

THE PHOENIX

By Philip Vassallo

Copyright © 2007 by Philip Vassallo, All rights reserved.
ISBN: 1-60003-273-7

CAUTION: Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that this Work is subject to a royalty. This Work is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America and all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations, whether through bilateral or multilateral treaties or otherwise, and including, but not limited to, all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention and the Berne Convention.

RIGHTS RESERVED: All rights to this Work are strictly reserved, including professional and amateur stage performance rights. Also reserved are: motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound recording, all forms of mechanical or electronic reproduction, such as CD-ROM, CD-I, DVD, information and storage retrieval systems and photocopying, and the rights of translation into non-English languages.

PERFORMANCE RIGHTS AND ROYALTY PAYMENTS: All amateur and stock performance rights to this Work are controlled exclusively by Brooklyn Publishers, LLC. No amateur or stock production groups or individuals may perform this play without securing license and royalty arrangements in advance from Brooklyn Publishers, LLC. Questions concerning other rights should be addressed to Brooklyn Publishers, LLC. Royalty fees are subject to change without notice. Professional and stock fees will be set upon application in accordance with your producing circumstances. Any licensing requests and inquiries relating to amateur and stock (professional) performance rights should be addressed to Brooklyn Publishers, LLC.

Royalty of the required amount must be paid, whether the play is presented for charity or profit and whether or not admission is charged.

AUTHOR CREDIT: All groups or individuals receiving permission to produce this play must give the author(s) credit in any and all advertisement and publicity relating to the production of this play. The author's billing must appear directly below the title on a separate line where no other written matter appears. The name of the author(s) must be at least 50% as large as the title of the play. No person or entity may receive larger or more prominent credit than that which is given to the author(s).

PUBLISHER CREDIT: Whenever this play is produced, all programs, advertisements, flyers or other printed material must include the following notice:

Produced by special arrangement with Brooklyn Publishers, LLC

COPYING: Any unauthorized copying of this Work or excerpts from this Work is strictly forbidden by law. No part of this Work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, by any means now known or yet to be invented, including photocopying or scanning, without prior permission from Brooklyn Publishers, LLC.

CHARACTERS

WOMAN 51, wears eyeglasses and slightly worn casual clothes. She is slightly overweight, slightly unhealthy, slightly immobile, slightly visually impaired, slightly hard of hearing, slightly forgetful, slightly perceptive. Just slight: Hardly here and not all there.

GIRL 18 years old. She is dressed identically but more neatly than the woman, and her longer hair is tied plainly in a ponytail. She has greater command of her senses, but she is much more frightened.

SCENE

A black box, a void.

TIME

December 11, 2002.

PROPS

lighter

eyeglasses

hearing aid

one folding chair

six books

twelve VHS tapes

set of keys

assorted framed photographs
of GIRL

kerosene can filled with water

COSTUMES

Dark, drab sweatsuits for each character. Nothing that would draw attention to their physiques.

NOTES

Fear and Trembling by Soren Kierkegaard, Alastair Hannay, translator. London: Penguin, 1985.

Medea by Eurpides, Moses Hadas, translator. New York: Dial, 1936.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

The Phoenix, a joint production of Pordenone Playwrights Productions and the Italian-American Repertory Company, premiered on April 19, 2003, at Rutgers University, New Jersey, and subsequently appeared on July 29, 2003, at the Samuel French Off-Off Broadway Short Play Festival in the Chernuchin Theater, New York City, and later in the Strawberry One-Act Festival in the Producer's Club, New York City. It was produced by Deborah S. Greenhut and John Fedele, directed by Philip Vassallo, and featured the following cast:

WOMAN	Elaine J. Netis
GIRL	Jaclyn Netis

To the memory of Peter Kostares

THE PHOENIX

by
Philip Vassallo

SETTING: At center, one metal folding chair and before it a disorganized pile of picture frames, books, videocassettes, a kerosene can, and lighter on an otherwise bare, black stage.

AT RISE: *The lights slowly rise on both characters. WOMAN is sitting in the chair. They say whatever they do directly to us at times, and to each other at other times. When they move about, they never venture more than six feet in any direction.*

The audience soon understands that WOMAN can hear GIRL when GIRL talks to us but not when talking to WOMAN. GIRL always hears WOMAN.

WOMAN: *(as if looking out a train window, to us)* What a long ride home tonight. How many times has this train stopped?

GIRL: *(to WOMAN)* For you, it's been stopped for fifteen months.

WOMAN: I hope Mommy is waiting at the station to pick me up.

GIRL: Not today, Mommy. Stay home. Wait for Daddy.

WOMAN: Of course, she'll be there. Mommy's never let me down.

GIRL: You know I never thought of that. Not once. I just took it for granted that you would be there. You were always with me. Even when you weren't. You were like an appendage; an annoying one at times. One I'd have loved to rip right off me. But I never gave it a moment's thought that you wouldn't be there.

