

CONEY ISLAND CHRISTMAS

BY DONALD MARGULIES

**BASED ON THE STORY
"THE LOUDEST VOICE"
BY GRACE PALEY**



**DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.**

CONEY ISLAND CHRISTMAS
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*For Gil Cates,
with love and gratitude*

CONEY ISLAND CHRISTMAS was originally commissioned and produced by the Geffen Playhouse (Gilbert Cates, Producing Director; Randall Arney, Artistic Director; Ken Novice, Managing Director), in Los Angeles, California, where it had its world premiere on November 28, 2012. It was directed by Bart DeLorenzo; the set design was by Takeshi Kata; the costume design was by Ann Closs-Farley; the lighting design was by Lap Chi Chu; the original music and sound design was by John Ballinger; the production stage manager was Jill Gold; the assistant stage manager was Kyra Hansen; casting was by Phyllis Shuringa; and the dramaturg was Amy Levinson. The cast was as follows:

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| CLARA..... | Grace Kaufman |
| SHIRLEY ABRAMOWITZ..... | Angela Paton |
| YOUNG SHIRLEY..... | Isabella Acres |
| EVIE SLOTNICK..... | Kira Sternbach |
| MRS. KORNBLUM..... | Eileen T'Kaye |
| MR. ABRAMOWITZ..... | Arye Gross |
| MRS. ABRAMOWITZ..... | Annabelle Gurwitch |
| JACKIE SAUERFELD..... | Andrew Walke |
| IRA PUSHKOV..... | Joe Gillette |
| HENRY BROWN..... | Julian Evens |
| ANNA LING..... | Maya Erskine |
| MR. HILTON..... | John Sloan |
| MISS GLACÉ..... | Lily Holleman |
| ENSEMBLE..... | Elitia Daniels, Ty Freedman, Rachel Hirshee, Sequoia Houston, Jim Kane, Richard Realivasquez, Stephanie Grant |

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Coney Island Christmas is the result of a phone conversation I had with the late Gil Cates back in 2009. Gil was the artistic director of the Geffen Playhouse, in Los Angeles, which has produced several of my plays. He was also my friend.

The impresario in Gil had long dreamed of the Geffen coming up with a Christmas attraction that was distinctly its own, a pageant-like, family-friendly play that could become a holiday tradition, its *Christmas Carol*. On the phone that day, he asked if I would be interested in writing it. “Why me?” I wondered. I was not an obvious choice. Many of my plays — *Sight Unseen*, *The Model Apartment*, *The Loman Family Picnic*, *What’s Wrong with This Picture?*, *God of Vengeance*, *Collected Stories*, and *Brooklyn Boy* — dealt with Jewish themes and characters but, as Gil pointed out, I was also the man who wrote the utterly ecumenical *Shipwrecked! An Entertainment* — *The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as Told by Himself)*, a play for audiences of all ages that celebrates theater and the power of storytelling. “If I write you a Christmas play,” I told him, “you realize it’s going to be a *Jewish* Christmas play.” And he said, “Great!” His other directive: Make it big. “If you want an ice-skating rink, put in an ice-skating rink!”

I accepted the commission but let it gestate for a while; I wasn’t sure how I would handle it. Then, in one of those thunderbolt moments that are few and far between, I remembered a short story I had read years earlier, when I was in high school, by the legendary writer Grace Paley (1922–2007).

“The Loudest Voice” is a seven-page story set in Depression-era New York about a Jewish girl named Shirley Abramowitz who is chosen by her drama teacher to play Jesus in the school play because she has the loudest voice. I re-read the story, loved it all over again, and understood immediately how to turn this slight, charming premise into a play. I sent it to Gil, who shared my enthusiasm and gave me the go-ahead. After securing the rights from the Paley estate I got sidetracked moving my previous Geffen commission, *Time Stands Still*, to Broadway, so I didn’t focus on it right away.

When Gil died, unexpectedly, in 2011, I promised my friends at the theater that *Coney Island Christmas* would be ready for Christmas 2012, around the first anniversary of Gil's death.

During that year, working closely with the director Bart DeLorenzo (with whom I had had a wonderful time bringing *Shipwrecked!* to life), I developed the play over the course of a couple of workshops. Fueled by our love of Gil, it was a joyous, if bittersweet, pursuit from the very beginning.

