



**COMPULSION
OR
THE HOUSE BEHIND**

BY RINNE GROFF



**DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.**



COMPULSION OR THE HOUSE BEHIND
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The World Premiere of COMPULSION OR THE HOUSE BEHIND was produced by
Yale Repertory Theatre, The Public Theater and Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

COMPULSION OR THE HOUSE BEHIND was originally commissioned by
Berkeley Repertory Theatre
Tony Taccone, Artistic Director; Susan Medak, Managing Director
and
The Public Theater
Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director; Andrew D. Hamingson, Executive Director

AUTHOR'S NOTES

On Actors and Puppeteers:

This play requires 3 actors (2 male, 1 female) and at least one puppeteer. All the male parts aside from Mr. Silver are played by the same actor. All the female parts are played by the same actress. The script denotes which specific performer should voice each puppet throughout the play.

I recommend using marionettes as the primary form of puppetry in the play for the metaphorical implications of strings being pulled and because it has a literal referent: Sid Silver had a marionette theater in Chicago.

On the play:

My *COMPULSION** is a work of fiction based on one chapter in the life of a fantastic writer named Meyer Levin. It wasn't the only chapter in his life, but it was a doozy. As he describes it in the opening paragraph of his autobiographical *The Obsession*:

In the middle of my life I fell into a trouble that was to grip, occupy, haunt, and all but devour me, these twenty years. I've used the word "fall." It implies something accidental, a stumbling, but we also use the word in speaking of "falling in love," in which there is a sense of elevation, and where a fatedness is implied, a feeling of being inevitably bound in through all the mysterious components of character to this expression of the life process, whether in the end beautifully gratifying, or predominantly painful.

Oh, how I wish I had the space to quote more from that fascinating book.

In the writing of this play, I have relied much on Levin's writings, especially *In Search*, *The Fanatic*, and *The Obsession*. Levin's published works are alas largely out of print, but still available; many of the unpublished are archived at the excellent Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University. There, too, one can find incredible letters from Levin's widow Tereska Torres, a brilliant published author in her own right who has also written about this

affair in her husband's life, most engagingly and nakedly in *Les Maisons Hantées de Meyer Levin*.

I first became aware of the story which became the springboard for this play when Frank Rich reviewed Lawrence Yurman's terrific non-fiction book *An Obsession with Anne Frank*. From there, my research took me to many places, but in terms of larger works, it feels appropriate to acknowledge Ralph Melnick's *The Stolen Legacy of Anne Frank* and, of course, the intense and remarkable book which sets this tale in motion, first published in English as *The Diary of a Young Girl* and now comprehensively presented and contextualized in *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Revised Critical Edition*. Without the writer Anne Frank and her contributions to the world, none of this work holds any meaning.

*There is also Meyer Levin's *Compulsion*, a work of fiction based on the lurid facts of the Leopold and Loeb murder and its subsequent trial. I decided to re-use Levin's title for many reasons, one of them being that in writing this play, I model Levin's methodology for that novel. Quoting from the introduction to *Compulsion*:

I have followed an actual case, are these, then, actual persons? I follow known events. Some scenes are, however, total interpolations, and some of my personages have no correspondence to persons in the case in question.

In Levin's *Compulsion*, there is a young University of Chicago student and cub reporter which Levin based on himself and to whom he gave the name Sid Silver.

COMPULSION received its world premiere at the Public Theater in a co-production with Berkeley Repertory Theatre and Yale Repertory Theatre, opening February 17, 2011. It was directed by Oskar Eustis; the set design was by Eugene Lee; the costume design was by Susan Hilferty; the lighting design was by Michael Chybowski; the sound design was by Darron L. West; the puppet design and supervision were by Matt Acheson; and the stage manager was Buzz Cohen. The cast was as follows:

MR. SILVER Mandy Patinkin
MISS MERMIN, MRS. SILVER Hannah Cabell
MR. THOMAS, MR. HARRIS,
MR. FERRIS, MR. MATZLIACH Matte Osian
PUPPETEERS Emily DeCola, Daniel Fay, Eric Wright

CHARACTERS

MR. SILVER

MISS MERMIN

MR. THOMAS

MR. HARRIS

MRS. SILVER

MR. FERRIS

MR. MATZLIACH

MR. WILLIAMS

THE MARIONETTES

PLACE

New York State and Israel.

TIME

1951 to 1981.

COMPULSION OR THE HOUSE BEHIND

Prologue

Mr. Silver, 45, an American-born Jewish writer of Eastern European descent, works in his studio.

