

# LAUGH

BY **BETH HENLEY**



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank Dr. Ron Marasco and the LMU/LA Laugh Class for helping to discover the beginning of this play. Their work and insight convinced me that there was a play to be written where pies would be thrown.

Much gratitude to the great and generous actors who read *Laugh* in my home where I heard the play aloud and living for the first time: Ray Baker, Joe Clark, Colleen Dodson-Baker, Mireile Enos, Belita Moreno, and Alan Ruck.

Many helped with the development of this play. Jonathan Lomma with his strategic caring found the play nurturing homes. Johanna Pfaelze once again brought me to NYSF to try anything in any way that felt right.

David Muse and the Studio Theatre took the wild chance and produced the play. A special thank you to Adrien-Alice Hansel for being there with her intelligence and warmth.

Wayne Barker, the composer, was with this piece from the first workshop. Wayne's knowledge and fervent passion for the world of the play was transformative.

David Schweizer's rigorous delight in the play, his relentless championing and keen knowledge of "cut it, don't cut it, maybe cut it" made *Laugh* live and helped me breath.

## NOTE ON MUSIC

Throughout the development of *Laugh*, Wayne Barker, the composer, emerged as such an intricate part of the process that he actually became a character (the Piano Player) in the play.

The score Mr. Barker composed for *Laugh* does what a great score does: It lifts the story and transports theatrical images, actions, and dialogue to a realm of vibrance and ambiguous truth that only music can provide.

It is my great preference that in all productions Wayne Barker's score is used and performed by a musician who can do it justice.

A caveat: If a theatre finds this request is not feasible there are alternatives to consider.

Music and sound could of course be recorded rather than live, and the Piano Player's lines could be distributed among the company at the director's discretion.

LAUGH was originally produced by Studio Theatre (David Muse, Artistic Director; Meredith Burkus, Managing Director), Washington, D.C., in March 2015. It was directed by David Schweizer, the original music was composed by Wayne Barker, the set designer was Andromache Chalfant, the lighting designer was Michael Lincoln, the costume designer was Frank Labovitz, the sound designer was Adam W. Johnson, the fight director was Joe Isenberg, the dramaturg was Adrien-Alice Hansel, and the production stage manager was Anthony O. Bullock. The cast was as follows:

MABEL ..... Helen Cespedes  
ROSCOE ..... Creed Garnick  
PIANO PLAYER ..... Wayne Barker  
CURLY P. CURTIS and others ..... Evan Zes  
UNCLE OSCAR and others ..... Jacob Ming-Trent  
AUNT OCTOBRA and others ..... Emily K. Townley  
BEE SUNSHINE and others ..... Felicia Curry

LAUGH was originally presented by New York Stage and Film & Vassar at the Powerhouse Theater in summer 2014.

LAUGH was developed at Theatreworks, Palo Alto, CA as part of their New Works Festival.

A developmental reading of LAUGH was presented in June 2015 by TACT as part of their newTACTics reading series.

## **CHARACTERS**

MABEL, a young woman

ROSCOE, a young man

PIANO PLAYER

CURLY P. CURTIS, SLAVE, CONDUCTOR, POLLY/DOLLY/  
SOLLY/FOLLY, TAP DANCING USHER, VON GEORGE

UNCLE OSCAR DEFOLIANT, ENGINEER, ALPHONSE,  
REPORTER, ROBUST MATRON, FATHER

AUNT OCTOBRA DEFOLIANT, CRIP, SECURITY GUARD,  
MITCH, WORM, MR. THALBUG

BEE SUNSHINE, COBB, TAP DANCING USHERETTE,  
DUMB JOHN, MRS. VON GEORGE, SCHOOL BOY ONE,  
POWDER, ZOZEL, MOTHER

## **PLACE**

America, the far West. As there are many settings they must be simple and mobile. An early slapstick sensibility prevails. Set and costume quick-changes are constant. Ingenuity is required. Pies will be thrown.

## **TIME**

1920s–1930s

## **NOTE**

Color-blind casting ideal.

