



# SPARROW GRASS

BY CURT COLUMBUS



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SPARROW GRASS  
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SPARROW GRASS  
Written by Curt Columbus  
for Trinity Repertory Company

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Over the last decade, I have been troubled by the debate in the United States around the idea of the “Family” (always capitalized in my mind, whenever it appeared in civic discourse). Every time I heard Family invoked as a concept, I felt that it was being used in a monolithic way, as if it were always a pure, uncomplicated, and simple construct. I chose the Phaedra myth, therefore, as a point of departure for *Sparrow Grass* because the notion of family that is posited in that myth is so thorny, with so many complicated and dangerous implications.

With *Sparrow Grass*, I set out to make an ancient Greek play about contemporary American issues for a contemporary American audience. My frequent collaborator, director Brian McEleney and I wanted a heightened scale of performance and production that encouraged our audience to consider the issues raised in the realm of metaphor, in the world of political idea. We wanted to use a classical form to discuss the meaning of the basest, most elemental human behavior in a contemporary family setting.

The Phaedra myth has intrigued writers for thousands of years. The story of a mother who feels an illicit passion for her stepson, Phaedra's tale has been realized on stage countless times — by Euripedes, Seneca, Racine, O'Neill, and many others. It intrigued us because of what it says about home, about the construction of family, and ultimately, about empire. It feels as if it is a story that was simultaneously ripped from a talk show headline and from a Greek tale. Sort of Sophocles meets Dr. Phil.

Further, the notion of the hyper-sexualization of relationships, the idea of maintaining the image of normality while being deeply unsettled, and the proposition of placing self and selfish desires above all other things — all fundamental narratives in the Phaedra story — had profound resonances for the contemporary American identity. In that sense, this ancient story asked us who we are now as individuals, as families, and as a nation.

We wanted to place the questions raised in this story in the audience's mind for debate. We wanted the play to reside in the realm

of metaphor, so that its issues would be discussed, so that the story would live beyond the limits of the stage. The audience response at Trinity Rep, where the play premiered, was extraordinarily lively and deep, which was thrilling to all of us involved.

And so many hands were part of the shaping of this play, beginning with the aforementioned Mr. McEleney, whose theatrical accuracy and rigor is unparalleled in my experience. The actors Phyllis Kay, Barbara Meek, and Richard Donnelly were part of the shaping from our first workshops, and their inimitable voices profoundly influenced their characters. Tyler Lansing Weeks and Jamie Rosenstein, the brilliant young actors who joined us, were both extraordinarily insightful and important in making the final product. All of the designers and technicians, the army of stage managers (especially Kristen Gibbs) and stage hands made the work possible.

Thanks to the artistic team at Trinity Rep, including Tyler Dobrowsky and Emily Atkinson, and the administrative staff that made it all possible, especially Michael Gennaro, Laura Smith, Pam Adams, Marilyn Busch, and Kathy Calnan. Special thanks to Lauren Ustaszewski, who keeps me sane, to Susan Gurman, who keeps things rolling, to Martha Lavey, Ed Sobel, and Steppenwolf, who first believed in me as a writer, and, finally, to Mark Turek, who made the big idea for our New Play Rep happen at Trinity. As always, my work as an artist would be impossible without my partner, Nathan Watson, who is always my first and last reader, my tireless critic and advocate, my life's greatest companion in all things.

SPARROW GRASS was first produced at Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island, in February 2012. It was directed by Brian McEleney; the set design was by Michael McGarty; the costume design was by William Lane; the lighting design was by Dan Scully; the sound design was by Peter Hurowitz; the property design was by Michael Getz; and the stage manager was Kristen Gibbs. The cast was as follows:

PAULA JEAN POPE . . . . . Phyllis Kay  
ISABELLE BARON . . . . . Barbara Meek  
TEDDIE POPE . . . . . Jamie Rosenstein  
NATE POPE . . . . . Tyler Lansing Weeks  
COLONEL RALPH POPE . . . . . Richard Donnelly

## **CHARACTERS**

*(in order of appearance)*

PAULA JEAN POPE

ISABELLE BARON

TEDDIE (THEODORA) POPE

NATE POPE

COLONEL RALPH POPE

## **PLACE**

Now.

