



BECKY SHAW

BY GINA GIONFRIDDO



DRAMATISTS
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World premiere in the 2008 Humana Festival of New American Plays
at Actors Theatre of Louisville.

New York premiere produced in 2009 by Second Stage Theatre, New York,
Carole Rothman, Artistic Director.

For Adrien-Alice Hansel

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I want to share a few beliefs about this play that I hope will function as permissions rather than prescriptions.

I don't think any character in this play is bad or wrong or crazy or worthless or unlovable. I don't think any of them are damaged beyond repair. I don't think any one character is more to blame than the others for the emotional wreckage that piles up in the second act.

I wish fingers didn't have to be pointed, but — trust me — they will be. In the audience talkbacks I have taken part in after productions of *Becky Shaw*, the one constant I have seen is the zeal to ascribe blame. The good news is that the audiences invariably fail to reach consensus as to which character is most deserving of their contempt. These characters seem to function as screens onto which audience members project old wounds and fierce convictions about how people ought to behave. The best comment I ever got in one of these talkbacks was from a woman who shook her head wistfully at the people arguing around her and opined that the characters were all “just doing the best they can.”

And I agree. There isn't any character in this play I wouldn't fix up with one of my friends. With some caveats, of course. I might say, “I have this great person in mind, but here's a thing or two you should know ...” But I would say this about any of my actual real friends in my actual real life. Like Suzanna says, “First date, everyone's nervous ... We all have our thing.” I'm not convinced these characters have significantly more things than your average Janes and Joes.

For whatever reason, I have seen Becky and Andrew take some of the harder beatings in these discussions, so I want to speak specifically to them. In imagining Becky, think of the fallen stars you've known, the people who came out of high school voted most likely to succeed and ... didn't. At seventeen, Becky had looks, brains, charm, and a full scholarship to an Ivy League school. Now she is, as Max rightly points out, “a thirty-five-year-old office temp” with a barren personal life. How did that happen? I think it

happened for the reasons Becky gives in the play, and for a few others she doesn't give. I leave the specifics of Becky's slide to the actress who plays her. The point I wish to drive home is that Becky is not a psycho loser but rather a winner who skidded off course and, through accumulated disappointments and failures, lost her moorings.

I have respect for Becky, and I have hope. She has an iron will not to accept her fate — her thin paycheck and monotonous typing-pool poverty. I believe that the woman Max describes at the end of the café scene — bitter, desperate, mercenary — is someone Becky truly does not want to be. It's fine to feel frustrated by Becky, oppressed by her, angry with her. Just keep in mind that she feels these same things about herself. Do I think Max and Becky have a future together? I don't know. But I don't think it's out of the question. If Becky were to work very hard and reclaim that old, good self she alludes to in the café ... Who knows?

Some words on Andrew. The potential pitfall in playing this character is to play the purity and truth of his goodness. I'm not sure I believe anyone is totally good and true, and I certainly don't believe Andrew is. If he seems more straightforward than the other characters, it may be because he's operating under the most self-delusion. He's a serial rescuer who derives self-esteem and maybe even sexual arousal from assuming the savior role in women's lives. He's got a bit of a broken bird fetish. Is this a terrible, wicked thing? I don't think it is. Suzanna isn't wrong to credit Andrew with "healing her." I think every character in this play manipulates other people to get their own needs met, and Andrew is no exception. He will come to understand this about himself in the course of the play, and it's an uncomfortable truth to face. I think the play works best when the actor playing Andrew mines the darker impulses in this very nice guy's character.

A couple more things that may help ...

I've heard from some of the artists who've worked on the play that they enjoyed knowing what I was chewing on when I sat down to write *Becky Shaw*. I was reading Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* after being intrigued by comments the film director, Mira Nair, made

regarding the perils of adapting the book for film in 1994. Also, I was puzzling over the many novels I read in college named after female characters that are (a) destroyers, (b) victims of destruction, or (c) both. Most often, they are both; their terrible reversals wrought by sexual indiscretions and attempts to climb into a higher class. I'm thinking of novels from the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, mostly — books by Richardson, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Hardy, and Dreiser, to name a few. On the dramatic front, I'd throw in *Hedda Gabler* and *Miss Julie*. I tried to change the name of this play at one point and my director, Peter DuBois, urged me not to do it. He said that the title *Becky Shaw* felt ominous and perilous for reasons he could not name. He led me to understand that we have a great literary tradition of ruinous and ruined eponymous women that we've internalized without analyzing.