# LAUGH

## ACT ONE

### Scene 1

*A mine in the West. Time: 1920s.*

PIANO PLAYER. Ladies and Gentlemen, *Laugh*. A play. A mine in the West. (*Curly [old] and Mabel [young] are digging a hole for dynamite. They are sweating, working hard. Both sense gold is near. Curly stops to wipe his brow. Mabel stops and looks at him intensely.*)

CURLY. It's some shallow. Keep digging. (*They dig with renewed fervor.*) Keep digging. Keep digging. (*Dust flies. Curly halts.*) Alright. (*Mabel halts.*) Get the explosives. (*Suppressing glee, Mabel takes two sticks of dynamite out of a box and hands them to him.*) Better have more. A wee bit more. (*Mabel hands him two more sticks. Curly grounds the sticks in the hole.*) Maybe a bit more of a wee bit more. (*Mabel's hand quivers as she gives him a giant stick of dynamite. Curly grins as he places it into the hole.*) Now hand me some of that explosion powder. We want a blast of prophetic proportions. (*Mabel carefully, very carefully, gets a can of undiluted nitroglycerin. Curly takes it and pulls off the tin top with some effort. Mabel cringes.*) Ah, don't be afraid little Mabel. This is my long-time area of expertise. (*Curly reaches in and stirs the powder with his hand and flicks it over the buried sticks of dynamite.*) Just peppering it. (*Curly gets more generous with the powder.*) Now the match. (*Mabel produces a matchstick. Curly takes the matchstick and strikes it three times against his overalls. It doesn't light.*) This one's a dud. Give me another. (*Curly chews on the matchstick. Mabel digs in her pockets. Nothing except a mouse — a real one.*) Ah, ain't it the way. Check the mule pack, child. And don't pause

for nothing. (*Mabel exits in a hurry. Curly scratches the back of his neck, wipes his wet forehead, and chews on the matchstick.*) I got the gold fever. (*He takes the matchstick out of his mouth and tosses it. BOOM!!! Flashing lights, booming sound. Smoke. Mabel enters in a state.*)

MABEL. Curly? Curly! Curly!! (*She looks up.*) AAAHH! (*A stuffed, singed version of Curly's body drops from the sky, just missing Mabel. Mabel goes to the body and shakes it.*) Curly! Say something. Oh, dear Curly. (*As the smoke clears, a wall of shining gold appears.*) Gold. We struck gold. Curly, don't be dead! Look! Look it's gold. (*Mabel lifts up Curly's body to show him. No response. She sobs.*) All shining gold.

## Scene 2

*A garden in Helena, Montana.*

PIANO PLAYER. A garden in Helena, Montana. (*Roscoe, a peculiar young man, hurries across the stage following a host of butterflies, fanatically waving a butterfly net.*)

ROSCOE. Let me capture — capture your wings! (*He almost catches a butterfly but trips instead.*) Ye Gad. (*Sound of unpleasant laughter offstage. Roscoe recognizes the laughter. He cringes with distaste.*) Ye Gad. Ye Gad. (*Roscoe swiftly turns, stumbles, and exits. Enter Aunt, a scheming old bat, and Bee Sunshine, an overtly unattractive and devious young woman.*)

AUNT. Dear Bee Sunshine of the world! The shining world. How happy you are going to be married to Roscoe, my tirelessly illustrious nephew.

BEE. Ah Miss Defoliant we are going to need barrels and barrels of white rice to wrap into white net with white ribbon. Barrels and barrels. My wedding is going to be the biggest splash Helena, Montana has ever seen.

AUNT. My, my.

BEE. I intend for my wedding train to be of such a dangling length that I will require plethoras of minions to parade it down the aisle.

AUNT. Of course you must not spend your entire fortune on the wedding.

BEE. Oops. Oops. Oops.

AUNT. What?

BEE. I thought *your* family was paying for the wedding.

AUNT. No, my dear, the *bride's* family *gives* the wedding. *Pays* for the wedding.

BEE. OOPS, OOPS, OOPS. I'm forced to tell you of a sudden Papa is destitute.

AUNT. My impression was quite the contrary.

BEE. Nay, bankruptcy. (*Aunt begins to wheeze. Bee smirks.*) That is after all why I accepted your nephew Roscoe's proposal.

AUNT. What?

BEE. I prefer a man who is not so Mr. Fancy Pants. (*With tyrannical pride.*) But Roscoe does love me and *love counts*.

AUNT. Love you? Roscoe! Roscoe! (*Roscoe enters with a butterfly in a jar and his net.*)

ROSCOE. Yes, Auntie? I've captured a specimen.

AUNT. (*Whispering.*) Never mind the insect. Bee Sunshine is not as wealthy as we thought.

ROSCOE. (*Glancing at Bee.*) And yet she is still as hideous.

AUNT. Bankrupt.

ROSCOE. Ye Gad.

