

**THE ABSOLUTE
BRIGHTNESS
OF LEONARD
PELKEY**

BY JAMES LECESNE



**DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.**

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THE ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS OF LEONARD PELKEY was originally developed and first presented at Dixon Place in New York City, opening on February 22, 2015. It was directed by Tony Speciale; it was produced by Dixon Place; the original music was by Duncan Sheik; the visuals were by Matthew Sandager; and the clothing was by Paul Marlow. The cast was as follows:

PERFORMER James Lecesne

THE ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS OF LEONARD PELKEY opened Off-Broadway at the Westside Theatre in New York City on July 27, 2015. It was produced by Darren Bagert, Daryl Roth, Jane Dubin, Curtis Forsythe, Michael Mayer, Diane Procter, Seaview Productions, Minerva Productions/Joshua Goodman; general management by DR Theatrical Management. It was directed by Tony Speciale; the set design was by Jo Winiarski; the lighting design was by Matt Richards; the sound design was by Christian Frederickson; the projection design was by Aaron Rhyne; the original music was by Duncan Sheik; the original animation and photography was by Matthew Sandager; the clothing was by Paul Marlow; the stage manager was Hannah Woodward; and the understudy was Kevin Bernard. The cast was as follows:

PERFORMER James Lecesne

CHARACTERS

CHUCK DeSANTIS

MARTY BRANAHAN

ELLEN HERTLE

PHOEBE HERTLE

BUDDY HOWARD

GLORIA SALZANO

MARION TOCHTERMAN

OTTO BECKERMAN

TRAVIS LEMBECK

THE ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS OF LEONARD PELKEY

Sound: music.

Chuck DeSantis, middle-aged, a bit worn, with a strong Jersey accent. He could be part of a mob, but he's one of the good guys, a detective and dressed like one.

Evidence is laid out on the table—a sneaker, some rope, smaller things in Ziploc bags, all of it carefully labeled.

CHUCK. *(To the audience.)* Right off I got that feeling. Y'know that feeling? That feeling that tells you something ain't right, something's off. You get a feeling like that and you tell yourself, Nah. I'm just being negative. Seein' the dark side.

But hey, I'm a detective. The dark side is my beat. Break 'n' Entry. Homicide. Missing Persons. Looking for shit in the shadows—that's what I do. That and searching for evidence, bringing in a suspect. Okay, so it's a slow beat in a half-ass town down the Jersey shore. A desk job mostly. Has been for years. Petty crime, old grudges. Same ol' same ol'.

Still, evil can happen anywhere. Even here.

Case number 3684599. Dated, April. Ten years ago. This is the case that put us on the Mapquest. Added to our Wikipedia entry. Got us Googled more times than I can shake a stick. And what did we get known for? That's right. Evil. Like it's been said:

“The evil men do lives after them;

The good is oft interred along with their bones.”

That's Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*. Act 3, Scene 2.

Now, you wouldn't think that me, Chuck DeSantis, a detective working some godforsaken precinct down the Jersey shore, would know Shakespeare. And back then you woulda been right. Back then, I didn't know shit from Sherlock—let alone Shakespeare. But in ten years' time a lot can happen, 'cause here I am, quotin' the Bard, digging up bones, bodies, walking this story into the light like a perp.

And hey, I ain't no Shakespeare, but by way of a title I like to call this story, "The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey."

Allow me to set the scene.

It's spring. And the tang of ocean brine is wafting through the streets of this seaside town like nobody's business. Sun is shining, flowers blooming and every fuckin' thing is on the rise. As usual, I am at the station, cooped up in my cubicle with a cruller and a cup of coffee. Big Marty Branahan, whose idea of an intercom is barging in and shouting information across the room, barges in and starts shouting information across the room.

Marty Branahan is close to retirement-age, big and brash. Street smart but that's about all.

MARTY. Chuck. Chuck, there's a hot-lookin' lady and her daughter out there. How long you gonna keep 'em waiting? They're driving me nuts with their fuckin' chitter-chatter.

CHUCK. Marty, how many times do I have to tell you—use the intercom! Or ping me when someone's here.