Lastly, I know I have misquoted *Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*. Over their years of friendship, Max and Suzanna have misremembered the quotation and — I think — slightly improved upon the original text. If it trips you up, you can change Max's line to "Bitch, where's the fucking bourbon?" But don't change Suzanna's.

I want to thank a few people not credited elsewhere who were in the development trenches with me and helped me find the play I wanted to write: Arijja Bareikis, Patch Darragh, Dashiell Eaves, Morgan Hallett, Charles Haugland, Jesse Hooker, and Zan Sawyer-Daily.

Thanks for hearing me out. Have fun.

Gina Gionfriddo
February 2010

BECKY SHAW was commissioned by Actors Theatre of Louisville (Marc Masterson, Artistic Director) and had its world premiere at the Humana Festival of New American Plays in February 2008. It was directed by Peter DuBois; the set design was by Paul Owen; the lighting design was by Brian J. Lilienthal; the sound design was by Benjamin Marcum; the costume design was by Jessica Ford; the dramaturg was Adrien-Alice Hansel; and the stage manager was Michael D. Domue. The cast was as follows:

MAX GARRETT David Wilson Barnes
SUZANNA SLATER Mia Barron
SUSAN SLATER Janis Dardaris
BECKY SHAW Annie Parisse
ANDREW PORTER Davis Duffield

BECKY SHAW premiered Off-Broadway at Second Stage Theatre (Carole Rothman, Artistic Director), opening January 8, 2009. It was directed by Peter DuBois; the set design was by Derek McLane; the costume design was by Jeff Mahshie; the lighting design was by David Weiner; the sound design was by Walter Trarbach; and the production stage manager was Lori Ann Zepp. The cast was as follows:

MAX GARRETT David Wilson Barnes
SUZANNA SLATER Emily Bergl
SUSAN SLATER Kelly Bishop
BECKY SHAW Annie Parisse
ANDREW PORTER Thomas Sadoski

CHARACTERS

MAX GARRETT

SUZANNA SLATER

SUSAN SLATER

BECKY SHAW

ANDREW PORTER

PLACE AND TIME

The United States (New York City, Providence, and Boston), 2009.

BECKY SHAW

ACT ONE

Scene 1

A room at a mid-range hotel in New York City. Suzanna, thirty-four, sits on the (made) bed, watching a Forensic Files–like true crime program on TV. She’s wearing a black dress (plain and casual; nothing sexy, formal, or funereal). She’s cozied-up and mesmerized ... soothed by a story of female disaster worse than her own. The narrator reports on a dead woman in an eerie monotone. Something like: “The young mother had been strangled ... and stabbed thirty-seven times.” Max, thirty-five, lets himself into the room — a man on a mission, energized. He watches enough of the TV show to realize what it is, then uses the remote to turn it off.

SUZANNA. Hey! I’m watching that.

MAX. He strangled her. She’s not coming home.

SUZANNA. Turn it back on.

MAX. No. I cut you off, remember? You’re not allowed to watch that stuff.

SUZANNA. It soothes me and I need it. Don’t judge me.

MAX. I’m not judging you. I’m disciplining you.

SUZANNA. I did nothing wrong! My mother is the one who showed up —

MAX. Stop! I just spent forty minutes calming your mother down, and she will be here soon. You need to be a big girl and face your big girl problems. (*Indicating TV.*) No more dead prostitutes on the autopsy channel until you do that.

SUZANNA. Why do you have a key to my room?

MAX. Because I paid for it.

SUZANNA. Did you pay for my mom's room, too?

MAX. Yes.

SUZANNA. Because we're poor now?

MAX. That's ... what we're all gonna talk about at dinner. Your mother'll be here soon.

SUZANNA. I've decided I won't see her.

MAX. Excuse me — what?

SUZANNA. I am grieving my father's death. My mother brought a ... a man with her. To a meeting about the estate. That is so insulting to my father.

MAX. Your father's dead. His feelings don't matter.

SUZANNA. Max!

MAX. Suzanna, you made a big scene in the lobby. You made your point.

SUZANNA. I won't see her.

MAX. So ... how's this gonna work? I go to dinner with your mother and her manfriend ... You stay here and cry while she takes all the money?

