



# THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN

BY **ERIC COBLE**



DRAMATISTS  
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## THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN

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THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN premiered at Boise Contemporary Theater (Matthew Cameron Clark, Artistic Director; Helen Peterson, Managing Director) on April 9, 2011. It was directed by Michael Perlman, featuring Mary Portser as Alexandra and Matthew Cameron Clark as Chris.

THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN was originally produced on Broadway by Larry Kaye & HOP Theatricals, Van Dean & The Broadway Consortium, Joan Raffe & Jhett Tolentino, Catherine & Fred Adler, Michael J. Moritz Jr., and KIRN Productions, at the Booth Theatre, opening on April 21, 2014. It was directed by Molly Smith; the set design was by Eugene Lee; the costume design was by Linda Cho; the lighting design was by Rui Rita; and the sound design was by Darron L West. The cast was as follows:

ALEXANDRA ..... Estelle Parsons  
CHRIS..... Stephen Spinella

## **CHARACTERS**

ALEXANDRA

CHRIS

## **SETTING**

The second-floor living room of Alexandra's brownstone home in Brooklyn, New York. The room is filled (but not cluttered) with books, LPs, decades worth of knickknacks, some small sculptures, and several noticeably empty patches of wall where paintings have clearly hung and are now missing. The place hasn't been kept up, but it's not frightening. A doorway leads off to the kitchen/dining room.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the room is that the front door is sealed with duct tape and blocked by a barricade of a comfy chair, end-table, and several Mason jars of filmy liquid, all tied together with a makeshift string of rags and newspapers. Similar jars and cloths sit on the sills of the two large windows that look out at the lovely fall morning. The windows are both closed, and outside one of them we can see the final leaves on several branches of a large tree.

## **PRODUCTION NOTE**

Though both Alexandra and Chris have spent many years in Brooklyn, they are not natives, and what dialect they have, if any, is mid-western.

# THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN

## ACT ONE

### Scene 1

*Lights up on a woman, 80, wearing a nice outfit and jewelry as if she's going out soon. In her hands, however, is another Mason jar of liquid and a lighter. Beside her is a small frying pan. This is Alexandra. She slumps in another comfy chair in the middle of the room. It's unclear if she's sleeping or dead. The jar and lighter are about to slip from her hands ... A CD player on a stand by the door plays the final phrases of Berlioz's Requiem, coming to a grand conclusion, wild applause. Alexandra doesn't move. Silence.*

*Then a noise from outside one of the windows. A rustling. Alexandra doesn't move. We see a figure in the window. A man is climbing to the window from the tree outside. He struggles, reaching for the window, trying quietly to open it. Alexandra doesn't move. The man gets it open and starts to pull himself inside. We now see he's in his 40s, wearing a worn denim jacket over a t-shirt, faded black jeans, and cowboy boots. His hair is in a ponytail and he's out of shape — definitely not designed to break into upper-floor windows. This is Chris. He's halfway through when he bangs his knee — winces ...*

ALEXANDRA. (*Opens her eyes.*) ... Who's here? (*Chris freezes ... Alexandra looks around, sees him at the window ... Screams. Beat.*)

CHRIS. Hey, Mom.

ALEXANDRA. ... Chris? What the hell are you doing out there?

CHRIS. I came to see you.

ALEXANDRA. No. No ... no ... no ... (*She starts trying to stand.*)

CHRIS. Mom, just let me

ALEXANDRA. You're not here, you are *not* here (*She tries to get out of her chair — it's a battle — He's trying to get in the window — it's a battle.*)

CHRIS. Would you (*Slips, catches himself.*) Dammit!

ALEXANDRA. This stupid chair

CHRIS. Look, I'm just trying to

ALEXANDRA. I said leave me alone and I meant leave me alone!

CHRIS. I'm not — Mom, I can't hang on

ALEXANDRA. Good! (*She's almost up.*)

CHRIS. Mom

ALEXANDRA. Oh, these blasted knees (*She moves for the window.*)

CHRIS. I'm two stories up! Let me in or I'm gonna die

ALEXANDRA. Should have thought of that before you tried to break into an old lady's house.