## **TIME**

A city. A high-rise apartment.

## **NOTE**

This play was inspired by the many theatrical versions of the Phaedre myth, including *Hippolytus* by Euripedes, Seneca's *Phaedra*, and Racine's *Phédre*. It is not meant to be played as naturalism.

# SPARROW GRASS

## Scene 1

PAULA.

Your love burns in the pit of my stomach  
It lives there like an ancient, cold, reptilian thing  
That rolls over in its sleep and yawns, its fangs exposed  
Tearing at me sleepily from the inside.  
There is no intellect, no reason  
No moral compass, or watchful eye  
That can stop up the flow from the wound you leave inside me  
Dark red desire pours from its center  
It burns whatever it touches,  
It blackens wherever it passes by  
Other loves are chess pieces  
Perfectly shaped, cold to the touch  
Functional for a game I no longer comprehend  
Comforting in other hands, former hands  
Hands that have never been burned  
By touching you

*(High floor in a high-rise. If there is a view of the sky, there is absolutely no skyline in view. Morning light. The room is spare, with a very few tastefully chosen pieces of furniture and art. Metal and wood, simultaneously classical and modern. If you listen carefully, the room sounds pressurized, like the cabin of an airplane or the very high floor of a very high building. Paula is simply but beautifully dressed for daytime. Isabelle is setting the table. She is dressed in dark clothing and a sweater and looks like a maid. Isabelle has a very slight accent of indeterminate origin.)* Hurry, he'll be home soon. I wish he'd called yesterday. I only got that telegram this morning. There's barely enough time. I want you to polish the silver candlesticks. They look nice with that tray.

ISABELLE. I'll put them out. They don't need to be polished.

PAULA. I'm so glad we found the caviar, you must have had it in that pantry forever.

ISABELLE. It's probably gone bad.

PAULA. The colonel loves caviar, it will be like when we were first married.

ISABELLE. It all tastes like shit to me.

PAULA. Polish the candlesticks, please, I want everything to be just perfect for him. *(Pause.)* Oh, Isabelle, he's coming home!

ISABELLE. It's like he's coming home from another time. A telegram! Even I wouldn't send a telegram anymore.

PAULA. The colonel is the only person in the world who would.

ISABELLE. What does it say?

PAULA. It's personal, none of your business. He could have just sent an email, I could have gone shopping yesterday.

ISABELLE. Maybe he thinks you wouldn't know how to open an email. Remember the last time?

PAULA. Just finish the table.

ISABELLE. Your daughter prints out your emails so you can read them.

PAULA. You're not funny. You know, Isabelle, it's going to be much more crowded here with the colonel back. You may have to find another position.

ISABELLE. *(Laughs long and hard.)* That hasn't worked for years, nehneh. What would you do without me? I could hide your Christmas presents in the oven, you'd never find them.

PAULA. I'm very proficient with the computer.

ISABELLE. You don't know how to work a can opener. Ha! Who would do the things I do for you?

PAULA. I would find somebody. There are people.

ISABELLE. I've taken care of you since you were born ...

PAULA. Stop. Not today.

ISABELLE. *(Gives up.)* "People." You find these "people," and I will go.

PAULA. *(Forcefully.)* I'm not going to fight with you today. Everyone is going to get along. I want this homecoming to be perfect. All right?

ISABELLE. Alright, Miss Paula. I understand. *(Teddie enters. She looks like a nerdy high-school student, very angular, shy and uncomfortable in her own skin.)*

TEDDIE. Your husband sent me a text to say that he's on his way.



PAULA. Your father, Teddie. He sent you a text?

TEDDIE. He's not really my father, but he sent me a text that he's in customs now. Don't start redecorating. Please.

PAULA. I'm just hanging up a sign that we had from the last time. And putting out some caviar and foie gras Isabelle found in the pantry.

TEDDIE. Liver and fish spawn. Barfing.