SUZANNA. You would never let that happen.

MAX. You know, I might. I don't like this weepy-weepy wah-wah thing you're doing. I don't respect it.

SUZANNA. Max, I'm grieving.

MAX. Negotiations are all about who has the biggest dick in the room ... Be sad, grieve. But do it with a big dick.

SUZANNA. Grieve with a big dick? That's not possible.

MAX. Uhhh ... Charles Bronson in *Death Wish*? *Rambo*? Mrs. Voorhees in *Friday the 13th*?

SUZANNA. None of those people are real, Max!

MAX. Suzanna, you gotta pull it together. Clock strikes midnight, you can regress. Light your vanilla candle and write in your dream journal. Until then, you're a soldier. Fix yourself up.

SUZANNA. (*As she tries ...*) In one of my textbooks, I read about these families ... Craziest thing, Max. When someone in the family is in pain, the other family members do this thing called nurture. You ever heard of that?

MAX. No. (*There's a knock on the door. Max springs to answer it.*) No crying. Big dick. (*Max answers the door and escorts Susan Slater, sixty, into the room. She has MS and may use a cane. She's attractive,*

but there's a heaviness to her: the fatigue of endless fatigue. Her mind is sharp and she's cultivated a forceful manner to compensate for her physical disability.) OK. So. Clean slate. Last few hours never happened. I'd like to welcome my two favorite ladies to New York City. We're all so glad we're here because we love each other so much, etc., etc. Now. I'm gonna suggest that we stick to the original plan.

SUSAN. I never suggested otherwise.

SUZANNA. You brought Lester! The plan did not include Lester!

SUSAN. Suzanna, I am disabled. I can't travel alone.

SUZANNA. I offered to drive to Richmond and pick you up —

SUSAN. I don't feel safe in a car with you. I'm sorry if that hurts your feelings, but —

MAX. It hurts my feelings, Susan. I taught her to drive.

SUSAN. I'm not blaming you. Suzanna has assumed a somber attitude since her father died.

SUZANNA. So I can't drive?

SUSAN. You're sluggish. If a drunk driver is careening into my path, I don't want my life in your hands. I'm sorry.

MAX. Suzanna's attitude is not the point. Lester is not the point.

SUZANNA. Lester is the point! I am not going to discuss my father's estate with your ... whatever he is to you in addition to being your house painter ...

SUSAN. He's my lover.

SUZANNA. Oh, my God. How could you?

SUSAN. (*Anger spikes.*) Listen to me. Your father died six months ago ...

SUZANNA. It was three months!

MAX. Four. It was four months; you're both liars.

SUSAN. You didn't lose a child or even a breast. Your father died of natural causes after a life well-lived. That's not loss, it's transition.

SUZANNA. How can you ... It's a huge loss.

SUSAN. It's an old man dying peacefully. It's not tragic —

SUZANNA. He was my dad.

SUSAN. And you're an adult. This ... This is a costume.

SUZANNA. What — my clothes?

SUSAN. The black dress. You're infatuated with your grief. You think you've finally found something that will distinguish you.

MAX. OK, that's enough.

SUSAN. It's not a distinction, Suzanna. A parent's death ... It is the most common of milestones —

MAX. My proposal is that we keep to the plan. We go to dinner, we talk facts and figures. Lester can join us for dessert.

SUSAN. No. I won't leave him sitting in the room while we have our nice dinner.

MAX. See ... *This* is the point. It's not going to be a nice dinner, Susan. We're here to talk about your finances —

SUSAN. I don't discuss money at the dinner table. You grew up in my household; you know that.

MAX. Oh, no. No. You agreed to this!

SUSAN. I agreed to hear your opinions —

MAX. They're not opinions.

SUSAN. I'm perfectly willing to have a conversation about the estate, but not over dinner. (*To Suzanna.*) Some women — Marilyn Monroe, Princess Diana — are sensual in grief. You are not.

SUZANNA. Max!

MAX. Susan, please —

SUSAN. Do you disagree? Look at her.

MAX. Let me tell you something. Suzanna can be fixed. I'm not worried about Suzanna. Your financial health, on the other hand —

SUSAN. Lester and I will meet you downstairs. We'll share a meal and some good wine. We'll talk business in the morning.