A marionette resembling Anne Frank is also at work, writing in her diary.

ANNE FRANK. (*Voiced by the actress.*) That's the difficulty in these times: Ideals, dreams, and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered. It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart.

I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness. I hear the ever-approaching thunder, which will destroy us, too. I can feel the suffering of millions. And yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think it will come out all right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again. In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out. Yours, Anne M. Frank. (*Beat, looking out to the audience.*) I shouldn't have told you that. I shouldn't tell you anything from my diary really because I don't hold the copyright. Especially not when quoting material in a play. In the theater! You've got to be very careful what you say in the theater. It can lead to litigation.

ACT ONE

In America (1951 – 1958)

Scene 1

New York City. 1951. Offices at a publishing house. Mr. Thomas enters to Silver.

The actress who voiced Anne Frank enters in role as Miss Mermin, 23, during the scene.

THOMAS. (*Shaking hands.*) What a pleasure. I'm a huge fan.

SILVER. Oh, thank you.

THOMAS. I have to admit I've got a soft spot for your Chicago stuff. I wanted to publish all those novels.

SILVER. That's funny. Somewhere in my files I have a bunch of early rejection letters from Doubleday.

THOMAS. It was hard at that time, harder, with Jewish material so-called, but I was pushing for it. And when they were hits, I called everyone into my office and I said, "Told you so." If I had a nickel.

SILVER. Yeah, me, too.

THOMAS. Well, you do now, I imagine. Your autobiography, among other things. I hear that's doing *quite* well.

SILVER. For a book about what it means to be a Jew in the world today, it's breaking records.

THOMAS. It's a crime you had to self-publish there. But wonderful that it's finding a niche. My assistant showed me: You got some impressive back-cover quotes.

SILVER. It's gotten a lot of support now that it's out there. It just had to force its way. Nothing worthwhile ever comes easy.

THOMAS. Sure, but when Albert Einstein says you've written a great book ... Because you have to figure he's a genius. (*Miss Mermin, still in the background, lets out a little laugh.*)

SILVER. (*Turning to her.*) Oh, hello.

THOMAS. This is Miss Mermin. You haven't met Miss Mermin?

MERMIN. Very pleased. I didn't know that Professor Einstein gave you a quote.

SILVER. He read the book and admired it.

MERMIN. No, it's great. And he's right: It is an admirable book. It's just a little weird. A physicist.

SILVER. Thomas Mann also wrote very kindly.

MERMIN. That, I read. And Quentin Reynolds.

THOMAS. Miss Mermin is our new junior editor here, and she knows everyone in the literary world, or intends to. But please, Mr. Silver, promise us you'll knock on our door before you go self-publishing again.

SILVER. Every one of my books, I'm sure, crossed the desk of someone here.

THOMAS. All the more reason for you to contact me directly when you have something new to share with the world.

SILVER. Well, I do.

THOMAS. Excuse me?

SILVER. I do have something to share with the world.

MERMIN. Are you talking about the Leopold and Loeb book?

SILVER. No. How did you know about that?

MERMIN. It's my job to know. With a certain echelon of writer, what they're working on. Is it true you went to university with the murderers?

SILVER. I'm flattered that you know so much about me. But the Leopold and Loeb book is not what I came here to discuss.

THOMAS. But if we can ever help that book, at a time when that book wants to be helped ...

SILVER. That book isn't even written yet; how can it be helped? What is this meeting about? Because I thought you invited me here to discuss the manuscript which I forwarded to your offices at Mr. Otto Frank's request.

THOMAS. Yes, the diary of the young girl.

SILVER. Did I somehow fail to make my devotion to this material clear enough in my cover letter?

THOMAS. No.

SILVER. And I know, "Jewish material so-called," but this document could transcend all that.

THOMAS. Mr. Silver, we've already circulated the manuscript to all our departments.

SILVER. Spare me the speech. I've heard it from every other American publishing house already, and it's so short-sighted. I'm not pretending this book will make you a million dollars. But you've got to think bigger than immediate gains. The prestige of publishing such a book: It's a first of its kind; a revelation!

THOMAS. Okay, I'm going to stop you there.

SILVER. Have you read the diary? Have you read it?

THOMAS. Is he talking about the same adolescent book by the Jewess?

MERMIN. I don't think Mr. Silver understands.

SILVER. I do understand, all too well, but I protest, and I will continue to raise my voice. Jewish writing must not be swept aside. Unless it's Jewish writing about two Jewish murderers; everyone wants a book about Leopold and Loeb. Stop with the murderers. What about the six million *murdered*?