PAULA. He'll be home any minute. Isn't that wonderful! He sent me a telegram this morning.

TEDDIE. A telegram? Weird. What does it say?

PAULA. It's personal. He hasn't been home for three years now, so he has a lot to say to me that's ... private. You'll understand when you're married. (*Looks around.*) Maybe I will spruce things up a little bit.

TEDDIE. It's already nice, please don't redecorate for him, mother. We won't be able to eat breakfast at the table for a month, the whole place turns into a construction zone. Just leave it.

PAULA. Come over here.

TEDDIE. Can't you just text me, whatever it is you want to say?

PAULA. No. Come on. (*She does.*) You look pretty today. Are those new?

TEDDIE. You bought me this skirt. And the top.

PAULA. I meant the shoes.

TEDDIE. I don't remember.

PAULA. They look worn out, but I don't remember seeing them before. (*Beat.*) Teddie. (*No response.*) Give me a hug. (*They hug.*) That wasn't much of a hug for your mother. Are you upset?

TEDDIE. Nate won't come back, will he? (*Teddie looks at Paula. Isabelle turns to look at Paula as well.*)

PAULA. (*After a pause.*) No. I don't know. Maybe. Your father threw him out. Aren't you glad that the colonel is coming home?

TEDDIE. I don't care, really.

ISABELLE. I'm going to go fold the laundry now. Miss Teddie, if you have any clothes you need washed, leave them outside your door. Okay, nehneh?

TEDDIE. Okay. (*Isabelle exits.*)

PAULA. We need him. You'll see, you'll be happier. I always made sure I looked pretty when I was your age, Teddie. You probably can't believe it looking at me now. (*No response.*) I like those sandal things, I really do. And your pretty hair. (*No response.*) Say thank you when you get a compliment.

TEDDIE. Thank you.

PAULA. I'm only trying to help you. I want you to learn how to pay attention. When I was just a little older than you are, I had to learn to be a whole new person all by myself. I didn't have anyone to help me learn how to act in the world.

TEDDIE. I know. You tell me this all the time. I'm sorry I'm not better at being like you.

PAULA. Are you going out with your friends later?

TEDDIE. I'm working! Leave me alone!

PAULA. You work a lot.

TEDDIE. I just wanted to tell you about Ralph ...

PAULA. Your father. The colonel ...

TEDDIE. *(Starts to exit.)* I'm going back to work.

PAULA. Teddie. I promise you, this time I will make everything perfect. We will get another chance to be a family, I promise. *(Doorbell rings.)*

ISABELLE. *(From offstage.)* There's somebody at the door.

PAULA. It's him! *(Teddie starts to exit.)* Where are you going?

TEDDIE. I have work to do.

PAULA. Teddie! Come stand here! *(Doorbell rings.)*

TEDDIE. It's you he wants to see, not me. *(Teddie exits, slamming her door. The doorbell rings again.)*

ISABELLE. *(Offstage.)* Someone should answer that door! *(Paula prepares herself, then answers the door. Nate is revealed in the doorway.)*

PAULA. Nate?

NATE. Paula. Hi.

PAULA. I didn't expect you to ... Wh — ...? Come in. *(Nate enters, followed by Paula. He is dressed in worn clothes, carrying a backpack. He looks unshowered, a little unstuck. They stare at each other for a few moments in silence.)*

PAULA. Nate. You look like you're homeless.

NATE. This is how I look. It's a look. I'm fine.

PAULA. Oh my god, you're homeless, aren't you?

NATE. Stop. I got my dad's message. That's all.

PAULA. He texted you too?

NATE. Is he here yet?

PAULA. No. I thought you might be him. He'll be very happy you came.

NATE. We'll see. He texted me, so ... I came.

# SPARROW GRASS

by Curt Columbus

3M, 2W

Inspired by the Greek myth of Phaedra, SPARROW GRASS brings the classic tragedy into our time when a woman's dark and misdirected passion threatens to destroy her family from within.

*"Provocative and challenging ... an undeniably wrenching look at one family torn apart by traumas of the past."*

—Cape Cod Times

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