



SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA

SIX ONE-ACT PLAYS BY
WILLIAM INGE

EDITED BY
CRAIG POSPISIL



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA — SIX ONE-ACT PLAYS
(BAD BREATH, CINDERELLA, THE DISPOSAL, A HERO OF OUR
TIME, A MURDER, VENUS IN THERAPY)
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Introduction
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INTRODUCTION

A couple of years ago, I was in the middle of editing a new volume for DPS's *Outstanding Short Plays* series. I had eight or nine plays for that anthology already chosen, but needed to find one or two more to complete it. I reached out to several agents to ask if any of their clients had short plays they might like to submit. It was then that the agent for the William Inge estate sent me a short play by the late author called *The Love Death* and mentioned that he had more.

After reading the play, I was struck by the tragic story of a writer who decides to commit suicide and sets about calling several of the people in his life to say goodbye. Even without knowing any details of Inge's life and death, I immediately sensed an absolute honesty in the writing. The piece didn't fit with the tone of the other plays I'd collected for *Outstanding Short Plays, Vol. 2*, but that was all right, because I was more than interested in the agent's comment that he had more unpublished short plays by Inge. "Can you send me all of them?" I asked. And soon eight more arrived.

Nine unpublished, largely unknown short plays by one of the pillars of 20th century American theater was definitely something exciting to discover, and to consider adding to the many plays of William Inge that Dramatists already publishes made it more so. And I became more excited as I read the plays. These are raw works, and I mean that both in terms of the tone of the writing, and in terms of the roughness of the plays. Many of these weren't even performed during Inge's lifetime and a couple of the manuscripts had handwritten revisions in the margins. But what they may lack in polish, they make up for in terms of the naked emotions Inge brings to the page.

To be completely honest, I wasn't overly familiar with William Inge's plays. I'd seen the movie version of *Bus Stop* many years ago, and I saw the recent Broadway revival of *Picnic*, but I only had a passing familiarity with much of his work. What I was sure of was how much the writing in these short plays differed from his earlier and most famous plays. Where those works deal with the repressed emotions that were the law of the land in Midwestern America in the earlier part of the 1900s, these short works from the 1960s were clearly influenced by that decade's far more open attitudes. These were characters that often held little back.

To move forward with editing an anthology of his works, I felt I needed to learn a lot more about Inge and his work. I dipped into the library here at Dramatists Play Service, read through his plays, got a copy of Ralph F. Voss' biography entitled *A Life of William Inge, The Strains of Triumph*, and gained a much greater appreciation for the man and his writing.

Any wildly successful artist has a period of time when their work is not just well-received or popular, but when they seem to tap into something in the zeitgeist so their work transcends the “merely” good and becomes something more. In the 1950s Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and William Inge had each clearly accomplished that in their own ways. Inge's successes in this time were enormous. He'd only really started writing plays in the late 1940s, but four of his first five full length plays were major Broadway hits. In 1950, *Come Back, Little Sheba* was the first of his plays to be produced in New York, and it was only the second play he'd written. *Sheba* was followed on Broadway in 1953 by the even more successful *Picnic*, which also won Inge the Pulitzer Prize. Two years later, Inge was back on Broadway with *Bus Stop*, and two years after that came *Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, which was actually a revised version of his first play, *Farther from Heaven*. So, really the first four plays he wrote all became hit Broadway plays. On top of that, all four were turned into very successful films. Two of his other plays were adapted into films, another was adapted for television, and his original screenplay *Splendor in the Grass* won him an Academy Award for Best Screenplay in 1962. That's an amazing run.

But Inge was unable to enjoy his success at the time. He was a gay man in a time where it was virtually impossible to be himself openly. He struggled with depression and alcoholism, spending years in psychoanalysis and at A.A. He clashed with a number of his directors, and a poor review would send him into a tailspin. If Inge couldn't truly be happy when his plays were popular, he was even less able to find peace when the times changed and his run of hits ended. As I said, in reading his play *The Love Death*, I sensed a real truth in the words and the emotions. After learning that he'd killed himself, it's clear that *The Love Death* — and indeed several of the short plays he wrote in the mid- and late 1960s — amount to Inge's suicide note.

