



**20TH
CENTURY
BLUES**

BY
SUSAN MILLER



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



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*for my mother and father
who infuse everything I write with their love*

The original Off-Broadway production of 20TH CENTURY BLUES was produced by Lida Orzeck, with Eva Price, Executive Producer, at the Pershing Square Signature Center, opening on November 28, 2017. It was directed by Emily Mann, the set design was by Beowulf Boritt, the lighting design was by Jeff Croiter, the costume design was by Jennifer von Mayrhauser, the sound design was by Darron L West, and the production stage manager was Samantha Flint. Photographs were by Jane Krensky. The cast was as follows:

DANNY Polly Draper
SIL Ellen Parker
MAC Franchelle Stewart Dorn
GABBY Kathryn Grody
BESS Beth Dixon
SIMON Charles Socarides
Understudies Lynda Gravatt, Felicity La Fortune,
Gregory Perri

20TH CENTURY BLUES was originally produced at the Contemporary American Theater Festival (Ed Herendeen, Artistic Director; Peggy McKowen, Associate Producing Director), opening on July 8, 2016. It was directed by Ed Herendeen, the set design was by David M. Barber, the costume design was by Therese Bruck, the lighting design was by D.M. Wood, the original music and sound design were by Nathan A. Roberts and Charles Coes, the projection design was by Hannah Marsh, and the production stage manager was Debra A. Acquavella. The cast was as follows:

DANNY Betsy Aidem
SIL Alexandra Neil
MAC Franchelle Stewart Dorn
GABBY Kathryn Grody
BESS Mary Suib
SIMON Jason Babinsky

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Joyce Ketay (for the years!) and for putting this play into the right hands.

Ed Herendeen and his continuing passion for the play, knowing he wanted to direct it upon reading it, and for assuring its first production at CATE, one of the best theatre festivals in the country.

Emily Mann, who sacrificed the comforts of home for Midtown Manhattan, at the same time running her own theatre, the McCarter, from afar, while deftly wrangling and inspiring a cast of four amazing women, one beautiful man, and a playwright, all for the love of this play. She got it. And gave it back. With a gorgeous production

The actors who brought 20TH CENTURY BLUES to life in early readings: Judith Light, Anna Deveare Smith, Blair Brown, Jill Eikenberry, Tamara Tunie, Ami Brabson, Barbara Barrie, Mary Beth Piel, Lynne Cohen, Judith Ivey, Ellen Parker, Kathryn Grody, Greg Keller, Alex Mickiewicz.

The Staging Team for sponsoring the first production of 20TH CENTURY BLUES at the Contemporary American Theatre Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Jane Krensky for the generous gift of her photographs.

My son, Jeremy Miller, for his humanity and insights.

Lida Orzeck who believed and made it happen.

CHARACTERS

The four main characters are women in their 60s. These are funny, passionate, complicated women, each of whom brings a unique history, as well as pressing current concerns, to the table. The often fast-paced rhythm of their dialogue should suggest that they talk in ways only people who know one another well can, even though individually they have different levels of comfort, intimacy, and friction with one another. They are not “polite” in their interactions, nor should their genuine connection to each other fall into the trap of sentimentality. Sometimes the lid blows off. At a cost.

DANNY. Attractive, great sense of humor, with an artist’s energy and wild strain. Layered with urban angst and a dose of self-doubt. Divorced. Has a grown son, Simon. She’s an accomplished, well-known photographer at a crucial turning point in her life.

SIL. A real estate agent. Separated from her husband. She works her ass off to keep current. And to keep afloat.

MAC. A high-level journalist. African American. She is witty, smart, opinionated. Lives with her female partner.

GABBY. A dedicated veterinarian running her own practice. She lives in Boston with her one and only husband. She doesn’t do well with conflict, and wants everyone to be “okay.”

BESS. Danny’s mother, 91. (Can be played by someone a good deal younger.) In no way is she a generic “old” woman. She is modern and loving, with former talents of her own, though she is now in the early stages of dementia.

SIMON. Danny’s son, early 30s. Smart, sense of humor. He works for a progressive cable/internet news program. He is close with his mother and grandmother.

TIME

The present during a TED Talk.
And four months earlier over the course of a day
in New York City.

SETTING

New York City artist's loft and living space.

A few stage directions are suggested in the text just to establish the geography. But the staging is entirely up to the director, the designer, and to the requirements of the space.

