



GHOST-WRITER

BY MICHAEL HOLLINGER



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GHOST-WRITER
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Originally produced by the Arden Theatre Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

This play was developed with the support of PlayPenn
(Paul Meshejian, Artistic Director).

for M
(talk about patience ...)

GHOST-WRITER was originally produced by the Arden Theatre Company (Terrence J. Nolen, Producing Artistic Director; Amy Murphy, Managing Director) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, opening on September 15, 2010. The production was directed by James J. Christy; the scenic design was by David P. Gordon; the costume design was by Charlotte Cloe Fox Wind; the lighting design was by Jerold R. Forsyth; the sound design was by Jorge Cousineau; the dramaturg was Edward Sobel; the assistant director was Matt Silva; and the production stage manager was Alec E. Ferrell. The cast was as follows:

MYRA BABBAGEMegan Bellwoar
FRANKLIN WOOLSEY Douglas Rees
VIVIAN WOOLSEY Patricia Hodges

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In addition to the gifted artists named on the previous page the playwright is indebted to:

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Dramaturgs Larry Loebell and Ed Sobel; Assistant Dramaturg Mark Costello.

Designers John Hoey and Rob Kaplowitz.

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Mary Harden and Harden-Curtis Associates.

The tireless, dedicated staff of the Arden, in particular Terry Nolen, for fostering my work these many years.

CHARACTERS

MYRA BABBAGE, mid-30s to early 40s

FRANKLIN WOOLSEY, late 50s to early 60s

VIVIAN WOOLSEY, same age as her husband, or slightly younger

PLACE

An austere furnished room in New York City.

TIME

November 1919.

NOTES

Ghost-Writer runs 80 – 85 minutes and is performed without intermission.

When one character begins speaking before another has finished, the point of overlap is indicated by a slash (/).

Apart from his two indicated exits, Woolsey remains on stage for the entire play, though Myra should look at him only in the flashback scenes; likewise, apart from these flashbacks, Woolsey should look at her only when indicated.

GHOST-WRITER

Before the play begins, pin spots illuminate three objects in different locations on the set: a telephone, a gramophone, and, most prominently, a sleek black typewriter.

When lights rise fully they reveal a room, austere furnished with a bookcase, an oriental carpet, an armchair, a table (bearing a tea warmer, two matching cups with saucers, and a sugar bowl), small tables or stands bearing the telephone and gramophone, a wastebasket, and, facing downstage, a typing table or desk upon which rests the typewriter noted above. Behind this elegant, serious machine, on a wooden chair, sits Myra, mid-30s to early 40s. A pile of typewritten pages rests face down on one side of the typewriter; a pile of blank sheets rests on the other. The room contains a side window, perhaps with a window seat, as well as a single door to a hallway.

As we discover her, Myra sits very still, with excellent posture. She wears a modest three-quarter sleeve dress, her hands resting on her lap, as if in a state of relaxed readiness.

Somewhere behind her, Woolsey stands, hand resting upon the armchair and looking out the window, deep in thought. He is in his late 50s or early 60s, and wears a suit.

Myra addresses an unseen visitor beyond the fourth wall, though she does not look directly at him until indicated. Nor does she look at Woolsey as she speaks.

MYRA. I can still see him, standing by the window. Resting his hand on the back of the armchair. Gazing out at the river, or beyond.

In the early years, he could watch the Queensboro Bridge

being built — truss by truss, tower by tower — its workmen scurrying this way and that. He would look on in quiet fascination, like a small boy who has come upon an anthill.

At such times I felt I could see to the center of him: a man who spent his days indoors, inventing worlds reminiscent of this one, peopling them with persons like us; letting us all see into, under, through and behind. He needed the still and silence of the room, as a monk needs solitude to speak with God; but he needed the window to see the world, and remind himself that he was still in it. (*Beat. She looks at her visitor.*)

However. You didn't come to hear me talk, but rather to watch me work, us work. (*Beat.*) And so you shall. (*She shuts her eyes, and waits. After a long silence, she opens her eyes.*)

Let me just say before we begin that anything I may tell you is true. She might say otherwise, almost certainly will, or has; but she wasn't there, or only rarely, and even when she was, her perspective is skewed. For obvious reasons. (*Beat.*) I just wanted to make that clear. (*Beat. She shuts her eyes again, and waits. As before, after a long silence, she opens them.*)

