



EVENING AT THE TALK HOUSE

BY
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DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
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EVENING AT THE TALK HOUSE was first produced by the National Theatre of Great Britain in association with Scott Rudin at the Dorfman Theatre, South Bank, London, on November 24, 2015. It was directed by Ian Rickson; the set design was by the Quay Brothers; the costume design was by Soutra Gilmour; the lighting design was by Neil Austin; the music was by Stephen Warbeck; the stage managers were David Marsland, Fiona Bardsley, and Olivia Roberts; and the staff director was Diyan Zora. The cast was as follows:

ROBERT	Josh Hamilton
NELLIE	Anna Calder-Marshall
JANE	Sinéad Matthews
TED	Stuart Milligan
ANNETTE	Naomi Wirthner
BILL	Joseph Mydell
TOM	Simon Shepherd
DICK	Wallace Shawn

EVENING AT THE TALK HOUSE was originally produced in New York City by the New Group (Scott Elliott, Artistic Director; Adam Bernstein, Executive Director). It was directed by Scott Elliott; the scenic design was by Derek McLane; the costume design was by Jeff Mahshie; the lighting design was by Jennifer Tipton; and the production stage manager was Valerie A. Peterson. The cast was as follows:

ROBERT	Matthew Broderick
NELLIE	Jill Eikenberry
JANE	Annapurna Sriram
TED	John Epperson
ANNETTE	Claudia Shear
BILL	Michael Tucker
TOM	Larry Pine
DICK	Wallace Shawn

CHARACTERS

(Note to anyone directing this play: While writing the play, I imagined that the characters had certain characteristics. This is how I imagined the characters. Obviously, it's up to you to decide whether or not you want the age and appearance of all of the characters to conform exactly to what I say in the list below, because you may have good reasons in certain cases for making a different choice. In London and New York, various characters were not as described on this list.)

ROBERT, in his 50s or 60s, tall, attractive

NELLIE, perhaps 60s, thin

JANE, perhaps early 30s, thin

TED, perhaps 50s, not tall

ANNETTE, perhaps 50s, not thin

BILL, perhaps 50s, not tall

TOM, perhaps 60s, tall, attractive

DICK, perhaps 60s, not thin

EVENING AT THE TALK HOUSE

The central meeting room of the Talk House, an old-fashioned, understated small club. Several armchairs, some facing away from us. There is a bar, with various bottles, where guests can refill their drinks. Robert is a tall, attractive man in his fifties or sixties.

ROBERT. I got a call from Ted the other night. That was a surprise. It had probably been five or six years since I'd heard from Ted. Of course, I'd never really—Well, I was about to say I'd never really known Ted that well—but then who *have* I known well, when you get right down to it, come to think of it?—so I guess I won't say that. To "know someone well"—I mean, that's a phrase from another time. That's an idiotic phrase. Who have I known well? I haven't known anyone well. But at any rate, Ted, you see, had composed some incidental music for a play I'd written a dozen years ago or so called *Midnight in a Clearing with Moon and Stars*—quite nice music, actually—and at that time, you see, when theatre played a somewhat larger part in the life of our city than it does now, Ted had been rather successful, he drove a rather nice car, he wore some pretty good-looking jackets and shirts, he was doing all right, but as far as I'd heard, his fortunes had declined, so it was in a way rather touching that he wanted to gather together some of the old gang from *Midnight*, as we called it, to commemorate the tenth anniversary of its opening night, a date I myself would never otherwise have noticed. You see, according to Ted, that play had apparently been a very happy experience for all concerned. I mean, that's what he said, and it was nice to hear that, I guess, and I suppose I'd had a nice time, myself, relatively speaking, during the production of that play. Certainly it would be reasonable to

call it, from many points of view, my best play, if one bothers to get involved in those invidious comparisons.