RUNNING TIME

Without an intermission: 1 hour, 40 minutes. (As published and produced Off-Broadway.)

The play may be performed in two acts, including an intermission, without needing any change in the dialogue. See Author's Note at end of play.

20TH CENTURY BLUES

*Lights up on area representing a TED Talk—the present. The “Global Conference Initiative” logo/sign is projected.**

After a moment, Danny makes her entrance, her camera slung over her shoulder, securing her headphone mic, as she moves across the stage to her designated spot. She catches her breath, then takes a moment to connect with her audience.

DANNY. The history of the world.

Beat.

In five hundred words or less.

Beat.

Go.

(Warming up the audience.) My final exam. Junior year. I was in the throes of trying to impress my professor, who I wanted to want me—I know. A *bad* idea. So I pulled an all-nighter. With some help from a magic little diet pill every girl in the dorm seemed to have except me. I was wired with facts and possibilities. I knew this baby cold. I was in the zone. I showed up to the final exam in my pajamas. And, I aced it. A week later I got my grade back and there was a big ugly *F*. With a note from the professor written in red. “USE YOUR WORDS.” I was stunned.

Beat.

What did he mean, *use my words*? And then I opened the test and looked at the page. Layer upon layer of *right* answers. *Unreadable*. A drug-induced blur of number-two pencil. A smudge. I had written all of it, everything I knew, in an eighth of an inch space between two lines on the first page of my blue book. The history of the world, lost forever. Under an avalanche of my tragically indecipherable,

* Under no circumstances may the actual TED Talk logo/branding appear in production. Please see Note on Songs/Recordings, Images, or Other Production Design Elements at the back of this volume.

brilliant ideas.

Beat.

I switched to Fine Arts. And started taking pictures. No words necessary.

Beat.

I want to tell you something you don't know. Even if you googled me. I want to tell you something I don't even know yet. But I'll start with a fact. I was born in the decade after the Second World War. So when the Museum of Modern Art announced they were giving me a retrospective of my work, I had to deal with it. Being a certain age. And having to think about how I want to be remembered. MoMA, of course, assumed it would be the work I'm already known for. Which they seem to enjoy calling my *brand*, but please promise me, you won't ever. Anyhow, it completely disrupted any notions I had, if I had any at all, about what I would or should be remembered for. Or which of the photographs I've taken in my career deserves a gallery wall or your attention here today.

The following photographs are projected behind her as she speaks. Her photographic point of view is distinct, artful, amusing.

French Wedding Day

Beat, then next image.

Art School

Beat, next image.

Times Square Or Bust

Beat, next image.

Boys In The Hood

Beat, next image.

Town Council Meeting With Donuts

After a moment, the projections go blank.

Something about the *group*—I don't know—people in juxtaposition with one another—just compels something in me. Like somehow we all affect the atmosphere together in a way that changes something we'll never really get to see. How it started was I got this gig

taking school pictures. You know that thing they do at the end of a year. Miss Gallagher's third grade class. All lined up in rows. And sometimes I'd imagine them grown up. Out in the world. But the truth is once I finish a shoot, I never see any of my subjects again. Except for *one* group. One group I've never shown publicly. Even though I've photographed these women once a year, every year, since the day we met forty years ago.

Beat.

In jail.

Beat.

Well, it was the seventies. You were no one if you didn't spend a night in jail.

Beat.

I can't say what drew the four of us close. Maybe it was something we recognized in each other but didn't yet know. Except that we were young and dazzled by it.

Beat.

So, when I started thinking about the retrospective and my former cellmates, these women I've known through decades and more than one lost political cause, it became clear that they were the ones I wanted to represent me at MoMA. They have something to tell you. Their faces say what I can't. Maybe they're what's buried under the scrawled answer in my failed history exam. Maybe they're my A.

Beat.

So the plan was—well, *my* plan—if everyone cooperated, because these women are not cooperative types, let me just say—was to unveil the photographs here. And talk about why they matter in the scheme of things.

Beat.

That was the plan.

Beat.

But then a day can happen that leaves everything up in the air.

Lights change. Danny walks offstage.

The global initiative sign goes away and a projection goes up

with the words: Four months earlier. After a few moments, that sign goes off.

A projection comes on that suggests an assisted living facility. Danny's mother, Bess, walks onstage with her walker, as Danny walks back onstage having changed some piece of clothing from the prior scene to suggest that time has passed. She is visiting her mother, who has mild but growing dementia. Danny applies lotion to her mother's hands as Bess looks around her room at the artwork (which is not displayed).

