



BLACK TIE

BY **A.R. GURNEY**



DRAMATISTS
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World Premiere produced by Primary Stages,
Casey Childs, Founder and Executive Producer;
Andrew Leynse, Artistic Director; Elliot Fox, Managing Director, February 2011.

BLACK TIE was originally produced at the 59E59 Theatre by Primary Stages (Casey Childs, Executive Producer; Andrew Leynse, Artistic Director; Elliot Fox, Managing Director) in New York City, opening on February 8, 2011. It was directed by Mark Lamos; the set design was by John Arnone; the costume design was by Jess Goldstein; the lighting design was by Stephen Strawbridge; the original music and sound design were by John Gromada; and the production stage manager was Matthew Melchiorre. The cast was as follows:

CURTIS Gregg Edelman
FATHER Daniel Davis
MIMI Carolyn McCormick
ELSIE Elvy Yost
TEDDY Ari Brand

CHARACTERS

CURTIS, middle-aged

CURTIS'S FATHER, older

MIMI, Curtis's wife, middle-aged

ELSIE, their daughter, in her twenties

TEDDY, their son, in his twenties

PLACE

The sitting area of what passes for a suite at a resort hotel, probably part of a chain like Hyatt or Ramada, near the southern tip of Lake George in the lower Adirondack Mountains. The general effect should be slightly tacky: a coat closet near the entrance to the room, with a full length mirror on the door facing front; a somewhat worn wall-to-wall carpet; a couch and typical generic chairs, a desk with a telephone; a TV; a cabinet containing a mini-bar. Just offstage somewhere is the bedroom and bath. The walls might be knotty pine, and the pictures on the walls might be photographs of Adirondacks deer or trout. A window somewhere might present a view of the mountains. The general impression should be slightly tacky and touristy.

TIME

The play takes place today, during late afternoon and early evening on a Friday in mid-August.

Action is continuous and there is no intermission.

BLACK TIE

At rise: Curtis, in a white T-shirt, is putting on his tuxedo pants, working his shoulders into the suspenders. Then he puts on the jacket which is draped over the back of the couch on top of a dark plastic suit bag on a hanger. His feet are bare. An open Val Pak suitcase on the coffee table contains the other accoutrements of formal evening wear, such as a starched dress shirt, a black bow tie, a small box of studs, and a cummerbund. His black shoes and socks are off to the side somewhere. Curtis goes to regard himself in the mirror. He tugs at his jacket, making sure it fits, then turns his back to the mirror, looks over his shoulder to see how it looks in back. When he turns again to face the mirror, he sees his father, through the mirror, standing opposite him, fully and elegantly dressed in a similar tuxedo.

FATHER. *(From the mirror.)* Well, well.

CURTIS. Hiya, Dad.

FATHER. It's a wise child that knows his own father.

CURTIS. Lately you keep coming to mind.

FATHER. It's been quite a while.

CURTIS. Yes it has. *(He goes to scrutinize the mirror.)*

FATHER. *(Arriving beside him.)* The prodigal returns.

CURTIS. OK. Put it that way.

FATHER. I like very much what you're wearing.

CURTIS. I knew you would.

FATHER. Looks vaguely familiar.

CURTIS. It should, Dad. It was yours. Mother gave it to me after you died.

FATHER. At least she didn't give it to the Goodwill.

CURTIS. Not on your life.

FATHER. *(Moving easily into the room.)* Just on my death, eh?

