd have knocked him into next week. Or, better yet, I'd have knocked him backwards in time, so he could have done the right thing and stayed with his wife.

PHOEBE: And, if I could just cry, it would be an amazing release.

FARRELL: So I called him. Right then, right there, and I said, "What are you thinking? Or not thinking. What?" And he was like---

ALL: (*except FARRELL.*) I was bored.

FARRELL: (*Indignant.*) What?

ALL: (*except FARRELL.*) I wasn't having any fun.

FARRELL: (*Incredulous.*) Fun?

ALL: (*except FARRELL.*) Yeah, fun. What you're supposed to have.

FARRELL: So, because you were bored and you weren't having any fun, you just throw some stuff in your truck and leave?

ALL: (*except FARRELL.*) I rented a U-Haul trailer.

FARRELL: You rented a trailer? Just woke up and, on the spur of the moment, rented a U-Haul trailer?

ALL: (except FARRELL.) I made a reservation two weeks in advance. You can't just go pick up a U-Haul on the spur of the moment. You have to make a reservation.

FARRELL: (More of a statement than a question.) So you knew two weeks in advance that you were going to leave.

ALL: (except FARRELL.) Pretty much.

FARRELL: And you never told me?

ALL: (except FARRELL.) I wasn't leaving you.

FARRELL: Do you know how messed up that is? How messed up you are?

ALL: (except FARRELL.) Whatever.

RANGER makes the sound of the light saber humming.

FARRELL: And he hung up.

RANGER stops making the sound of the light saber humming.

RANGER: So I get to play with my light saber all I want and my girlfriend doesn't have a clue.

WEST: We started dating pretty much right away. I was already dating three women, but I dumped them so I could be with Aurora. Exclusively. Unbelievably... perfectly.

PHOEBE: When a guy treats you like your perfect – like you're a princess on a pedestal – you're in trouble. It's flattering. It's nice to have that level of respect and admiration, but it's not a situation you can sustain for any substantial amount of time. Because there's nowhere to go but down. And there's not an elevator, or stairway, or even a ladder down. You fall. Or you get knocked off, in which case you fall even faster. So the whole time you're up on the pedestal, all you can think about is how precarious it is up there and what an odd perspective it gives you to be higher than everyone else. Above them. A feeling of condescension is inherent in the pedestal experience. And, just like when you're on top of a high building and you look at the people way down below, you have an overwhelming desire to spit on them. So, when a guy puts me on a pedestal, I want to spit on him. I suppose it's a good thing that I don't have an abundance of saliva.

BRIDGET: And no matter how together you are before the injury – no matter how well-adjusted, clear-thinking, stable and sane you are before you become an injured pariah, you are not prepared for it.

TALIA: I brought the book with me to college.

KASON: I brought a lunch. (*Explaining.*) For while I was waiting in the parking lot of her apartment building. The day after I followed the limo she was in, I went back and waited for her. I waited an hour or so, the night before, too. I figured that she'd realize she left her shoes at the party and go back for them. And I'd be there waiting, when she came out. But, after an hour and fifty-two minutes, I determined that she was in for the night. So, I drove back to the party and found a pair of unclaimed shoes that looked like they'd fit her and I put them in my car. First, I put them on the nightstand next to my bed. Then, when I woke up, I carried them out to my car with me. And I drove back to where she got out of the limo the night before. There must have been two hundred apartments in the complex, so it wasn't practical to knock on every door to find out where she lived. But there appeared to be only two ways out of the building she went into and I could see both of them from where I was parked. I figured that, as soon as she came out one of those two doors, I'd get out of my car and casually bump into her. Like, "Oops, hey, remember me? I'm your destiny." Or maybe, "Oops, hey, I remember you. You're my destiny." That approach is stronger. No question mark. Just two clear statements: "I remember you," and, "You're my destiny."

PHOEBE: Drooling is less aggressive than spitting, but it implies a mental problem. If you saw someone drooling off the top of a building or standing on a pedestal drooling onto the people below, you'd think something was wrong with him or her. I don't even like to drool in my sleep.

TALIA: Part of me wanted to leave the book with my mom. Not that she would read it or even hold it or appreciate the symbolism of what it was in the house. It was more about me wanting to leave behind some happiness. Some guarantee of happiness. Because since my dad left – and for a while before that – she hasn't been very happy. She hasn't been even a little bit happy. I think she's forgotten what happy feels like.

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