



# GRASSES OF A THOUSAND COLORS

BY WALLACE SHAWN



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The world premiere of GRASSES OF A THOUSAND COLORS was presented by the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, London, England, on May 18, 2009. It was directed by André Gregory; the set design was by Eugene Lee; the costume design was by Dona Granata; the lighting design was by Howard Harrison; the original music and sound design were by Bruce Odland; the video design was by Bill Morrison; and the production stage manager was Catherine Buffrey. The cast was as follows:

BEN..... Wallace Shawn  
CERISE ..... Miranda Richardson  
ROBIN ..... Jennifer Tilly  
ROSE.....Emily Cass McDonnell

The New York premiere of GRASSES OF A THOUSAND COLORS was presented by the Public Theater (Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director; Patrick Willingham, Executive Director) and Theater for a New Audience (Jeffrey Horowitz, Artistic Director; Dorothy Ryan, Managing Director), opening on October 28, 2013. It was directed by André Gregory; the set design was by Eugene Lee; the costume design was by Dona Granata; the lighting design was by Howard Harrison; the original music and sound design were by Bruce Odland; the video design was by Bill Morrison; and the production stage manager was Jennifer Rae Moore. The cast was as follows:

BEN..... Wallace Shawn  
CERISE ..... Julie Hagerty  
ROBIN ..... Jennifer Tilly  
ROSE.....Emily Cass McDonnell

On October 9, 15, 23, 30, and November 5, 14, 23, 17, the part of Robin was played by Emily Cass McDonnell and the part of Rose was played by Kristina Mueller.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Let's be frank — I've taken a few elements of this play from the story "The White Cat" by Madame d'Aulnoy (1650/51 – 1705). This story can be found in Andrew Lang's *Blue Fairy Book*. John Ashbery's translation appears in Marina Warner's *Wonder Tales*.

## CHARACTERS

HE — The Memoirist (Ben), over 65.

CERISE — younger than Ben.

ROBIN — younger than Ben.

ROSE — younger than the others.

# GRASSES OF A THOUSAND COLORS

## PART ONE

*A lectern. A waste basket. A sofa.*

HE. Well. Hello, everybody! Hello! Hello there! Ha ha ha — You know, it's so wonderful that you've come to see me here this evening — I mean, I know you're busy, and you're probably just as mixed up as I am — Because things have obviously changed since yesterday, that's totally clear, things are definitely different, in one way or another. Well, it's been quite a journey — my God. The last part of it was crazy! And I know you could have signed up for any of a million things tonight, but anyway, you chose to come listen to me, and here we all are. Now, did they give you any of this? (*He takes out a small bottle with a brightly-colored liquid in it.*) Because I said, "Ooh, I'm feeling a bit weak, or a bit giddy or something," and somebody just handed me one of these and said, "Look, if you feel like *that*, take some of *this*" — well, I don't know if I'm going to try it ... (*He goes to the lectern and sets the bottle on it next to an empty glass.*) Anyway, I'm *so* excited that you've come to hear me talk about myself tonight, and I'm very eager to tell you all about my life, but I have to admit that I've been having terrible memory problems recently, and I must say the last few years are a complete blank, I seriously don't remember them at all. I don't even remember yesterday. I can't remember anything about it. I don't even remember where I *was*, much less what I did. (*He pauses.*) But luckily for me *and* you, several years ago I actually wrote my memoirs (*He points to a huge book on the lectern.*), and so what I'm going to do tonight is to read you some sections from this rather fascinating book. And I don't

know quite what I ought to say by way of introduction, but one thing I certainly *will* say is that I love this room — isn't it great? — in fact, I've just decided to give this room a name. I'm going to call this room "the satin heart," because it sort of looks like that, you see, it sort of looks like a chocolate box, in a certain sense, and of course, to me, all of you have just become chocolates in a way, because when you're all so nicely sitting there and listening to me, I'm deriving a great deal of pleasure from each and every one of you, as if you were chocolates I was eating — ha ha ha! — and some of you are sort of whiskey-flavored, and some are sort of coffee-flavored, or whatever, but I can taste each one of you distinctly, and it's a delicious experience. And of course I know I'm greeting you a bit informally here in my dressing gown and slippers, but everything has always felt so much nicer to me whenever I've been able to be comfortable with the clothes I'm wearing, and I've always hated the very tight, constricting clothes that men have always traditionally worn. (*He stops for a moment.*) You know, I feel so weak, I think I'm just going to try some of this. (*He opens the bottle, pours some of the liquid into the glass and drinks. He perks up.*) Hm, not bad. Actually quite good!