CURTIS. That's a good one, Dad.
FATHER. I thought you had one of your own.
CURTIS. I grew out of it, Dad. So I gave mine to Teddy.
FATHER. My grandson Teddy?
CURTIS. Tonight I'm wearing yours, he's wearing mine.
FATHER. Does yours fit him?
CURTIS. Well enough.
FATHER. As Mark Twain said, "Clothes make the man ..."
CURTIS. Ah yes.
FATHER. "... And naked people have little or no influence on society."
CURTIS. (*Smiling.*) Good one, Dad.
FATHER. I must say mine fits you reasonably well.
CURTIS. I took it to a tailor.
FATHER. It was originally tailor-made.
CURTIS. That's what he said. He said it was a first-rate tuxedo.
FATHER. Dinner jacket.
CURTIS. Here we go.
FATHER. We call it a dinner jacket. "Tuxedo" sounds slightly below the salt.
CURTIS. Below the what?
FATHER. Below the salt. An expression from the Middle Ages. If you were seated below the bowl of salt at a nobleman's table, you were not considered part of the nobility.
CURTIS. A-ha.
FATHER. The word "tuxedo" came in fairly recently. It was introduced by a group of rich New Yorkers in a summer resort called Tuxedo Park. They had all been wearing tails but decided to cut them off for the summer season. One of those bold New York gestures which caught on. Like brunch.
CURTIS. Interesting.
FATHER. Yes, but not important. Turn around. Let me see the back.
CURTIS. The tailor had to pull in the waist and lengthen the pants a little.
FATHER. Trousers, call them trousers. Gentlemen wear trousers. Gents wear pants. Since you're wearing my clothes, I hope you'll do me the honor of referring to them correctly.
CURTIS. I'll try, Dad.
FATHER. Or better yet, don't refer to them all. Simply *appear* in them. Wear them comfortably and unselfconsciously, as if they

were your natural attire. Did your dear mother also leave you my dress shirts?

CURTIS. They'd gotten a little yellow, Dad. I bought a new one for tonight.

FATHER. I hope it's not all fluffy in front.

CURTIS. (*Showing him a dress shirt from his bag, still wrapped in tissue paper.*) This was the best they had at Brooks Brothers.

FATHER. It looks good enough. You can always tell a gentleman by his linen and his leather.

CURTIS. Ah yes.

FATHER. Do you have my pearl studs? And matching cufflinks?

CURTIS. (*Displaying a small stud box.*) Absolutely, Dad. See? Here they are.

FATHER. I inherited those from *my* father.

CURTIS. I know.

FATHER. Teddy should get them next.

CURTIS. If he wants them.

FATHER. Of course he'll want them. Why wouldn't he want them?

CURTIS. I'll be wearing your cummerbund, Dad. (*Shows it.*) And your silk socks. With garters. (*Shows them.*) And even one of your monogrammed handkerchiefs. (*Displays all these items from his suitcase.*)

FATHER. I got all those accoutrements in Paris on our honeymoon.

CURTIS. Mother told me. (*Curtis takes off his jacket and carefully puts it back on its hanger. He hangs it and the suit bag from a hook over the mirror, thus masking the mirror for most of the rest of the play. He might start to insert the studs and cufflinks into his shirt and will continue to get dressed at various moments during the course of the play.*)

FATHER. Well sir. So tonight you're putting on the Ritz, eh?

CURTIS. Sure am.

FATHER. And I assume your dear wife Mimi will be putting on the dog.

CURTIS. Let's hope.

FATHER. Those are expressions from the movies, by the way. Fred Astaire in evening clothes put on the Ritz. Jean Harlow wearing a fur piece put on the dog.

CURTIS. Didn't know that.

FATHER. Of course, it all leads ultimately to the question of why? Why did you transport my evening clothes all the way up here to

this undistinguished suite in this second-rate hotel crouched in a seamier corner of the lower Adirondacks?

CURTIS. Teddy's getting married.

FATHER. Teddy? Married? The little rascal who beat me at chess?

CURTIS. He's out of college now, Dad.

FATHER. No.

CURTIS. And taking the step. So tonight Mimi and I, as parents of the groom, are giving the rehearsal dinner.

FATHER. You mean the bridal dinner.

CURTIS. These days they call it a rehearsal dinner.

FATHER. How do you rehearse a dinner? Do you practice your table manners?

CURTIS. What they rehearse is the wedding ceremony, Dad. Which they're doing right now. The dinner comes after.

FATHER. Why do they have to rehearse anything? All they need to do is walk slowly down the aisle and then stand quietly at the altar while the minister reads them their lines.

CURTIS. Not these days, Dad. Now the kids make up their own lines.

FATHER. Oh Good Lord.

CURTIS. And they won't be in a church. They're getting married in an old bandstand down by the lake.