MAX. No! I don't have time in the morning, Susan! And you can't afford good wine.

SUSAN. (*After a beat.*) Are you enjoying this drama you've created?

MAX. Your husband created it. I am just the messenger.

SUSAN. This is terribly exhilarating for you. I can see it.

SUZANNA. Mom.

MAX. How can you ... You and Richard raised me, Susan. For all practical purposes, you're my parents.

SUSAN. And that only makes it crueler.

MAX. You think I take pleasure in this? I would be a monster —

SUSAN. Not a monster, a powermonger. I know that look.

MAX. What look? This look?

SUSAN. That is the look you get when my family's stupidity offers you a foothold to gain power.

MAX. Anytime I can clean up after your family's stupidity, I'm happy to do it.

SUZANNA. Stop it. What is this "your family," "my family." We're ... This is our family. (*A difficult silence that Suzanna rushes to fill ...*) How broke are we?

MAX. I think we should drink some alcohol.

SUSAN. Lester is hungry. Whatever you want to say, you may say now or in the morning.

MAX. I have a full day tomorrow —

SUSAN. Then say it now. Cogently, please. Do not savor.

MAX. (*After a beat.*) The business hasn't turned a profit in nearly a decade. Richard burned through a lot of your savings patching holes, keeping it afloat. I think it was largely ... sentimental. It's an old family business, he hoped the tide would turn ...

SUZANNA. Are we broke?

MAX. No. But your savings are ... thin. I have a plan I would like to propose —

SUSAN. I have a very hard time believing this, Max. Yoshi would certainly have told me if —

MAX. Yoshi lost his objectivity. He'll be the first to admit that ...

SUSAN. Nonsense. He's a Japanese businessman. His objectivity is all he has.

SUZANNA. Mom, that's racist.

SUSAN. Send me the figures, I will show them to my financial advisor.

MAX. Your financial advisor is Yoshi.

SUSAN. Correct.

MAX. Yoshi no longer wishes to be involved.

SUSAN. Because you bullied him in your zeal to seize power. I'll bring him back.

MAX. There's no power to seize, Susan! (*Pause.*) Look. Yoshi asked me ... There was a loss of objectivity.

SUSAN. In your opinion ...

MAX. In reality on planet Earth. Your husband was stupid about his money and his financial advisor was ... There was a romantic situation and I'm sorry.

SUSAN. (*After a beat.*) Oh, you are devious.

SUZANNA. Romantic?

SUSAN. He means homosexual.

MAX. I don't think we need to get into labels.

SUZANNA. Gay?

MAX. Bi. Let's say your father was bi.

SUZANNA. You don't believe in bisexuality.

SUSAN. I'm very upset with you, Max.

MAX. Me?

BECKY SHAW

by Gina Gionfriddo

2M, 3W

In Gina Gionfriddo's *BECKY SHAW*, a newlywed couple fixes up two romantically challenged friends: wife's best friend, meet husband's sexy and strange new co-worker. When an evening calculated to bring happiness takes a dark turn, crisis and comedy ensue in a wickedly funny play that asks what we owe the people we love and the strangers who land on our doorstep.

"Gina Gionfriddo's comedy of bad manners, a tangled tale of love, sex and ethics among a quartet of men and women in their thirties, is as engrossing as it is ferociously funny, like a big box of fireworks fizzing and crackling across the stage from its first moments to its last ... deftly plotted, scabrous and sharp-witted ... One of the great pleasures of BECKY SHAW is the way the moral ground keeps shifting underneath your feet."

—The New York Times

"The characters in Gionfriddo's blind-date-gone-bad black comedy share the potential to revolt ... They're also subversively funny — and improbably charming. Grade: A."

—Entertainment Weekly

"... scathing, class-conscious comedy ... BECKY SHAW exerts a hypnotic pull, thanks in large part to the wonderfully witty dialogue and complex characterizations."

—The New York Post

"Blithely cynical and devastatingly funny ... witty observations on the emotional damage inflicted by neurotic people in the name of love ... Gionfriddo is some kind of genius."

—Variety

"The perfect nourishment for theatergoers starved for a dramatic conflagration or two ... Gionfriddo's creations talk with rat-tat-tat ferocity ... the laughs flow freely."

—Associated Press

Also by Gina Gionfriddo

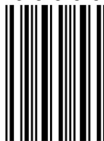
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