Oh yes, that feels much better. So now I definitely want to tell you about what happened yesterday. Because you see, it was exactly eight o'clock yesterday morning when I finally sat down to my breakfast table. And my breakfast table, you see, is outside, on my balcony, on a sort of golden terrace looking out on the sea, and so it's all quite lovely, but what I was of course obliged to do there, as at every meal, was to somehow manage to swallow a few spoonfuls of the gritty, thin, horrible gruel that I was most unfortunately obliged to eat. I'm sure almost all of you know all too well what I'm talking about. Now, in the place where I lived, the impresario of gruel happened to be Dr. Felix Gross. Have you heard of him? Well, he was our Nutritionist to the Privileged, and so it was his very demanding job to keep all of his patients very well supplied with these different weekly batches of disgusting gruel which more or less kept up week by week with the ever-changing slippery development of the awful stomach illness which so suddenly and so mysteriously had changed the lives of so many humans on earth. Well, if there's anyone here who's come from a very remote area and who perhaps requires a brief analysis of that — you know, what can I say? To be rather simple about it — well, everyone knows that a

human being can't keep itself going — can't create energy, strength, or warmth for itself or keep itself alive — by swallowing a mouthful of stones. But it also can't keep itself going or keep itself alive by swallowing a mouthful of rice, unless and until that rice has been chemically transformed inside its body into a substance that's able to perform those functions. Digestion, in other words, is a wonderful and complicated process, and it can obviously fail or fall apart at any one of its thousands of wonderful and complicated junctures, and, for whatever mysterious reason, there came a moment when most of us simply couldn't digest most foods any more, and the list of foods we *could* digest kept changing and ultimately shrinking, as more and more foods became impossible for each of us to eat. Most people started living off this government-processed gruel that almost always fell behind, so that for most people the excruciating stomach pain and the vomiting and the other expressions of digestive collapse got worse and worse as each day wore on, so that by evening they were subsisting in a kind of agony. And so, in the place I lived, well, Gross's gruel was a more effective type of gruel, or so we hoped, or so we always said, and according to certain statistics we lived much longer than the less privileged people, or at any rate we all devoutly *believed* we did, whether it was true or not. In any case, even with Gross's help, we woke up in pain every day, with our stomachs terribly sore and sort of throbbing, and if we were lucky we would have managed three or four hours of sleep, perhaps interrupted only once or twice by a brief, quickly dispatched vomit or two. And it was in that condition that all of us set about eating our so-called breakfasts each day — in my case, certainly, after recalling for a moment the marmalade, butter, coffee, cream, rolls, toast, and boiled eggs that I used to be able to eat. So, at any rate, yesterday, I hadn't had more than two spoonfuls of gruel when quite unexpectedly the young woman I lived with — Rose — suddenly appeared on my balcony holding a letter addressed to me that had just been delivered to our door. Now Rose was extremely close to my wife, Cerise, and Rose quite often received letters from Cerise, because Cerise lived quite far away, way off in the country. But it had been a very long time since anyone had written a letter to me. So Rose gave me the letter and walked away without saying very much, and I opened the envelope, and it seemed to be an invitation of some kind — and then suddenly I sneezed. Cat dander? That seemed odd. And the invitation, rudely, was for that very afternoon,

and it was signed simply, “Love, Blanche.” Well, that was odd, too, because Blanche — the only Blanche I knew — was certainly dead. I knew she was dead, because I’d been present at her death. And the other thing that was odd was that the Blanche I knew was definitely a cat, and even if they’re very much alive, cats can’t write. Well, so there was something curious, clearly, but I thought to myself, Well, I mean, of course I’ll go. I mean, you know, why wouldn’t I? ...

But, at any rate, to get back to my memoir, please let me start by reciting for you the epigraph I chose for it after a certain amount of thought. It’s by Count D’Aurore, and it goes like this: “When I finally awakened after a long, long sleep with many dreams, I was surprised to find that I was lying on a battlefield and holding a sword. It was just after dawn, the air was cold, and the ground was damp with my own blood. As I wondered what circumstances could have brought me here, I looked across the vast expanse of the plain on which I lay, and it seemed that I could see grasses of a thousand colors, in which many rabbits, in absolute silence, were leaping and running like small horses.” And now let me read you the very beginning of my book. (*And now he reads.*) “I’m a lucky person. I was born lucky. And to call a person ‘lucky’ means, really, that good things sort of rush towards that person, sort of fly towards them somehow, special privileges that other people don’t have, and the privileges sort of carve out little channels in the fabric of the universe, channels that flow in that person’s direction, so that each good thing that went in their direction yesterday helps to make it more likely that more good things will go in their direction today. And I’m a lucky person. And it’s nice to be lucky, because other people can’t help being drawn to people who are lucky — it’s part of our fundamental makeup — and even words like ‘friendship’ and ‘love’ mainly refer to the feelings that draw us all toward lucky people, and so lucky people are always surrounded by friends and get to pick whoever they like to keep them company every day, which is a very agreeable situation.”