FATHER. A bandstand? By a *lake*?

CURTIS. This is what they call a "destination wedding," Dad. It's here where they met.

FATHER. Do they plan to get married in bathing suits?

CURTIS. No, Dad.

FATHER. Glad to hear it. I hope at least they'll be married by a man of the cloth.

CURTIS. It's a woman, actually. A woman of the cloth.

FATHER. Will *she* be wearing a bathing suit?

CURTIS. Cut it out, Dad. She's an ordained Presbyterian. And some of the ceremony will be very traditional. There are ushers and bridesmaids and wedding rings and all that.

FATHER. Thank God.

CURTIS. And after the rehearsal, they'll all come back here, and get gussied up, and then Mimi and I will provide them with a good dinner.

FATHER. Ah. Dear Mimi.

CURTIS. She's downstairs right now, putting flowers on the tables and arranging the seating.

FATHER. You're actually giving the bridal dinner here? In this thoroughly undistinguished hotel?

CURTIS. It's the best place we could find where everyone could stay.

FATHER. Is the bride attractive?

CURTIS. Very.

FATHER. What's her name?

CURTIS. Her name is Maya.

FATHER. Maya? Maya what?

CURTIS. Maya Benkovich.

FATHER. What nationality is that?

CURTIS. I believe it's Croatian, Dad. Her grandparents came from Croatia.

FATHER. Croatia. Where they have the Dalmatian Coast.

CURTIS. That's it.

FATHER. Where Dalmatian dogs come from. They used to run alongside fire engines.

CURTIS. I guess they did.

FATHER. Is the bride's father a fireman?

CURTIS. Knock it off, Dad.

FATHER. Nothing wrong with firemen. They save lives. They save property. In the insurance business, we used to be very appreciative of firemen. We'd send a case of scotch over every Christmas. Do you like the bride's family?

CURTIS. Very much.

FATHER. Do they have any money?

CURTIS. We really haven't gotten into that, Dad.

FATHER. What does her father do?

CURTIS. Come on, Dad.

FATHER. Tell me what he does, and I'll tell you what he makes.

CURTIS. He's in the food business.

FATHER. Food is good. We can always use food. Retail? Wholesale? What?

CURTIS. I believe he manages a supermarket over in Utica.

FATHER. Do we know anyone in Utica?

CURTIS. I don't know, Dad.

FATHER. I'm not sure we do. (*Pensively.*) I'm not sure we should.

CURTIS. Please, Dad.

BLACK TIE

by A.R. Gurney

3M, 2W

Father of the groom, Curtis, simply wants to make a memorable toast. But before he is able to raise his glass, he must defend the time-honored ways of his past, including his attire. Cultures clash when a surprise guest is announced, threatening to throw convention out the window. Curtis finds that balancing the standards of his late father and the needs of his future family may prove too messy for a black tie affair.

“There are not many fixed verities in the world of the theater, but one of the few is that when A.R. Gurney returns to home territory — writing about the manners and morals of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant upper class — the results will most likely be gratifying. Mr. Gurney’s BLACK TIE ... is one of this prolific writer’s most enjoyable plays in years, a modest but effortlessly engaging comedy about the generational shifts in the subset of humanity Mr. Gurney has been writing about with warmth, humor and insight throughout his career ... BLACK TIE is insightful and touching in its depiction of a man welcoming back that ghost many of us have to banish consciously from our minds as we grow older, the voice of a parent (or grandparent) that becomes an internal barometer of the propriety of our behavior, whether we like it or not.”

—The New York Times

“A lighthearted romp about what really matters — manners ... As usual, Gurney’s dialog is sharp.”

—NYTheatre.com

“Wryly witty and warmly embracing of its characters’ eccentricities and foibles, this generation-gap tale is a charmer — funny, observant, and altogether winning ... highly satisfying, quietly touching ... Gurney’s faith in the ability of civil behavior to improve human relations may be quixotic in this increasingly selfish, solipsistic world, but this gentle cri de coeur persuasively argues that there’s hardly any problem that wouldn’t benefit from it.”

—BackStage

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