I didn't find a way to put in that ice-skating rink but, by today's austere production standards, I *did* make it big: a cast of thirteen principal actors and an ensemble of seven. (If you can figure out how to do it with fewer actors, I'd be grateful to hear how.) Productions may populate the play with as few or as many classmates and neighbors as are available, with a minimum large enough to fulfill the requirements of the piece.

The story has a framing device set in contemporary California that flashes back to various locations in Coney Island, Brooklyn, in 1935. (Inspired by Reginald Marsh's artwork of that era, Takeshi Kata's clever set design for the world premiere used a revolve on which just a few pieces of furniture fluidly conveyed, with nary a blackout, the Abramowitz shop, the living room, and the school auditorium.)

The play's major set-pieces are two children's pageants, the first celebrating Thanksgiving and the second (and more elaborate of the two) a slightly fractured telling of the story of Christmas. The children portrayed are all about twelve years old. Ideally, the ensemble of young actors in their twenties should be plausible as a group of sixth graders so that we readily suspend disbelief. (Members of the Geffen company were all of medium height.) They must capture the *essence* of being children without "doing" children. We cast two "authentic" child actors to play Clara and Young Shirley, the embodiment of her great-grandmother at the age of twelve. It was remarkable how well our bonafide twelve-year-old melded into a group of classmates ten or more years her senior. (I employed this conceit before, in my 1984 play *Found a Peanut*, in which actors in their twenties and early thirties played a group of children ranging in age from five to fifteen.)

When I was developing the piece, I discovered that it is one thing to laugh at young adults playing children stumbling through a school pageant, and it is another thing entirely to witness actual children stumbling through a play.

Much of the pleasure of *Coney Island Christmas* — for actors and audiences alike — is in its meta-theatricality. There is gold to be mined in the foibles of children in performance: boredom, stage fright, flubbed lines, missed cues, misplaced props. The laughter the adult actors elicit is the affectionate laughter of recognition of a lifetime of performances in which we and our children have taken part. Kids love seeing adults playing them nearly as much as the adults (not to mention the actors) enjoy getting in touch with the child in themselves.

That said, I suspect the play would work well enough with children playing children and, for that matter, children playing the adults. (A recent production cast a petite woman in her twenties as Young Shirley, apparently to good effect.) My only concern would be that the comedy could succumb to earnestness and the sentiment to sentimentality.

The Depression-era scenic elements and wardrobe should be authentic, while the costumes and scenery of the pageants within the play should have a primitive, homemade quality (as if created by children). There should be nothing “built” or slick or faux child-like about them. They should exist firmly in the period (1935) and resist the temptation of anachronistic allusions (I always find that sort of thing cheap). Ann Closs-Farley’s costumes for the Geffen premiere was brilliantly resourceful, imagining what would be at the disposal of families enduring hardship so, for example, in the Nativity story she put the kids in bathrobes as if brought in from home, and wigs and beards made from mops. Recorded sound is used except during the plays within the play, which employ Foley sound techniques in plain view. Songs indicated in the script should not be sung in their entirety.

YouTube provides great research, a treasure trove of videos of Christmas pageants, demonstrating the “herding cats” phenomenon employed by heroic, endlessly patient teachers like the play’s Mr.

Hilton and Miss Glacé. They are active participants in these scenes, the former creating sound effects with found objects and the latter conducting while at the piano, all with an air of quiet desperation.

Coney Island Christmas is performed without intermission (running time ideally should be under 90 minutes).

Keep it simple and truthful. Don't push it. And, by all means, feel the joy.

—Donald Margulies
New Haven, Connecticut
February, 2014

A NOTE ON FUTURE PRODUCTIONS

Coney Island Christmas was created for a specific, southern California audience. *With permission of the author*, the brief scenes that book-end the central flashback may be customized to fit the locale of a particular production. Elements where minimal changes may be permitted are noted in brackets. Please submit your request by contacting Dramatists Play Service.