CHRIS. I'm serious! I'm slipping! Mom! (*She hesitates, not looking at him ... He's clawing to hang on ...*) Can you ... could I get a hand ...

ALEXANDRA. No. (*She steps away, her back to him.*)

CHRIS. Goddammit, Mom!

ALEXANDRA. There's no need to take the Lord's name in vain. He didn't put you out there. (*Chris continues to struggle in.*) You better not have hurt my tree!

CHRIS. I didn't ... hurt your tree ...

ALEXANDRA. Clambering around out there like some third-rate Johnny Weissmuller — (*And he's in, thumping to the floor in a heap, panting ...*)

CHRIS. ... I just ... wanted to come see you ...

ALEXANDRA. (*Not looking at him.*) Well, you've seen me. Now go back the way you came in.

CHRIS. Mom!

ALEXANDRA. I'm serious. You want to play monkey up, you play monkey down. But so help me, you break one twig on that tree, and I'll blow this whole house to kingdom come.

CHRIS. And *that* wouldn't hurt the tree.

ALEXANDRA. I'm a dangerous woman. As I'm sure you've heard.

CHRIS. I thought they were exaggerating. You know how Michael  
ALEXANDRA. I do. He wasn't. Not this time. (*She turns and looks at him. Pause. They fully take each other in for the first time ...*) You got old. (*He watches her ... She really stares at him ...*) My God. You turned into a man. A skinny old raggedy man.

CHRIS. Do you know why I'm here?

ALEXANDRA. Your voice sounds right. Everything else

CHRIS. Mom

ALEXANDRA. You should have sent a, a picture. You could've prepared me

CHRIS. Kind of short notice.

ALEXANDRA. Did they send you?

CHRIS. Nobody

ALEXANDRA. 'Cause it's clever, I'll give them that, very crafty.

CHRIS. Mom, nobody is

ALEXANDRA. I'd applaud the sheer cruelty of it, but my hands are full.

CHRIS. Where'd you get the gasoline?

ALEXANDRA. Don't come near me.

CHRIS. I'm just asking you

ALEXANDRA. It's not gasoline.

CHRIS. Kerosene, then, lamp oil, whatever.

ALEXANDRA. It's developing fluid.

CHRIS. What?

ALEXANDRA. Film-developing fluid. For photography. (*Chris laughs.*) Laugh it up. It's more combustibile than gasoline.

CHRIS. I'm just thinking where — Who even *has* film-developing fluid anymore?

ALEXANDRA. Me.

CHRIS. Of course.

ALEXANDRA. It was your father's. It's mine now. He had three gallons of the stuff saved up.

CHRIS. And it's just been sitting here all this time?

ALEXANDRA. It was a gift from the Lord, remembering that fluid.

CHRIS. I'm not sure that was God talking to

ALEXANDRA. Night before last, two nights ago, two in the morning, I'm in every corner, every drawer, looking for any defense I can find

CHRIS. Jesus, Mom.

ALEXANDRA. Don't you "Jesus, Mom" me, I need to hold off an

army! I have that kitchen knife set your Aunt Kathryn gave me, right? I have one solid frying pan. But all of that's hand-to-hand, I can't move worth a damn anymore. I needed a distance weapon. Something to keep Michael and Jennifer at bay. For the first time in my life I wished I'd kept your grandfather's shotgun.

CHRIS. Mom!

ALEXANDRA. But your Uncle Sebastian wanted it and what was I going to shoot in Brooklyn?

CHRIS. Exactly!

ALEXANDRA. Well, now I know what I want to shoot in Brooklyn! The Mongol Hordes! Invaders!

CHRIS. We're not

ALEXANDRA. And then God told me! Jennifer's room! Or what was Jennifer's room. Before your father went crazy with the cameras and needed his "darkroom." Retirement did not agree with that man. Your brother told me, after Dad died, that we needed to get rid of all that stuff. Thank God I wouldn't let him. I'd be defenseless now.

CHRIS. You don't need defenses.

ALEXANDRA. A man just broke into my house two minutes ago!

CHRIS. Because you won't answer the front door!