MERMIN. Mr. Silver, Doubleday is publishing the diary.

SILVER. You're publishing the what?

MERMIN. The diary. We thought you knew. We've already contacted your dear friend Otto Frank.

THOMAS. And he's accepted Doubleday's firm offer for English language publication.

SILVER. God in Heaven. So you *did* ask me here to ... But then all the talk was about *my* writing and when's the new book coming out. I have to sit down. You have no idea. What this book means to me. And how hard I've been pushing it to these stupid idiots in the publishing world. Present company excluded. You're not idiots; you're geniuses. Making a choice for the good of humanity. Mr. Frank didn't write me about any of this.

THOMAS. Miss Mermin has been corresponding with Mr. Frank directly.

MERMIN. Isn't he wonderful?

SILVER. Wonderful isn't even the word. I could die right now. I could kiss you.

THOMAS. Please don't. She already has a suitor. Look, she's blushing. So you're pleased?

SILVER. Pleased for Anne Frank, yes. And for her father who's devoting his life to spreading her message. And since we're all in this together now, I mustn't hold back from you, I'm pleased for me, too. With the American publication secured, it's time to get going on a stage adaptation. That's our plan, Mr. Frank and I, to

turn this book into a play. Imagine how many more people we can affect when they see Anne on stage, right there in front of them. “From amongst themselves a teller must arise.” That’s my only mission now: to help the teller to tell.

THOMAS. The teller?

SILVER. Did you read, you didn’t read my autobiography; no, it’s all right. A teller “from amongst themselves.” I wrote those words to say that no matter how hard we tried to report the story of the Holocaust — even those of us who were there to witness the liberation of the camps — none of us seemed able to make meaning, to make the world aware of the meaning. It had to be a writer from within. More than an observer. More than a victim. A teller.

MERMIN. Incredible. That he wrote about that need before he even laid eyes on Anne’s book. It was a premonition.

SILVER. More like a hope. A prayer. I’ll never forget the first time I held her, her diary in my hands. Cover to cover in one sitting. My wife had given me this thin little volume that had caught her eye at the bookseller when we were living in the South of France.

THOMAS. What a great story.

SILVER. Another time.

MERMIN. We’re just on a very tight timetable for publication.

THOMAS. We want to get this thing out as soon as possible.

SILVER. Here, here. How can I help? You probably want me to write an introduction for Anne’s material?

THOMAS. The introduction?

SILVER. What am I saying? You must have access to every Jewish writer there is. I shouldn’t get ahead of myself.

THOMAS. The introduction isn’t by a Jewish writer.

MERMIN. No, uh, Doubleday felt, and Mr. Frank agreed, that it might serve the book better if the introduction were written by someone who wasn’t Jewish.

SILVER. Why’s that?

MERMIN. When I tell you who’s agreed, I hardly think race, or religion, will be an issue.

SILVER. But religion is an issue; it’s *the* issue in Anne’s story.

THOMAS. No. Eleanor Roosevelt is doing the introduction.

SILVER. Eleanor Roosevelt?

THOMAS. A coup by Miss Mermin. She’s already written it.

SILVER. Eleanor Roosevelt has?

THOMAS. No, Miss Mermin has.

COMPULSION OR THE HOUSE BEHIND

by Rinne Groff

2M, 1W (doubling, flexible casting)

Sid Silver is a man obsessed. When he learns about a young girl named Anne Frank and her extraordinary diary, Silver makes it his mission to ensure her tale is heard. But is the manuscript a work of art? A cultural treasure? Once publishers and producers get involved, it becomes “a very valuable product” — and his good intentions prove to be his undoing.

“Fascinating ... The puppets eloquently express one of the play’s major themes: how real life differs from stage life, how theater lies even when it tells the truth.”

—**The New York Times**

“A riveting drama for three actors and an ensemble of marionettes ... [Groff’s] semifictional dive into one real Jewish writer’s litigious battle over Anne Frank’s diary is a compelling foray along a thin line between idealism and fanaticism.”

—**The San Francisco Chronicle**

“Rinne Groff takes us to the intersection of history and show business in her very powerful new play ... COMPULSION is a rich mix of history, entertainment world gossip, and a man’s obsession over a work of art that doesn’t really belong to him. It’s a terrific show.”

—**The Connecticut Post**

Also by Rinne Groff
THE RUBY SUNRISE

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