CHARACTERS

Los Angeles

SHIRLEY ABRAMOWITZ, very old
CLARA, Shirley's great-granddaughter, 12

Brooklyn

YOUNG SHIRLEY, 12
MR. MISHA ABRAMOWITZ, Shirley's father, 45
MRS. CLARA ABRAMOWITZ, Shirley's mother, 40
MRS. KORNBLUM, a neighbor

At School

MR. HILTON, the drama teacher, 35
MISS GLACÉ, the music teacher, 28
EVIE SLOTNICK, Shirley's best friend
JACKIE SAUERFELD, Shirley's crush
IRA PUSHKOV, the wisenheimer
TEACHER and various classmates including
GIUSEPPE SABATINO, ANNA LING,
HENRY BROWN, and LESTER

In the Thanksgiving Pageant

MYLES STANDISH
PRISCILLA MULLINS
KING JAMES
PILGRIMS and INDIANS
SQUANTO
STATUE OF LIBERTY
TURKEY

In the Coney Island Nightmare

SIDESHOW HAWKER
GYPSY FORTUNE TELLER
BEARDED LADY
SIAMESE TWINS
DREAM JESUS

In the Christmas Pageant

GRANDMOTHER

JESUS

MARY

JOSEPH

ANGEL GABRIEL

INNKEEPER

TWO SHEPHERDS

KING HEROD

THREE WISE MEN

SANTA CLAUS

EBENEZER SCROOGE

GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

TINY TIM

CAROLLERS, CHORUS OF ANGELS, and ANIMALS

PLACE & TIME

Los Angeles, California, in the present;
Brooklyn, New York, during the Great Depression.

DOUBLING

SHIRLEY ABRAMOWITZ plays
MRS. KORNBLUM, TEACHER, and BEARDED LADY

YOUNG SHIRLEY plays
TURKEY and JESUS

MR. ABRAMOWITZ plays
SIDESHOW HAWKER

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ plays
DREAM JESUS

MR. HILTON plays
GYPSY FORTUNE TELLER

EVIE plays
PRISCILLA MULLINS, MARY, and TINY TIM

JACKIE plays
MYLES STANDISH, SIAMESE TWIN, and JOSEPH

IRA plays
KING JAMES, SIAMESE TWIN,
KING HEROD, and EBENEZER SCROOGE

HENRY plays
SQUANTO, ANGEL GABRIEL, and SANTA CLAUS

ANNA plays
STATUE OF LIBERTY, GRANDMOTHER,
INNKEEPER, and GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

PILGRIMS play SHEPHERDS

INDIANS play WISE MEN

Members of the company play
CAROLLERS, CHORUS OF ANGELS, and ANIMALS

CONEY ISLAND CHRISTMAS

*As houselights dim we hear a song like Justin Bieber's cover of "Drummer Boy."**

Lights up. [Southern California. The present. Blue skies. Palm trees. Cacti. A comfortably middle-class suburb, perhaps somewhere in the San Fernando Valley.]

A bedroom, decorated in vivid colors, with the posters and accoutrements of a modern pre-teen girlhood. An unlit electric menorah is on the windowsill.

Sunshine spills across the frilly, stuffed animal-laden bed in which Clara, twelve years old, is listening to the music through her iPhone earbuds while texting.

Her great-grandmother, Shirley Abramowitz, a petite yet sturdy nonagenarian with an indelible presence and a voice to match, pops her head in the doorway.

SHIRLEY. (*Brightly.*) Hello-o-o? (*Clara can't hear her.*) HEY!

CLARA. Oh, hi, Gramma.

SHIRLEY. How's my great-granddaughter? Hm? How's my little Clara?

CLARA. Not so good.

SHIRLEY. How's that throat of yours? Still sore?

CLARA. Yeah. (*Shirley takes out her knitting.*)

[SHIRLEY. What do you think of the scarf I'm making you?

CLARA. What do I need a scarf for?

* See Special Note on Songs and Recordings on copyright page.

SHIRLEY. To wrap around your throat, keep it nice and warm! Nice, huh?

CLARA. Yeah, but this is California, Gramma.

SHIRLEY. So?

CLARA. It never gets that cold here.

SHIRLEY. What, it's a crime to wear a scarf in California? Please. Thirty years since I left New York, and *still* this place makes no sense. Eighty degrees at Christmas? It's *mishugeh*.] (*Clara gets a text and responds.*) Who's that?

CLARA. My friend Rachel. Telling me what happened at school today.

SHIRLEY. What happened?

CLARA. Nothing.

SHIRLEY. I hear you're missing some big to-do tomorrow, on accounta you're sick.

CLARA. Yeah, the stupid Christmas play.

SHIRLEY. Why is it stupid?

CLARA. They made us learn all these songs, like for Kwanzaa.

SHIRLEY. What's wrong with learning a song for Kwanzaa? I think it's great they teach you about all kinds of cultures.