Arthur Miller's giant themes and Tennessee Williams' delicate and lyrical dialogue have perhaps kept their work to be seen as more vital to our contemporary eyes and ears. Inge's characters live in a world of repressed emotions, especially surrounding sex. If heterosexual intercourse, even between married couples, was something that verged on shameful, sex outside of marriage or homosexual relations were a social death sentence. Inge's characters feel things just as deeply, and their lives are just as destroyed as the characters in Miller's or Williams' plays, but part of their tragedy is the inability to show it. The social revolutions of the 1960s and the decades since have done a lot to wipe away many of the emotional barriers and stigmas that went along with them. Inge's plays, therefore, can feel "old-fashioned" or quaint to contemporary audiences. But I think that's a disservice to them and to Inge. And it's a way of viewing his plays that I was guilty of too, until I started to research Inge's life and to try to read his plays with new eyes. These are rich works, and Inge was rarely less than brutally honest in how he wrote about the world as he saw it.

As I considered the nine unpublished works, an immediate division between most was apparent. Several bore the title *Complex*, followed by individual titles (like *The Love Death*) just below, and Voss' biography confirmed that Inge was working on a play with that master title comprised of short plays set in a dark, impersonal apartment complex in large city. Many of the other unpublished works were set in small towns, more reminiscent of the settings of *Picnic* or *Dark at the Top of the Stairs*.

In thinking about how to present these new plays, I looked at an earlier collection of short plays that Dramatists published by Inge, simply called *Eleven Short Plays*, which featured plays he had written in the 1950s. Inge frequently used one-acts and short plays as a testing ground for characters and stories that he would later adapt into full-length works. In doing this, I remembered that Dramatists had four one-acts of Inge's which had previously been published, but were now out of print. If those four were added to the nine unpublished plays, then we would easily have enough plays for two volumes. And with roughly half of all the plays set in apartments in a city, and the others mostly in more rural settings, I had a natural division for the collections as well.

As a playwright myself, I dislike collections that are simply called “*Five One-Acts*” or “*Eleven Short Plays*.” It seems too generic, and too easy to confuse with another collection, or just overlook. I prefer an overall title that somehow relates to the plays in the anthology, and then maybe “Three One-Acts” or whatever as a descriptive subtitle.

The first seven plays I collected under the title of *The Apartment Complex — Seven One-Act Plays*, which I hope serves as an acknowledgment of Inge’s unfinished collection, as well as a grouping of plays which I feel have a strong connection in setting and theme, and which could make a cohesive evening in the theater.

The second collection didn’t have quite so obvious an overall title. Several of the other plays were set in small towns, very much like Independence, Kansas, where Inge had grown up, but of the others one was set in a prison and another took place in something like a fantasy version of America. I played with a couple of options before settling on *Somewhere in America — Six One-Act Plays*, which feels apropos for a quintessentially Midwestern American playwright, who lived in Independence, St. Louis, New York, and Los Angeles, but who couldn’t seem to find a permanent home anywhere.

I hope many of you will read these plays with a new appreciation of William Inge, as I did, and more I hope that you will be moved to produce these plays and give them a home.

—*Craig Pospisil*
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BAD BREATH

CHARACTERS

MARY

JOHN

SONNY

SUE

MRS. GOODMAN

ERNESTINE

GLADYS

FAIRY PRINCESS

JIM

JANE

JACK

MARY'S MOTHER

GEORGE RALSTON

MRS. RALSTON

RALPH

BAD BREATH

Scene 1

Time: the present. A spring morning. Scene: an American home.

MARY. All right, I'll tell you. You've got bad breath. BAD BREATH! That's why your boss won't come to dinner. You've got *bad breath*.

JOHN. But I brush my teeth regularly.

MARY. Brushing isn't enough. *(Picks up a bottle of mouthwash from the table.)* Formula 316 gives you the extra protection you *need*.

JOHN. Can it be true ... that I've been guilty of bad breath?