ALEXANDRA. Because if I do, there's an army of police outside to tackle me and haul me off in a straight-jacket!

CHRIS. Because you're threatening to blow up an entire building!

ALEXANDRA. Because they won't leave me alone!

CHRIS. Because you're crazy! You don't blow up a Park Slope brownstone!

ALEXANDRA. So it's the real estate you're worried about.

CHRIS. Yes! Partly! You could sell this place and have enough to live in an A-One nursing home for fifty years!

ALEXANDRA. You sound just like your brother.

CHRIS. I didn't come here to be insulted.

ALEXANDRA. Then why are you here? *(His phone rings. He hesitates ... It rings again, he clicks it off without looking.)* Who was that?

CHRIS. Okay, let's say you're not crazy, fine, but what you're doing? This? If you — look, Mom, look at this objectively, you've barricaded yourself, you're making threats

ALEXANDRA. They're the ones making threats.

CHRIS. Okay, it's not "they," it's "we," it's your family

ALEXANDRA. Since when did you rejoin the tribe?



CHRIS. The point is, in times of crisis a family comes back together  
ALEXANDRA. Then start treating me like family. You do not sic  
the police on your own mother.

CHRIS. Nobody's

ALEXANDRA. Michael is! And Jennifer! They both said, you ask  
them, they both said if I didn't play their little game they'd have the  
police down on me so fast it'd make your head spin! Happy  
Mother's Day!

CHRIS. I'm sure they didn't

ALEXANDRA. Are you calling me a liar?

CHRIS. No.

ALEXANDRA. You ask them yourself, you shimmy back down  
and tell them if they want to inherit this valuable little building,  
they all need to back off.

CHRIS. Can I go out the front door to tell them?

ALEXANDRA. Don't insult me.

CHRIS. I just want

ALEXANDRA. Who's on the other side of that door? Hah?  
Michael? Jennifer? How many police?

CHRIS. Nobody, there's nobody, they haven't called the cops.  
Not yet.

ALEXANDRA. The door stays closed. You leave by the window.  
(*Beat. Chris watches her.*) Which I will then lock.

CHRIS. It doesn't lock.

ALEXANDRA. I'll lock it, I'll tape it.

CHRIS. Right? Michael and Jen didn't remember that, but I did.  
I knew you'd get the window by the back steps, I knew you'd get all  
the doors, all the windows — except the one by the tree. (*She  
watches him.*) Because of the birds? Right? You need to hear the  
birds in the tree? You can't tell me you want to shut all that down  
and blow it all up

ALEXANDRA. I will.

CHRIS. I don't believe you.

ALEXANDRA. I'm a cornered animal, Christopher. I'll do  
whatever it takes.

CHRIS. You're gonna burn down the whole block. You do this,  
you're gonna kill innocent people

ALEXANDRA. Not if you get out and give them warning.

CHRIS. What about Mr. What's-his-name. On the first floor. The  
renter downstairs.

# THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN

by Eric Coble

1M, 1W

THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN swirls around Alexandra, an 80-year-old artist in a showdown with her family over where she'll spend her remaining years. In Alexandra's corner are her wit, her volcanic passion, and the fact that she's barricaded herself in her Brooklyn brownstone with enough Molotov cocktails to take out the block. But her children have their own secret weapon: estranged son Chris, who returns after 20 years, crawls through Alexandra's second-floor window and becomes the family's unlikely mediator. No sooner are the words "Hi, Mom" uttered than the emotional bombs start detonating. THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN is a wickedly funny and wonderfully touching discovery of the fragility and ferocity of life.

*"Bracing, honest, and often deliciously funny ... Anyone who's even reached the crest of middle age will have an innate feeling for this admirably drawn woman."*

—The New York Times

*"A vivid poetic expression for all the frustrations of old age ... the clash Coble illuminates manages to touch nerves exposed in the many seemingly no-win debates across America over what's best for a relative no longer at her sharpest."*

—The Washington Post

*"Sublime and penetrating ... a tale that resonates with a broad range of audiences as it touches on a sobering dilemma faced by families every day."*

—Variety

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