BESS. Those are nice. Those things on the wall.

DANNY. They're your paintings, Mom. You made them.

BESS. *I did?*

DANNY. And the sculpture.

BESS. I didn't know that. Not too bad. So what's on the agenda?

DANNY. All the girls are getting together. Like we do. Sil and Gabby and Mac. It's the day I take their picture.

BESS. That's wonderful. *(Then, not a complaint, just a curious fact.)* You know I haven't had a meal since I came here.

DANNY. *(Jollyng her.)* Mom, you've been here a year. I think you must have eaten at least a piece of toast. You'd be wasting away.

BESS. *(Small laugh.)* Oh. Yes. I guess so.

DANNY. Are you hungry? I'll get us some ice cream.

BESS. *(A little anxious.)* How do I pay for it?

DANNY. My treat.

Bess looks at something else that catches her attention. A photograph.

BESS. That's wonderful of Dad. Did you take it?

Danny nods yes.

Do you hear from him? He was always with me. I don't see him. I don't know if he's still my husband.

DANNY. Daddy's always going to be your husband, Mom.

BESS. *(Her mind taking a quick turn.)* I think he's here somewhere. Probably talking with the other men.

DANNY. (*Reassuring.*) I'm sure he is. I know he is.

BESS. We took a ride to the Poconos yesterday. Dad and I. Nothing special.

DANNY. Those are the best kind of rides.

BESS. (*Troubled.*) Honey, do you know where I'm sleeping tonight?

DANNY. Right here, Mom. In your room.

BESS. Oh, this is my room?

DANNY. It's where you live now.

BESS. I'm not really sold on it.

DANNY. I know. But maybe we can work on how to make it better.

BESS. Well, that's something to think about.

A moment.

Do you think you can drive me home? Or should I call a cab?

Lights change. The screen flies up.

Danny walks into the revealed space of her loft studio. It is now later that morning.

Danny pours herself a cup of coffee as Gabby enters, breathless, with flowers. Although they haven't communicated in person since the last shoot, they talk as if they're picking up where they left off.

GABBY. (*Referring to her cell phone.*) Did you know you can have a personal guide to walk you anywhere you want to go? I named mine Wanda. She re-routes you if you go off course. Which I did every two minutes. I thought she'd have a nervous breakdown.

She gives Danny the flowers. They hug.

I can't believe I'm the first one here.

DANNY. There's no babka! I was expecting babka.

GABBY. Greenbaum's is no more. You live here. Didn't you notice?

DANNY. I'm in denial. I mean, do we really need another nail salon or pharmacy? Or is it a bank? Who are the people who have so much money that we need another bank?

Gabby walks around the studio, taking it all in. Danny stands back, enjoying just watching her.

20TH CENTURY BLUES

by Susan Miller

1 man, 5 women

Four women meet once a year for a ritual photo shoot, chronicling their changing (and aging) selves as they navigate love, careers, children, and the complications of history. But when these private photographs threaten to go public, relationships are tested, forcing the women to confront who they are and how they'll deal with whatever lies ahead. 20TH CENTURY BLUES is a sharply funny and evocative play by Obie Award and Susan Smith Blackburn Prize-winner Susan Miller that questions our place in the world and with one another.

"Though it touches on themes of friendship and art-making, this is mostly a comedy about aging. Ms. Miller...hopes to demonstrate that when women turn 60 they don't suddenly become sexless, charmless, invisible."

—**The New York Times**

"A brilliant...play... Miller's script is clever and wise, bursting with great lines and naked truths."

—**Curve Magazine**

"20TH CENTURY BLUES...breaks the mold when it comes to the female ensemble dramedy. ... With poignant but still laugh-out-loud social commentary on the process of aging in America, razor sharp one-liners and thought-provoking questions about older generations adjusting to the younger world, 20TH CENTURY BLUES takes a tried and true comedic premise and adds a uniquely modern twist."

—**BroadwayWorld.com**

"[The] deceptive comic tone of...20TH CENTURY BLUES draws us into raw, painful, poignant confrontation among four friends."

—**Joyce Carol Oates**

"Critics' Pick! Susan Miller's 20TH CENTURY BLUES is empathetic and timely."

—**Deadline.com**

"These are fully rounded people. Representative of a lot of women who want to see themselves on stage. It's a diverse play as well."

—**PBS Theater Talk**

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