Like all my plays, *Midnight* was set in a period that to a lot of people seemed vaguely medieval, but I always explained that really most of my plays took place in a sort of imaginary kingdom that predated history altogether, or stood to one side of it, at any rate. *Midnight in a Clearing with Moon and Stars* told the story of a powerful king, his loyal sons, and a princess, but actually the central figure was a sort of independent knight who lived in an enormous forest quite near the area ruled over by the king. Well—in any case, the play hadn't been terribly well liked by the public, and it wasn't a success, but quite a few people had enjoyed it quite a bit, including, interestingly, a certain Mr. Ackerley, who not long afterwards began to take a more and more prominent place in our national life, which, I'd have to admit, was not unhelpful to me when certain lovely prizes were awarded several years later, after I'd moved into the more congenial form of writing that sustains me today. Of course there are quite a few people who look back lovingly and longingly on the era of Walter Barclay in which that play was written, but you can put me down as a bit of a skeptic on that. I mean, was that really such a happy time? I'm not so sure. Certainly we can all agree that Walter Barclay was a very nice fellow, and Mr. Ackerley, as we know, has a cruel side, more and more in evidence, one could say, but how do these personal traits translate themselves into nationwide happiness or unhappiness, or do they, you see? I think that's the question that's sometimes ignored. Mind you, I keep my views of Ackerley to myself, as most people obviously do if they have any brains. Walls have ears—as do floors, ceilings, windows, doors, plates, cups spoons, forks, and come to think of it, other human beings, if we're compiling a list. In any case, the alternation between Mr. Ackerley and our sneaky friend Mr. Rodman seems to work rather well, I feel, and I'm certainly not going to complain because statistics say that the theatre-going impulse has declined substantially since Walter Barclay took his last breath—or had it taken from him, if you believe those theories. A decline in the theatre-going impulse could in a way be seen as a small price to pay for the rather substantial benefit derived from entering into an era that quite a few people would describe as much more tranquil

and much more agreeable than the one that preceded it. And the horrible truth, if I dare to say this, is that although I had some fairly nice times, some pretty good moments, putting on my plays—well, if pressed to the wall I'd have to say that theatre for me eventually came to seem like a rather narrow corner, a rather distasteful little corner of the world in which to spend my life—I came to feel that it was a corner of the world that I honestly wouldn't mind leaving and whose general decline I was not in my heart of hearts terribly saddened about. Because, what exactly *was* “theatre,” really, when you actually thought about it? You'd have to say that it was utterly and irreducibly about a small group of humans sitting and staring at another small group of humans—an animal process—an animal process that completely lacked art, not to mention, for my money, charm, and that was fundamentally no less mindless than what dogs do or what cows do, an animal business of sniffing and staring. No one really cared about the soundtrack to the event, the words that were spoken—the writer's role was just to choose whether the cows onstage said “Moo” or whether they said “Moo moo.” And when I was young, that was all right with me. When I was young, I myself was still in love with the experience of sitting in a darkened theatre and staring at the stage, and that was why I devoted all those years to putting on plays. I loved to *look* at them, I loved to stare at the actors and even the scenery they were placed in. In other words, well—I was unfailingly excited—one could even say awe-struck—by the sight of an enormous stage, filled and over-filled with enormous shaggy trees rising as high as one could see—and even higher than one could see—and lit by beautiful, suffusing, milky moonlight... And then into that milky moonlight, people would stride, with glinting and flashing swords and maces—tall, gorgeous people in flowing robes of blue and red—you know, and I loved the scantily clad nymphs and the magnificent beards of the virile young men. I loved all of that. And sure—part of the pleasure I took in watching those figures was that their very manner, their bearing, so often reflected certain extremely noble but at the same time perennially threatened ideals that I greatly admired then—and still do: self-sacrifice, first of all, I suppose; courage—or heroism on a field of battle, if that was the venue; loyalty; the instantaneous, repeated decision to choose suffering in preference to dishonor. The power

and magnificence of the body, I suppose, when inspired into action. And in a way one could laugh, but I still like to think that what we do each week on *Tony and Company*, admittedly in an entirely different style, presents some of the same ideals in a more contemporary package in each little thirty-minute segment. Tony—particularly as Tom plays him, of course—is understandable, he’s human, he has his failings and his weaknesses, but he’s fundamentally a good person who’s guided by the same principles that inspired some of the characters in my plays—he’s a person who’s prepared to fight when necessary to defend his friends. Or that’s how I would see it.

But at any rate, when I asked Ted where he thought we should hold our great anniversary celebration, he replied, “Why, the Talk House of course!” The Talk House? My God, the Talk House, that almost-legendary, wonderfully quiet and genteel club, known far and wide at one time for its delicious and generously sized snacks, some of them pleasantly sautéed, some delightfully freezing cold, all rather charming and unexpected—The Talk House, rather like my own play, had fallen completely out of my mind in recent years, and I was shocked to learn, quite frankly, that it still even existed. But of course it was the perfect place for us all to gather, because during the run of *Midnight*, many of us had gone there after the show almost every night to have a few drinks and enjoy a large or small dinner made up out of some alluring combination of attractive snacks. And of course everyone loved the incredibly kind matron who managed the place, Nellie, a very intelligent, very sensible, rather innocent woman, who always made me feel, when I would walk in the door and see her standing there, that I was a young student just starting out at a rather good school where I could feel quite confident I was going to be well taken care of.