WOMAN: *(to GIRL)* I was eighteen years old.

GIRL: *(to us)* A freshman at NYU. Standing in the middle of Penn Station. It's dark and cold, and I can't find my train. The letters and numbers on the big board above are flipping nonstop. I look up at the big clock suspended from the ceiling. But the hands are spinning out of control.

WOMAN: People were everywhere.

GIRL: Some are standing there looking at the big board as if it makes perfect sense to them. Others pass me in every direction, disappearing downstairs to the train platforms or upstairs to the street. Nothing is still. Not even the floor or the walls or the ceiling. The announcer over the loudspeaker: The voice screeching, so shrill. I can't tell if it's male or female, if it's my language or some other. I ask some woman walking by, "What time is it?" But she just keeps walking. How strange. So I ask a man walking by, "Can you

help me find my train?" And he keeps walking by without noticing me. Now I'm scared. I grab the arm of the next person who walks by and I ask, "What time is it?" His arm just slips through my grasp as if I'm made of air, and he keeps walking by without missing a step. Now I'm in a panic. I grab another person, shake another. Businessmen. Janitors. Old, frail women. But each time it's the same. The big board's still flipping and the big clock's still spinning. **(raises)** Finally, I lunge at this one person from behind, shoving as hard as I can. "Can you help me find my train?"

WOMAN: But this one turned toward me. And then came a . . .

WOMAN and GIRL: **(in unison)** . . . blinding flashing of light.

GIRL: Its glow is absolutely overwhelming. The heat it generates is unbearable. I can't see what it is. But it consumes everything around me. **(in unison, they drop to their knees, shaking)** It's God.

WOMAN: It had to be. Only God could be so powerful, so outside me and inside me all at once.

GIRL: I tremble, completely out of my mind.

WOMAN: Convulsively.

GIRL: My tongue is parched, my lips quiver, my heart pounds.

WOMAN: I wanted to speak.

GIRL: But I can't.

WOMAN: But I had to.

GIRL: Somehow I do.

WOMAN: I asked.

GIRL: "Can you help me find my train?"

WOMAN: I asked God.

WOMAN and GIRL: **(in unison)** "Can you help me find my train?"

WOMAN: **(overcome with joy)** Oh my God, I really did. I spoke to God Almighty.

GIRL: **(to WOMAN, resentfully)** I did. Not you. I did.

WOMAN: And God spoke to me.

GIRL: This is my life. Not yours.

WOMAN: **(pointing)** God said, "That way."

GIRL: What are you talking about?

WOMAN: God set straight my path. God gave me the answer.

GIRL: That's not what happened at all.

WOMAN: If you ask God, He shall answer.

GIRL: You always do this to me!

WOMAN: I went on my way. In peace with God's grace.

GIRL: You weren't even there.

WOMAN: The big board stopped flipping. The big clock stopped spinning. All the people were in harmony. Penn Station grew warm and bright. I was on my way home. Thank God, without Whom no good comes.

The Phoenix - Page 6

GIRL: There was no answer from God. I finally found it. The number nine train to Courtland Street and World Trade Center. Why can't you face that?

WOMAN: The train ride to South Amboy was wonderful.

GIRL: **(incredulously)** Wonderful? Have you ever taken the train to South Amboy?

WOMAN: All the people were full of the joy of being alive.

GIRL: What planet are you from?

WOMAN: I just couldn't wait to get home to be with my mother.

GIRL: I know what you're doing. You're just denying what happened.

WOMAN: I was going home.

GIRL: If you can't listen to me, the least you can do is listen to yourself. While you're still alive.

WOMAN: I was alive.

GIRL: If there is any life left in you.

WOMAN: I had nothing to fear.

GIRL: **(tries to cross to the WOMAN but can't get past an unseen barrier)** I WAS DEAD!

WOMAN: And there was my mother at the South Amboy Station waiting to pick me up.

GIRL: MOMMY! I AM DEAD!

WOMAN: **(rises)** And we drove home together. I loved that three-mile ride home.

GIRL: Those rides were awful. Full of questions.

WOMAN: "How was your day, sweetheart?"

GIRL: The same questions.

WOMAN and GIRL: **(in unison)** "How were your classes? What are you learning?"

GIRL: And I never answered.

WOMAN: And I always answered. She loved listening to me telling her everything I was learning in college.

GIRL: Not once! If I did, then tell me one thing I was learning.

WOMAN: Existentialism with Professor Newton.

GIRL: What was I reading?

WOMAN: Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

GIRL: **(incredulously)** How did you know that?

WOMAN: **(lifting a book from floor, opens it, reads:)** "Abraham can say the most beautiful things any language can muster about how he loves Isaac. But this is not what he has in mind, that being the deeper thought that he would have to sacrifice Isaac because it was a trial."