The waiting is part of the work, of course — the better part. By which I mean the longer, not the part which is most pleasant. Quite the contrary. (*Beat.*) But one never knows when the words will come. Or how. Like raindrops or in torrents, I never know, never have known. I only know they'll come. In time. If one is patient. (*She smiles pleasantly at her visitor. Pause.*)

The gentlemen who preceded you here these past few weeks, the ... yellow journalists, were not, to my eyes, patient. They began sitting, in that same chair — mildly attentive, polite, at least for newspapermen. But one soon sees the tremor of the leg, the glazing of the eye, the surreptitious glance at the wristwatch. You know the glance ... (*She demonstrates.*) And they were only here to find their "angles," fill their column inches; they were not expecting a *performance*. (*Beat.*) But perhaps you are more patient than they ... (*Pause.*)

When Mr. Brownell at Scribner's said there was someone else who wanted to meet me, I initially declined. Surely sufficient newsprint has been squandered on the subject of "Mr. Woolsey's eccentric secretary." Does the reading public really need another hastily-written piece portraying her as a devoted, if deluded servant? I read two and a half of these — one had enough superfluous commas to punctuate all of Shakespeare — then stopped when

I found myself compared to the dog on the Victor Talking Machine: alert, ear cocked, listening for His Master's Voice. (*Again, she demonstrates.*)

But then I came to learn that you were not, in fact, a journalist. But rather a different kind of inquisitor. So I acquiesced. (*Beat.*) And here we are. (*She smiles pleasantly, as before, then shuts her eyes. After a moment, she types for perhaps ten seconds, waits, then opens her eyes again and returns the carriage.*)

No, that wasn't writing; only typing. (*Pause.*)

In truth, the waiting no longer bothers me. Not as much as one might think. Inspiration makes one wait, and one must be ready, prepared for the spur.

There were days — before July thirteenth — when I would wait many minutes, even an hour, or more, for the words to come. As he waited. We waited together, I poised at the keyboard, hands at rest, he standing by the window, gazing out ... At times the room was so quiet I could hear the ticking of the watch in his waistcoat pocket, or perhaps I only imagined this. At first, the constant readiness made me anxious, enervated me. But I came to learn how to rest within it, how to relax and still be attentive.

When the moment came, I would know by the crisp intake of breath, not loud, and certainly not for my benefit, and then the flow of words again, he speaking and my fingers flying, as if riding the words themselves. At times it seemed the fingers didn't follow, but rather typed the word as it was spoken, or even before, as the steed sometimes instinctively knows the rider will turn — before the tug at the bit, before the rider himself may know.

From time to time he would touch me on the forearm, here, as if to stop my hands, as if the words had flowed so fast, he suddenly found himself empty. And I would stop, in the middle of a sentence, sometimes even a word, and wait, while he filled up again.

Sometimes he left his hand there while we waited together, and if I was wearing a three-quarter sleeve, as I came to do more and more often, I could feel his pulse through the tips of his fingers. And perhaps he felt mine, too, I don't know. (*From outside, the distant rumble of thunder. Myra turns toward the window and looks out.*)

You'll wish you had brought an umbrella by the time we're finished. These clouds are deceivers — like those that doused the diatribes of the Anti-Saloon League on Armistice Day. Just when they seem impenetrable — permanent even — that's when the rain

will come. The sky opens up and the deluge begins. *(Pause. She looks down at the typewriter for a moment, then exhales heavily and addresses her visitor.)*

I feel I ought to tell you that no words have come these past three days. Just so you know the outlook. Ordinarily, this wouldn't bother me — part of the normal ebb and flow — but of course your presence adds a certain ... pressure to the situation. It's hard enough to be open to the words, day after day, moment to moment, without the added scrutiny of an *interloper*. Whose purpose may be less than sympathetic. *(Beat. Pleasantly.)*

Would you like some tea? *(She acknowledges the negative response.)*

It goes without saying that writing tends to be a solitary task — reclusive, even. I have heard there are those who can do it in the middle of Grand Central Terminal, but this is beyond belief. Maybe journalists can, but not real writers. The act is a conversation with oneself, as it were, and even the addition of a single soul, however patient, *(A nod to her visitor.)* can disrupt the flow. I learned this only over time, being not, by nature, patient. Mr. Woolsey marked this early on in my employment. *(Woolsey abruptly turns to Myra, bringing her back in time.)*

WOOLSEY. Please be still.

MYRA. What?

WOOLSEY. Stop jiggling.

MYRA. Jiggling?