Nellie—thin, perhaps in her sixties—appears behind Robert and begins arranging the room.

Nellie of course was assisted by Jane, who ten years ago had been a very young aspiring actress. As I happened to know, Jane had left the Talk House not too long after the days of *Midnight*, but unfortunately she hadn’t had great luck as a performer, and I wasn’t terribly surprised to learn from Ted that she’d eventually returned to her old job with Nellie.

After a moment, Jane—perhaps early thirties, thin—appears, and begins to help Nellie. Nellie and Jane wear uniforms. Then we see Ted—perhaps in his fifties, not tall—come in the door and greet Nellie and Jane.

These days Ted made a living writing advertising music whenever—to use his words—“something came up for which a more old-fashioned composer seemed appropriate.” At any rate, that’s how he put it to me.

Annette—perhaps in her fifties, not thin—comes in and greets Nellie, Jane, and Ted.

Annette had been our wardrobe supervisor on *Midnight*—that was her official title—but to many of us she’d been a special friend and confidante as well, because in stressful circumstances one could always count on Annette to stay pleasant and calm—a soothing presence. She now did private tailoring and repairs for various wealthy clients—a rather unstable mode of existence, as Ted explained it to me.

Bill—perhaps in his fifties, not tall—enters and greets the others.

Bill, our resourceful producer, was actually doing quite nicely these days. He’d become a talent agent, and was now quite well known and highly regarded in his new profession.

Tom—perhaps in his sixties, tall and attractive—arrives and greets the others.

And then of course there was Tom, the gorgeous and resplendent Tom, the star ten years ago of the not-terribly-successful theatrical masterpiece *Midnight in a Clearing with Moon and Stars*, and currently the star of the *unbelievably* successful television masterpiece *Tony and Company*, for which I’ve had the honor for the last many years of laboring as head writer, story editor, chief word-wrangler, or whatever you’d want to call me.

Nellie, Jane, Ted, Annette, Bill, and Tom go off together as Robert continues to speak to the audience.

At any rate, as the author of the immortal dramatic work that we were gathering to celebrate, I considered it my prerogative to show up a fashionable twelve minutes late, and as the others had all wandered off into the library before I arrived, I didn’t see anyone in the club’s main meeting room when I came into it, and so I decided to begin

EVENING AT THE TALK HOUSE

by Wallace Shawn

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To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the opening of an unsuccessful play, the playwright, the leading actor, the producer, and various other members of the company get together at their former haunt, the Talk House. Most haven't been there, or even seen each other, in years, and the gossip and nostalgia are mixed with questions and accusations. Why does a washed-up old actor keep getting beaten up by his friends? Where does a failed actress-turned-waitress disappear to for months at a time? *EVENING AT THE TALK HOUSE* is a biting portrayal of people grasping to find their place in a world in which terror has become an accepted part of life. Is this the world we're living in now?

"...[an] excavation of moral cowardice in a fascist age... [EVENING AT THE TALK HOUSE] provides plenty of bitter food for thought..." —**The New York Times**

"[Wallace Shawn's] most perfect alarm, arriving at the necessary moment..." —**New York Magazine**

"For decades, Shawn has written of a world in which artists are crushed by government thugs and ordinary citizens cheerfully justify crimes against humanity... Depending on your political outlook, you may shrug and call that the status quo in the West for more than a century. Still, [in] TALK HOUSE...Shawn has turned his theatrical nightmares into our waking reality." —**Time Out New York**

"Shawn [has a] talent for stealthily climbing into our brains and planting a time bomb of horror. He lulls us into a false sense of comfort, exploiting the complacency that is very much at the heart of his story. ...Shawn seamlessly blends deathly serious themes with his unique brand of absurd humor. ...An uncomfortable ring of truth emanates from this story about the breezy acceptance of tyranny, provided it does not interfere with certain bourgeois niceties." —**TheaterMania.com**

Also by Wallace Shawn
AUNT DAN AND LEMON
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