GIRL: You're reading my books? You never read a book in your life!

WOMAN: **(replaces book in shopping bag)** And ancient drama with Professor Lynch.

GIRL: Now I suppose you're going to recite *Medea*.

WOMAN: (**as Medea, melodramatically:**) "I can delay no longer, or my children will fall into the murderous hands of those who love them less than I do."

GIRL: (**incredulously**) You're reciting *Medea*!

WOMAN: "In any case they must die. And if they must, I shall slay them, who gave them birth."

GIRL: I never recited *Medea* to you.

WOMAN: "Now, my heart, steel yourself. Why do you still hold back? The deed is terrible, but necessary. Come, my unhappy hand, seize the sword, seize it."

GIRL: I never even read that whole book!

WOMAN: "Before you is a course of misery, life long misery; on now the starting post. No flinching now, no thinking of the children, the darling children, that call you mother."

GIRL: Why are you reading my books? You can't live my life, Mommy!

WOMAN: My mother loved listening to me. She never went to college herself.

GIRL: Is this all about guilt?

WOMAN: (**as Medea**) "This day, this one short day, forget your children. You have all the future to mourn for them. Aye, to mourn."

GIRL: You can't change what happened!

WOMAN: "Though you mean to kill them, at least you loved them. Oh! I am a most unhappy woman."

(Sinks slowly to the floor, utterly devastated.)

GIRL: You didn't kill me! I just died! A plane smashed into my desk and I evaporated before I knew what hit me. You've got nothing to do with it!

(The WOMAN lifts VHS tapes from floor and sits cross-legged on the floor, mechanically and rhythmically pushing and pulling the tapes into an imaginary VCR as SHE absorbedly watches an imaginary TV.)

WOMAN: We would get home by night and watch a video together.

GIRL: Are you for real? When did we last do that?

WOMAN: We saw so many together. She taped every episode of *Nature* for me because she knew how I loved animals.

GIRL: I hadn't watched *Nature* since I was twelve.

WOMAN: And how I loved those musicals. *My Fair Lady*. *Funny Face*.

GIRL: Can't you get a life, Mommy?

WOMAN: *Mary Poppins*. *The Sound of Music*.

GIRL: It's been fifteen months since September eleventh. Let me go.

WOMAN: *An American in Paris. Singing in the Rain.*

GIRL: I'm not your baby anymore. And I'm not coming back.

(WOMAN and GIRL speak in unison.)

WOMAN: *The King and I. South Pacific. Carousel. Brigadoon. Babes in Arms. Showboat. Guys and Dolls. The Music Man. West Side Story. Camelot. White Christmas. Man of La Mancha. Fiddler on the Roof. On the Town. Anchors Aweigh. Take Me Out to the Ball Game. Meet Me in Saint Louis. Ziegfeld Follies. Forty-second Street. A Funny Thing Happened on the way to the Forum. Grease. Bye-Bye Birdie. A Little Night Music.*

GIRL: **(her voice clearly heard over WOMAN)** And you're not me. You can't sit in the house watching the same videos everyday making believe that I'm sitting next to you. You're living in the past. You live in the same house with Daddy and you never speak to him anymore. It's like he's dead, too. You shut everything off but some crazy idea of what I never was. You can't make me over! You can't change what's happened! Get over it!

(WOMAN freezes, expressionless.)

I wanted that internship in Port Authority. It's not Daddy's fault that he found it for me. And it's not your fault either that you never said that it would be too much for me. We all knew it was a good opportunity. And Penn Station was functioning like it was supposed to. But I'm thinking, if I had only gotten there late.

WOMAN: **(replaces VHS tapes on floor, notices an object in the pile. To herself:)** My hearing aid. I was looking all over for it, but I couldn't find it without my glasses. **(picks up hearing aid and places it in her ear)** Where are my glasses? Can't hear enough. Can't see enough. I'm in the halfway house of auditory and visual impairment. **(searches along floor on her hands and knees. Inadvertently touches her face and feels eyeglasses)** Oh.

GIRL: I'm sorry for what I said. I loved those rides home with you from the station.

WOMAN: **(to GIRL)** If you speak to God, God answers.

GIRL: **(punctuating each adjective with a finger jabbing the air.)** God is allegorical. Enigmatic. Cryptic.

WOMAN: God speaks directly to your heart and soul. From where I stood. . .

GIRL: From where I stand. . .

WOMAN and GIRL: **(in unison)** I see the end of life.

GIRL: Not mine.

WOMAN: Not death. But the end of *all* life.

Thank you for reading this free excerpt from THE PHOENIX by Philip Vassallo. For performance rights and/or a complete copy of the script, please contact us at:

Brooklyn Publishers, LLC

P.O. Box 248 • Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52406

Toll Free: 1-888-473-8521 • Fax (319) 368-8011

www.brookpub.com