WOOLSEY. Your leg shakes like a palsied priest. Please bring it to heel. *(He looks out the window again. Myra addresses the unseen visitor.)*

MYRA. And so I did. For a minute or two. As he stared out the window. Then, at last, a crisp intake of air, and I prepared to follow the flow, but again:

WOOLSEY. *Be still.*

MYRA. Mr. Woolsey ...

WOOLSEY. How shall I think while you sit twitching?

MYRA. I didn't know I was.

WOOLSEY. You must be like the typing machine: still and silent when I am silent, in motion only when I speak. *(Beat.)*

MYRA. Yes, of course. *(Woolsey moves to the bookcase, removes a volume and looks through it. To the visitor.)* And so, over time, I was tamed. *(Pause.)*

I'll assume you've already spoken with Mrs. Woolsey. The Bereaved. I am aware that she does not approve of my bringing new

chapters to Mr. Brownell, believing I do it to profit myself, though of course all payment, once the book is published, will go to her. I do not do what I do for money, certainly not for recognition. Mr. Woolsey would simply want us to finish the novel. What is so mysterious about that? *(Beat.)*

Naturally, I can imagine how a wife might feel bereft, envious even. Apparently, he has not spoken to *her*, through *her*, and yet she waits for a word, any word. But no word comes. The horror, and the hope, and the expectation. I can imagine. *(Beat.)*

Perhaps I'll make a pot, in case you change your mind. *(She rises, moves toward the tea warmer, and lights a flame beneath the kettle during the following.)*

You've heard, I'm sure, that there has been quite a clamor for the new book. Four years is a long time to wait for a novel from Franklin Woolsey. And of course there are those who are curious about the unusual means of its composition. Though many books have been posthumously published, very few are written that way.

But a novel cannot be rushed to satisfy the appetites of a hungry public. It takes as long as it takes, and no one — not even its author — can predict the hour of its completion, the arrival at the last full stop.

The revelation of these final lines has always seemed to me nothing short of miraculous — like reaching a summit following a long and arduous climb. Mr. Woolsey would finish a phrase and pause, eyes closed, *(She shuts her eyes.)* waiting for any more words to follow. And when there were none, he would open his eyes and say: WOOLSEY. Well. I suppose that's all there is. *(She opens her eyes.)* MYRA. His way of tempering our exhilaration by acknowledging this was a first draft only, and a great deal of paper would yet be spoiled before the book was worthy of a binding.

Still, a feeling of lightness followed the consummation of a novel. The stemming of the great flow of words at last. That quiet was such a relief. Like the quiet after a storm. *(She looks toward the window.)* Not like today, when the clouds are heavy but the rain won't fall. *(She moves to the typewriter, sits, shuts her eyes, and types for perhaps ten seconds, waits a moment, then opens her eyes and returns the carriage. Beat.)*

We may as well get the obvious questions out of the — *(The telephone starts to ring, stopping her thought. She does not look at it. After the second ring, she looks away. After the third, she addresses her*

GHOST-WRITER

by Michael Hollinger

WINNER OF THE 2011 BARRYMORE AWARD

1M, 2W

Novelist Franklin Woolsey dies mid-sentence, but his secretary Myra continues to take dictation. Attacked by skeptics, the press and Woolsey's jealous widow, Myra sets out to prove she is more than just an artful forger. Is she trying to steal Woolsey's legacy now that she cannot have his love, or might she truly possess a gift the world can't understand?

"An absorbing tale. GHOST-WRITER works marvelously well — a finely wrought piece of entertainment that does just what it sets out to do." —**The Wall Street Journal**

"Tantalizing, understated and lovely. This engrossing, old-fashioned play is about the drama of writing — and typing — and creativity and love. People who care about semi-colons (and you know who you are), this show is for you ... [An] extraordinary marriage between fiction and theater." —**The Philadelphia Inquirer**

"It's many plays in one — a love story of the utmost restraint, an unbiased portrayal of a lover's triangle, a portrait of a seamless working partnership and a meditation on the act of creation. All that rolls out in about ninety minutes without a misplaced word or a surplus syllable." —**Palm Beach Daily News**

"The scenes that most crackle with English-language love are the working moments between Myra and Franklin, and not only because their sexual tension is as thick as cement. Between the rat-a-tat-tat clatter of the typewriter and Franklin's oral dictations and debates over syntax and punctuation there lies a deep understanding of the workings of an author's mind — the cerebral nuts and bolts that coalesce into what we call writing, ghostly or otherwise." —**Broward-Palm Beach New Times**

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