CLARA. Yeah, but it's like so obviously a rip-off of Chanukah. Seven candles, instead of the menorah it's the kinara ...

SHIRLEY. I think that's interesting. We're all related. (*Pause. She knits. Clara texts.*) You know, I was in a Christmas play once.

CLARA. You were?

SHIRLEY. Is that so hard to believe? Once upon a time, I was young, too, you know, with rosy, smooth skin just like you, none of this crinkly, wrinkly stuff. The girl inside me never got old. Only the wrapping paper.

CLARA. What was it like?

SHIRLEY. The Christmas play? Oh, you don't want to hear about it ...

CLARA. Yes I do.

SHIRLEY. That was my favorite Christmas. The one that stands out from all the others. And when you're as old as *I* am, that's a lotta Christmases.

CLARA. Do you remember?

SHIRLEY. Do I remember! Of course, I remember. I remember 1935 better than I remember two minutes ago.

CLARA. Well, then, tell me.

SHIRLEY. I'm not telling you anything until you put away your little gizmo. 'Cause if you're gonna sit there ... *(She mockingly mimes texting.)*

CLARA. *(Surrenders her device, petulantly.)* Okay!

SHIRLEY. Thank you. Now: Close your eyes.

CLARA. Do I have to?

SHIRLEY. Yes! Close 'em! Imagine we're floating. Out the window, up to the clouds...!

CLARA. Is this gonna take long?

SHIRLEY. Shhh! There is a certain place ... Far from sore throats and all the noise and *dreck* we call the Here and Now, a place where everything *is* the way it *was*, the color of faded old pictures. And the smells are ... *(Inhales.)* potato latkes, gefilte fish, and sour pickles.

CLARA. What *is* this place?

SHIRLEY. It's a place called ... Brooklyn! *(The room opens up and she takes Clara into her past. Manhattan skyline. Brooklyn Bridge. 1935.)* Now: Way down in *southern* Brooklyn, as far as you can go without falling into the ocean, there's *another* certain place. Coney Island! A long stretch of beach and boardwalk. Fun-houses, spook-houses, penny arcades. There are roller-coasters there. Ferris wheels. Carousels. *(Sound montage. Waves. Calliope music.)*

HAWKERS. *(Echoing, off.)* — Caramel popcorn! — Peanuts! Get your hot roasted peanuts! — Salt water taffy!

SHIRLEY. Gypsy fortune tellers, sideshows with bearded ladies and men seven feet tall.

HAWKER. *(Off.)* Step right up! See Matilda, the bearded lady! Siamese twins! *(Etc.)*

SHIRLEY. In this certain place called Coney Island, dumb-waiters boom, doors slam, dishes crash; where every window is a mother's mouth bidding the street ... *Shut up!* *(She yells along with the echoes of faraway voices.)* — *Quiet down there!* — *Go play somewhere else!* — *You know what time it is?*

VARIOUS. *(Overlap.)* — *Quiet down there!* — *Go play somewhere else!* — *You know what time it is?*

SHIRLEY. My voice is the loudest. *(Young Shirley, twelve years old, carrying schoolbooks, argues with Evie Slotnick.)*

YOUNG SHIRLEY. Evie Slotnick, I can't believe you told Jackie Sauerfeld I want to marry him!

CLARA. Gramma, is that supposed to be *you*?

SHIRLEY. It *is* me! See how young I am?

EVIE. (*To Young Shirley.*) I did not tell him! He guessed!

YOUNG SHIRLEY. Yeah, after you gave him plenty of hints! (*Evie sticks her tongue out.*)

CLARA. Who is *she*? (*Meaning Evie.*)

SHIRLEY. Evie Slotnick? My very best friend. We love each other only as best friends could.

YOUNG SHIRLEY. I hate you, Evie Slotnick! I hate you, I hate you!

EVIE. Oh, yeah? Well, I hate you, too!

SHIRLEY. Every Sunday afternoon, Evie and I go to the Tilyou Theater for popcorn and a double feature. (*Young Shirley and Evie are seated together at the movies eating popcorn. We hear a few bars of Shirley Temple singing "Good Ship Lollipop."**) Shirley Temple is my favorite movie star. I figure if her name is "Shirley Temple" ... she's gotta be Jewish. (*Pedestrians pass stores with signs in Italian. Chinese. Russian. Polish. Spanish. Irish names. Yiddish.*) A few doors down from Shapiro the barber and Goldstein the shoemaker; nestled between Needleman the tailor and Feigenbaum the pawnbroker, is a little grocery store — Abramowitz's Appetizing — run by my darling papa, may he rest in peace. (*Mr. Abramowitz appears, wearing a shopkeeper's apron. Shirley Abramowitz assumes the role of Mrs. Kornblum, a customer. The shop doorbell tinkles.*)

MR. ABRAMOWITZ. Ah, Mrs. Kornblum. What can I do for you today?