MARY. Someone had to tell you, John.

JOHN. *(Taking the bottle.)* Very well. I'll try it. I certainly don't want to offend. *(Enters the bathroom and gargles as Mary goes into the kitchen and sets out bowls for breakfast cereal. Two children, a boy [Sonny] and a girl [Sue], ages 9 and 10, come running down the stairs on their way to the kitchen.)*

SONNY. I can't wait to get up in the morning, knowing Mom's got Sugar Crisp Oats waiting for breakfast.

SUE. Sugar Crisp Oats help build up our young bodies in *four* different ways: by adding protein, nourishing vitamins, all the roughage we need, and causing regularity.

SONNY. Scientists have proved that Sugar Crisp Oats give us enough energy to last *all* day.

SUE. And yummy! They taste good, too. *(In the kitchen, the two children sit at the breakfast table and eat their cereal.)*

MARY. What a miracle! To find a breakfast cereal that packs enough vitamins, proteins, and minerals to last *all* day. And look how the children love them. *(Sonny and Sue eat ravenously, smacking their lips. John comes out of the bathroom and goes to the kitchen, taking Mary in his arms, kissing her.)*

JOHN. (*Smiling.*) There's no backing off from me now, is there?

MARY. Formula 316 is the surest guarantee I know to happiness. (*Mary darts to the stove and pours a cup of coffee, which she offers John, he sipping it, frowning, setting the cup and saucer down. A look of worried concern crosses Mary's face.*) Have I failed again?

JOHN. Oh that's all right, dear. I'll get a cup of coffee at the office.

MARY. (*Dropping into a chair in total dejection.*) Why can't I make good coffee?

JOHN. Don't worry, dear. Some wives have the knack for it. Others don't. It's not your fault.

MARY. But I've *tried*. I've tried so *hard* to make good coffee.

JOHN. Don't worry, dear. I'm on my way to the office now. I feel just like walking into G.R.'s office and saying, "Look, G.R., how about bringing your wife to dinner tonight?"

MARY. (*Horrificed.*) You're bringing your boss and his wife to *dinner*!

JOHN. You bet. I can face him now.

MARY. But John! What can I do about my coffee?

JOHN. Well ... I guess we'll just have to serve them the stuff that you make.

MARY. Oh, I feel *such* a failure!

JOHN. Don't worry, dear. Lots of housewives can't make good coffee.

MARY. (*Cheerlessly.*) Have a good day, dear.

JOHN. Goodbye, kids. (*He kisses the children.*)

SONNY and SUE. So long, Dad! (*John exits with briefcase.*)

MARY. (*To herself, still in dejection.*) What's wrong with *me*? Why can't I make a good cup of coffee? (*Son and daughter jump up from the table now.*)

SONNY and SUE. Goodbye, Mom. We're ready to start the day the Sugar Crisp way!

MARY. (*Sadly.*) Did you brush this morning with BRIGHT? The only toothpaste that has Fluriceen in its formula?

SONNY. You bet we did.

SUE. No cavities for us!

MARY. As long as you can't brush after every meal, you need the extra protection that BRIGHT gives, all day.

SONNY and SUE. We both registered in the upper twenty-seven percent of our class, Mom. On tests given to more than a hundred and sixty-three students, we were in the group that used BRIGHT. The only toothpaste approved by the American Dentists' Association.

MARY. I always feel my children are safe with BRIGHT.

SONNY and SUE. So long, Mom! So long!

MARY. Be right with BRIGHT! (*Mary waves the children goodbye happily, and then sits in a chair and broods.*) Why can't I make a good cup of coffee? (*Mary sits brooding until she can't bear the agony anymore. She jumps to her feet suddenly. Now she sounds desperate.*)

Dear God! *Why* can't I make a good cup of coffee? (*Now she pulls a drawer out of the table and grabs a big butcher knife. Going to the sink, she slashes a wrist just as Mrs. Goodman, a friendly old neighbor with, for some reason, a German accent, enters into the kitchen.*)

MRS. GOODMAN. Now, now. What's this? Is my dear neighbor lady unhappy about something?