MARTY. Chuck, how many times I gotta tell YOU—I don't know from pinging. I'm Old School. I'm a techno-peasant. When I started this line of work we communicated with drums and fuckin' smoke signals.

CHUCK. Very funny. SHOW THE LADIES IN! AND USE THE FUCKING INTERCOM!

Ellen Hertle enters. As the owner of the local beauty salon, she's learned how to use her personal beauty to advantage.

ELLEN. How long you gonna keep us waitin' out there? Forget it. We're in.

(To daughter, Phoebe.) Come on, honey. Come on in.

(To Chuck.) This is my daughter, Phoebe. My name is Ellen. Ellen Hertle. I own the hair salon. Down on Corliss Avenue. Near Eddie's Deli... Hair Today... Hair Today. It's the name of the salon. I thought maybe—Never mind. We're here to report a missing person.

He's fourteen years old. His name is Leonard Pelkey. That's P-E-L—
You writing this down? Write it down. P-E-L—

CHUCK. *(To the audience.)* She was what they used to call in my line of work, “a dame.” A steady looker with legs up to here, an impressive rack and the kind of in-your-face attitude that could have you leaning up against a bar before noon knocking back shots of Johnnie Walker.

ELLEN. —K-E-Y. You got that? He's been missing twenty-four hours.
(To Phoebe.) What?

(To Chuck.) Oh. Nineteen hours, forty-seven minutes. To be exact.

(Suddenly.) Oh my God! Where's my purse?

(To Phoebe.) Phoebe, get my purse... My purse. I left it on the chair out there... Just get it!

(Back to Chuck.) I swear, I'd lose my pancreas if it wasn't inside me. Which is not to say that Leonard is lost. He's not. He's a missing person. It's different... Leonard is my nephew.

(To Phoebe.) Thank you very much.

(To Chuck.) Okay, so he's not my nephew. He's my brother's ex-girlfriend's son...

Sound cue: ringing cell phone.

... who came to live with us two years ago 'cause the mother, the ex-girlfriend, died (long story, very sad) and my brother happens to be a total asshole and shouldn't be allowed to care for a Shitzu let alone a human child. Excuse my French.

Hold on. I got to get this.

(Answering her phone.) Hello?...

Phoebe Hertle appears. She's sixteen, awkward, shy, but with a sly and knowing sense of humor.

PHOEBE. Hey. I'm Phoebe. I'm the daughter. That's my Mom. Obviously. Don't mind her. She's just a local beauty-stylist-slash-control-freak. Basically harmless. Unless you're her daughter. And then, Tah-Dah.

CHUCK. *(To the audience.)* Phoebe Hertle. Sixteen, going on forty-five. A kid really, but without the innocence you'd expect from a kid her age. I guess you could say she'd been around the block. But not all the way.

PHOEBE. I bet you see a lot of dead people in your line of work, huh? I see a lot of dead people in my mom's line of work, but

they're all still alive, walking around, having their hair done. When they actually DO drop dead they get laid out like on a beauty bed and made to look like they're alive. Sometimes my mom does their hair. She charges double for the dead. Which she doesn't like to do. But I tell her, considering you're giving them a look that'll last for all eternity it's kind of like a bargain.

ELLEN. (*Into the phone.*) Cathy. Cathy! When she made the appointment she asked for frosted tips and a blowout and that's what we charged her for... I don't care she changed her mind... Yeah, but... but... uh... Cathy... CATHY! I know. But she didn't tell me. And I'm not a mind-reader. Okay, listen.

Tell her *we* run a full-service salon, but we're responsible for the OUTSIDE of her head only.

(*To Chuck.*) Sorry. Business. This'll only take a minute.

(*To Phoebe.*) Phoebe, show him the picture... The picture of Leonard... The one on your cellphone... At the picnic... Oh, just show him!

Image: Leonard.

CHUCK. Exhibit A. JPEG of a boy. A little out of focus, but clear enough to see the blondish hair, blue eyes. Nice-looking kid.

PHOEBE. It doesn't show in the picture but you should know that Leonard is totally weird. Don't get me wrong, I like weird. I come from weird. I AM weird. But when weird goes too far, then it just becomes bizarre and nobody wants to be around that. And I'm not even talking about the fact that Leonard is gay.