(*He looks up from the book and speaks to the audience.*) And at a certain point in the book I explain why I was never one of those people who complained about their luck, why I was never one of those people who felt guilty because they were lucky. And I explain why I think there’s a certain idiocy in that sort of complaining. (*And now he reads.*) “I came, you see, from an optimistic generation.

Everyone I knew from my generation was a fixer, an improver. We were born that way, apparently. We loved to solve problems. Was someone dissatisfied with how fast he could run? Was someone dissatisfied with how fast he could think? We saw these as problems that *could be solved*. But of course the one thing that in principle *cannot* be solved is luck. You can't fix luck. There's good luck for some people and bad luck for other people — and that's just the way things work in the universe that human beings live in — that's the way they *have* to work, because, in that particular universe, in regard to whatever's bigger than an atom, each thing has a certain location, and no two things can share exactly the same location. If one person is situated in a particular place, right in the middle of this sofa, let's say, then no other person can occupy that place. And so in any line of ducks in a pond, one duck and only one duck can be in front, and one duck and only one duck will be in back. Only one face of the dice can stand on top — not all six. And in the game of 'musical chairs,' the number of chairs is always one less than the number of people, and when the music stops, there's always one person who has no chair."

(*He speaks to the audience.*) So I explain that I began my life in fortunate circumstances. And in the first chapter I explain how I grew up, how I became a doctor, and everything about my early life. And the second chapter begins with that fateful night at the Grand Circle restaurant, when five other young doctors and I passed around six of that restaurant's blue paper napkins, and we each wrote down on our napkin our answer to the question, "What is the greatest problem facing the world today?" and incredibly we all came up with essentially the same answer. Because we could all see, on the one hand, an enormous crowd of entities, ourselves and others, who were roaming the planet trying to sustain themselves, looking for something to eat — but on the other hand, we could see only a tiny, inadequate crowd of entities who were sitting there on the planet, waiting and available to *be eaten*. So in other words, there was a problem about food. It was all about food. There wasn't enough food. And after we left the restaurant, I went home, and I stayed up all night, and the next morning, I went to my office and told my secretary that I was going to wind down my private medical practice, turn the little building next door into a laboratory, and do some research. And a year later, I'd invented a very unusual nutrient for animals — Grain Number One, as I decided to call it. Of course,

# GRASSES OF A THOUSAND COLORS

by Wallace Shawn

1M, 3W

Shawn's most outlandish work to date, this disturbing and anomalously beautiful play explores the role of human beings in nature and the role of nature in human beings, sexuality being, as Shawn says, "nature's most obvious footprint in the human soul." The play's central character is a doctor who figures out how to rejigger the metabolism of animals. This discovery has unexpected consequences. The play tells a story about the doctor, his wife, and his lovers that is also a story about the planet we live on.

*"[A] nasty and erotic fairy tale that, no matter how bewitching it seems at moments, murmurs a cautionary whisper all the while: Something is very wrong in this world, it says, and life may not be any better when you wake up ... [a] lyrical, creepy and richly detailed (and, oh yes, pornographic) dreamscape ... if you are the least bit prudish, then GRASSES is not for you. Still, it would be a shame for anyone to miss such a thorough deployment of the powers of enchantment as is offered here."*

—The New York Times

*"... weird, teasing and devastating ... astonishing ... it's never clear what's real and what's a nightmare ... GRASSES OF A THOUSAND COLORS is a bewildering, labyrinthine fairy tale ... it's clear that Shawn is after something about the erosion of boundaries between human and animal, nature and society. The play is a feverish portrait of male egomania threatening to waste the planet. Shawn's world, though, remains prodigiously fertile and whole."*

—Time Out (New York)

## Also by Wallace Shawn

AUNT DAN AND LEMON  
THE DESIGNATED MOURNER  
MARIE AND BRUCE  
and others

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