MARY. (*About to swoon.*) Oh, Mrs. Goodman, *why* can't I make a good cup of coffee?

MRS. GOODMAN. My, my! You mustn't do anything *desperate*.

MARY. But I've failed John. He's bringing his boss to dinner tonight, and I haven't the courage to serve them my dreadful coffee.

MRS. GOODMAN. (*Wrapping the wrist wound with some Band-Aids she finds in her pocket.*) Good coffee is not such a difficult problem, Mrs. Wilson.

MARY. It is for *me*, Mrs. Goodman.

MRS. GOODMAN. There, there now. It was just a shallow cut. If I'd not come in when I did, it might have been too late.

MARY. (*Dropping into a chair.*) Maybe I just don't care anymore, Mrs. Goodman.

MRS. GOODMAN. But you're a fine young American housewife, Mrs. Wilson. You mustn't let a little thing like bad coffee upset you.

MARY. But every morning, it's the same thing. Every morning. "Mary dear, you make bad coffee." I guess I just can't stand it anymore, Mrs. Goodman. I just have to admit, I'm a failure.

MRS. GOODMAN. No wife today should feel herself a failure over a little thing like coffee.

MARY. But John won't even drink the coffee I make, Mrs. Goodman.

MRS. GOODMAN. So? And why should that be a problem?

MARY. Mrs. Goodman, *why* can't I make good coffee like other wives?

MRS. GOODMAN. Have you tried Schroeder's valley-grown coffee?

MARY. Is there really a difference?

MRS. GOODMAN. Of course! You see, Schroeder's is valley-grown. Those dark, rich coffee beans get all the moisture from the fertile valley in the high Brazilian mountains. Here! (*She produces a can of Schroeder's coffee from her shopping bag.*) Try this can of Schroeder's, and don't let

yourself feel like a coffee-failure again.

MARY. Well, I'm willing to try anything once.

MRS. GOODMAN. You just see if Schroeder's doesn't bring back that morning smile again. Remember, it's *valley-grown*.

MARY. Thank you, Mrs. Goodman. (*Mrs. Goodman leaves. Mary begins to clean up, going first to the sink.*) Oh dear! Blood stains! (*She tries a scouring powder.*) But the powder I'm using doesn't work. (*Now Ernestine appears, a robust young woman dressed in overalls.*)

ERNESTINE. Pardon me, Mrs. Wilson, but I just came to look at your plumbing.

MARY. Ernestine, you're a life-saver. How am I going to get rid of these ugly stains?

ERNESTINE. (*Looking at the sink.*) Blood stains. No ordinary detergent is going to get rid of those. (*She shakes her head woefully.*)

MARY. But my detergent has always worked before.

ERNESTINE. What you need is the *new* Capo, Mrs. Wilson.

MARY. The *new* Capo?

ERNESTINE. Yes. The *new* Capo contains *luminox*, a scientific formula that will remove the stains that *other* cleansers can't even dim.

MARY. Luminox?

ERNESTINE. It's the surest cleaning agent scientists can produce.

MARY. Well ... I'm willing to try *anything* once.

ERNESTINE. Let's have a little test. You shake some of your detergent on one half of the stain ...

MARY. (*Doing so.*) Yes ...

ERNESTINE. And I'll sprinkle some of the new scientifically-tested Capo on the other side. (*She does so.*) Now we'll wash away. (*She turns on the water.*) See?

MARY. I declare. Some of the blood still remains on *my* side.

ERNESTINE. But Capo removed all the blood on my side without even scrubbing.

MARY. (*Joyfully.*) Ernestine, you've done it again.

ERNESTINE. I didn't do anything. New Capo did all the work.

MARY. I'll be a friend of New Capo from now on.

ERNESTINE. I'll drop in again in a few weeks, Mrs. Wilson.

MARY. You're always welcome in *my* house, Ernestine. (*Ernestine leaves. Mary pats the container of Capo proudly.*) And so is Capo. (*Now Gladys, the elder daughter of the family, comes running downstairs into the kitchen. She feels of her hair and wears a fretful look on her face.*)

GLADYS. Mother, I just don't know what I'll do if Ralph avoids me again today in our English class.