ELLEN. (*To Chuck.*) Strike that from the record.

(*To Phoebe.*) We do not know that. Not one hundred percent. And besides, I'm sure Leonard would not appreciate us going around saying such things to total strangers?

PHOEBE. Wake up, Mom. It's the twenty-first century. No one cares.

ELLEN. I care. Okay? I care! Not that I got anything against the gays. I love the gays. My Uncle Paulie was gay. And I loved him. And he was so gay. He was gay like a Village Person. And so much fun. Oh my God, back in the day? He visited all the gay hotspots. Fire Island, Provincetown, exit 35 on the Parkway. Arrested there three times. And he didn't go around talking about it all the time. He didn't identify as a BLGT or whatever. He was just himself. He was just Uncle Paulie. Same as Leonard. He's just himself.

(*To phone.*) Cathy, I'll call you back.

CHUCK. (*To the audience.*) At this point, the mother was off the

phone. I asked her a few questions about the kid, height, weight, when... Mrs. Hertle, you okay?

ELLEN. I'm fine. I was just remembering. Okay, a couple of weeks ago Leonard comes to me and tells me that my frosted pink lip applicator by Maybelline has outlived its shelf life, and it's time to toss it. Said it was passé. Then he gives me this—Glossimer High Beam Gleam by Chanel. So thoughtful. I was so touched. Y'know, in my heart. I mean, what kind of a kid does a thing like that? What kind of a kid uses a word like passé?

PHOEBE. Um, a gay kid.

CHUCK. *(To the audience.)* I told them there wasn't much we could do 'til the kid was missing for a full twenty-four hours. But I suggested they might want to think about a poster. I'd seen it work for cats and dogs and once for an escaped parakeet. Y'know, people see the missing whatever, it jogs their memory, they call.

ELLEN. Does this kid look like a parakeet? You don't seem to understand the situation here. Leonard doesn't know anyone. Except for me and Phoebe. Some of the customers at the salon. The kids at school. Also the teachers. And the people over at Buddy Howard's School of Drama and Dance where we signed him up for after-school. But other than that, he's a total stranger in this town.

CHUCK. Okay. Maybe you can start by telling me who was the last person to see him.

Buddy Howard is middle-aged, a bit fey, and totally British. Speaks with a bit of a lisp, teaches drama and knows all about it from personal experience.

BUDDY. I believe it was half past six when I offered Leonard a ride home. Something I often do with my older boys. But he refused and toodle-loo, off he went on his own steam. And really, that was the last I saw him. Excuse me, Detective, but I'm not a suspect here, am I?

CHUCK. Buddy Howard was The Major Duomo of the famous Buddy Howard School for Drama and Dance. I use the word "famous" in the local sense of the word, which is to say—unless you live within a fifty-mile radius you probably never heard of the joint.

BUDDY. I'm only asking because early on there were some nasty rumors circulating about me, and I'd prefer not to stir all that up again... Well, if you must know, someone was going round saying I was a peedophile. And that's not the sort of thing you can deny, fresh out the box. "Hello, I'm Buddy Howard and I am not now nor

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One actor portrays every character in a small Jersey Shore town as he unravels the story of Leonard Pelkey, a tenaciously optimistic and flamboyant fourteen-year-old boy who goes missing. A luminous force of nature whose magic is only truly felt once he is gone, Leonard becomes an unexpected inspiration as the town's citizens question how they live, who they love, and what they leave behind.

"... leave[s] you beaming with joy. ... a superlative solo show... Mr. Lecesne is a writer of wit and keen observational skills, who here unfolds a dark tale that shimmers with the needling suspense you associate with the best police procedurals... Perhaps most remarkably, he's the rare artist who doesn't shy away from sentimentality. ... you may find yourself choking back a tear or two..."

—**The New York Times**

"... moving... [Lecesne] delivers a message of acceptance without being preachy. Intimate and affectionate, ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS is about the difference one person can make—and perhaps, with any luck, one show."

—**New York Post**

"... shines with humanity... an affecting and entertaining testament to the beauty of a world in which difference is celebrated rather than denigrated."

—**Los Angeles Times**

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