SHIRLEY. (*As Mrs. Kornblum.*) Mr. Abramowitz, what have you got that's fresh?

MR. ABRAMOWITZ. Everything's fresh. I was at the Fulton Fish Market this very morning, before the sun came up.

SHIRLEY. (*As Mrs. Kornblum.*) That's what you said the last time. That cod fillet you sold me, by the time I got it home, it stank to high heaven.

MR. ABRAMOWITZ. The problem with fish ... is it smells like fish. What can I get you?

SHIRLEY. (*As Mrs. Kornblum.*) Half-pound of chopped liver, half-pound of cole slaw, and keep the funny stuff to yourself. (*Mr. Abramowitz fills her order during the following.*)

YOUNG SHIRLEY. (*Still on the street.*) Evie Slotnick, I HAVE HAD IT WITH YOU! I don't want to talk to you ever again! (*Mrs. Abramowitz appears.*)

* See Special Note on Songs and Recordings on copyright page.

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ. Shirley Abramowitz, enough shouting on the street already!

SHIRLEY. Also in this faraway place, my long-gone mama is there, still as full of breathing as me.

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ. You're giving the neighborhood a headache!

YOUNG SHIRLEY. (*Enters the shop.*) Yes, Mama. Hello, Papa.

MR. ABRAMOWITZ. Hello, my darling.

SHIRLEY. I plant myself next to the pickle barrel. I'm supposed to be doing homework but my mind wanders. In my head, I'm dancing with Shirley Temple on the good ship *Lollipop*. My pinky makes tiny whirlpools in the brine. (*Her dance reverie is interrupted.*)

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ. Shirley Abramowitz, get your fingers out of the pickle barrel! What's the matter with you? Do something useful for a change! Unpack those cans. (*She hands Young Shirley a box of cans that the girl proceeds to unpack.*)

YOUNG SHIRLEY. (*Loudly.*) Campbell's Tomato Soup!

SHIRLEY. (*As Mrs. Kornblum.*) Must she always be so loud?

YOUNG SHIRLEY. Campbell's Vegetable Beef Soup! Campbell's Chicken Soup!

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ. (*Overlap.*) Shirley, please! The labels are coming off the cans!

SHIRLEY. (*As Mrs. Kornblum.*) Mrs. Abramowitz, really, parents should not be afraid of their own children.

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ. You hear that, Shirley? You're bothering everybody. Now be quiet!

MR. ABRAMOWITZ. Let her speak, Clara. — (*The action freezes.*)

CLARA. Her name is Clara? Like me!

SHIRLEY. That's right, *bubeleh*, you're named for my mama, may she rest in peace. (*Action resumes.*)

MRS. ABRAMOWITZ. The girl is too loud, Misha!

MR. ABRAMOWITZ. So what if she's loud? Better she should use her voice *now*, while she's alive. In the grave it'll be plenty quiet. From Coney Island to the cemetery, it's the same subway, the same fare. (*Mr. Abramowitz completes the transaction with Mrs. Kornblum.*) Goodbye, Mrs. Kornblum. (*The sun begins to set over Brooklyn. He unties his apron and turns out the lights.*)

SHIRLEY. At the end of every workday, Papa closes up shop and we go home.

CLARA. Where?

CONEY ISLAND CHRISTMAS

by Donald Margulies

based on the story "The Loudest Voice" by Grace Paley

8M, 10W (doubling, flexible casting)

Pulitzer Prize-winner Donald Margulies weaves together nostalgia, music, and merriment in this new seasonal classic. A holiday show for people of all ages and all faiths, CONEY ISLAND CHRISTMAS introduces us to Shirley Abramowitz, a young Jewish girl who (much to her immigrant parents' consternation) is cast as Jesus in the school's Christmas pageant. As Shirley, now much older, recounts the memorable story to her great-granddaughter, the play captures a timeless and universal tale of what it means to be an American during the holidays.

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