MARY. Sometimes, Gladys, a mother just doesn't know how to advise her children.

GLADYS. I can't understand it, Mom. Ralph was very attracted to me when we met, but when he brought me home at night and put his arms around me, something ... stopped him, and he backed away. *(There is a flash of light and suddenly a Fairy Princess appears, with wand.)*

FAIRY PRINCESS. Have I discovered another victim of dull and lustreless dry hair?

GLADYS. *(Awed, as is Mary.) Who are you?*

FAIRY PRINCESS. I am Princess Starbright! I can make love affairs turn out *right!* *(She produces a spray can of Starbright.)*

GLADYS. You mean, you can do something to make Ralph notice me again?

FAIRY PRINCESS. Try Starbright!

GLADYS. Oh! I think I've heard about Starbright.

FAIRY PRINCESS. *(Spraying Gladys' hair.)* It's the only way to bring life and lustre back into dry-as-grass hair. See? *(Gladys feels of her hair.)*

GLADYS. It *does* have more body now.

MARY. And lustre, too.

FAIRY PRINCESS. Don't let lustreless, dry hair spoil a happy love affair.

MARY. Oh, *thank* you, Princess Starbright.

FAIRY PRINCESS. "Star light, star bright! I wish I may, I wish I might! Enjoy *his* kisses every night."

GLADYS. *(At a mirror.)* Starbright gives my hair that glamorous sheen.

FAIRY PRINCESS. It's good for the scalp, too.

MARY. *(Enraptured.)* Gladys! You look like a movie star.

GLADYS. I owe it all to you, Princess Starbright.

FAIRY PRINCESS. And now we'll see if Ralph turns away when he brings you home *tonight.* *(She floats away.)*

GLADYS. *(Waving.)* Goodbye, Princess Starbright!

MARY. And now it's breakfast time, dear.

GLADYS. But remember, Mother, I've joined the Beauty Breakfast Club.

MARY. *(Opening a can.)* I know you have, and that's what I'm preparing for you now.

GLADYS. Beauty Breakfast helps me to stay slim and trim and keep my vim.

SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA

SIX ONE-ACT PLAYS

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BAD BREATH. What starts as a seemingly light spoof of 1960s *Mad Men*-era advertising and the All-American Family turns darker, exposing lies and betrayals behind the glossy sheen. (6 men, 9 women, doubling.) **CINDERELLA.** This sharp and sly retelling is set in a pretentious middle-class home, somewhere in America. But this young woman seems to have everything in hand to save herself. (4 women.) **THE DISPOSAL.** Jess was convicted for killing his pregnant wife, and now he sits on death row, awaiting execution today. He alternates between calm acceptance and violent hysteria, raging at his fellow inmates and the prison's chaplain. Jess is desperate for forgiveness from his father, but his father refuses to accept that Jess is guilty, robbing his son of the possibility of some kind of understanding. (8 men, 1 woman.) **A HERO OF OUR TIME.** Bonnie and Vic are teenage neighbors who have the eye for one another, but their families keep them apart. Bonnie's father worries that his daughter hangs out with bad company. Vic's religious, conservative mother wants her son to steer clear of impure thoughts and deeds. And so the parents condemn their children to lives of dissolution and repression. (4 men, 4 women.) **A MURDER.** A private man with a box of memories seeks lodging at a strange boarding house — a place where the weather and time itself can change in an instant. When the man discovers the dead body of a young boy in the wardrobe, we wonder if we really have crossed over into another dimension. (2 men, 1 woman.) **VENUS IN THERAPY.** The owner of a small beauty parlor in a country village, Venus loves to be in love. She seems to be ageless, and it's possible that she really is an embodiment of the goddess of love. But this Venus feels that her lifelong desire has become a curse, and that in the face of sexual obsession, people don't think of love as something real. (6 men, 7 women, doubling.)

Also by William Inge
BUS STOP
PICNIC
SUMMER BRAVE
and others

DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.

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