BEE. Roscoe, tell your aunt how much you love me. Surely you have told me over one hundred times. "I love you Bee Sunshine; kiss me Bee darling Bee Sunshine. Smooch, smooch, smooch."

ROSCOE. Dear Miss Bee Sunshine, I must be frank. I must be blunt. I recant and retract all and every protestation of love I was able to stomach making to you. I don't love you, I could never love you. In truth I find you magnanimously — revolting.

BEE. Nincompoop! (*Bee shoves him. Roscoe falls and drops the net. Bee picks it up and mercilessly whips him.*) Nincompoop! Nincompoop! Fancy Pants Nincompoop! (*She slings the net down and exits.*)

AUNT. I ask myself, Roscoe, why must you always come to naught? Failure follows you like fawning fungus. (*Roscoe gets up and dusts himself off with a deadpan look. Uncle, an over-groomed slush, enters with a glass of whiskey.*)

UNCLE. Ward! Fetch me a barrel of whiskey from the cellar! Fetch it!

ROSCOE. Didn't I lug up a barrel yesterday?

UNCLE. Unfortunately there was a hole — a capacious hole in that barrel.

AUNT. Brother.

UNCLE. Sister.

AUNT. It's time for your cookie. (*She hands him a devilish cookie.*)

UNCLE. Yes, my cookie.

AUNT. Every crumb, eat every crumb. (*Uncle finishes the cookie.*)

UNCLE. Oh my. How my intestines are undulating.

AUNT. I'll prepare a minced venison pie to settle your undulating intestines.

UNCLE. My undulating intestines.

AUNT. I'll go out back to the slaughterhouse and hack venison carcass for your minced pie. But first I must check the morning mail. (*She goes to the mailbox and opens a letter. Roscoe studies the butterfly in the jar.*)

UNCLE. Roscoe, orphaned ward. Fetch your uncle more whiskey. Fetch it boy. Fetch it!

ROSCOE. One moment. I'm examining an insect. (You old sot.)

UNCLE. Whiskey is paramount, minced venison is but a supplementary desire.

AUNT. Brother, ward! Adhere, adhere! Out of the heart of death. Out of the jaws of doom! A letter of vast import has arrived from Smithertown! The late and horrid husband of your dear departed mother seems to have had a cousin — Mr. Curly P. Curtis.

ROSCOE. My father has a living relative?

AUNT. No longer. Curly P. Curtis has been blown up in a mining mishap.

ROSCOE. Ye Gad.

AUNT. This letter is from Mr. Curtis's attorney. It states that there is an orphan ward of Curly P. Curtis's named Mabel Sunday. This orphan child has no one to turn to except our own dear family.

UNCLE. But why would we bring in another ward? We've already got this one.

AUNT. Because, Brother, the poor homeless orphaned blight has a fortune. A gold mine fortune.

UNCLE. A gold mine fortune! Don't mind if I do. I'll open up our finest brandy for a *celebration*.

AUNT. A *celebration*? Never have we ever had any kind of *celebration*. But in this case — the day has been saved!

UNCLE. Yes, a *celebration*! Brandy snifters at once! (*Uncle exits.*)

AUNT. How fortunate you are, my boy. Count your lucky stars. You now have one more chance to be a pertinent human being.

ROSCOE. Pertinent? How so?

# LAUGH

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3M, 3W, 1 n/s

The West. The 1920s. Mabel's had a hard few weeks. A dynamite accident at a gold mine has left her wealthy but orphaned; she's shipped off to a calculating aunt, whose nephew is charged with seducing her to control Mabel's fortune. This hapless courtship reveals a shared love of silent movies and a plan for greater things. A story of mishaps and moxie, the romance of Hollywood and ultimately a Hollywood-caliber romance. A slapstick comedy from the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of *Crimes of the Heart*.

*"Set in the 1920s and inspired by silent film comedies, right down to [a] live piano score and title-card style narration, LAUGH — an imperative, not a noun — is a Muppetty assemblage of outrageous zut alors! accents, awful fake beards, pendulous fake boobs, and cream-pies-in-faces. ... In intention and in effect, it is decidedly and unreservedly silly."*

—**Washington City Paper**

*"[LAUGH] displays Henley's deeply weird sense of humor ... The archness of the dialogue reminds you of a Coen Brothers movie at its most eccentric — Raising Arizona and O Brother, Where Art Thou? come to mind."*

—**DCTheatreScene.com**

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ISBN: 978-0-8222-3367-1

