

**THE MOTHER**  
**A BLACK FARCE**

BY  
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*La Mère*  
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The U.S. premiere of THE MOTHER was presented by Atlantic Theater Company (Neil Pepe, Artistic Director; Jeffery Lawson, Managing Director), New York City, in 2019. It was directed by Trip Cullman, the scenic design was by Mark Wendland, the costume design was by Anita Yavich, the lighting design was by Ben Stanton, the sound design and original composition was by Fitz Patton, the projection design was by Lucy Mackinnon, the fight director was J. David Brimmer, the dialect coach was Kate Wilson, and the production stage manager was Samantha Watson. The cast was as follows:

THE MOTHER .....	Isabelle Huppert
THE FATHER .....	Chris Noth
THE SON .....	Justice Smith
THE GIRL .....	Odessa Young

## **CHARACTERS**

THE MOTHER, Anne

THE FATHER, Pierre

THE SON, Nicolas

THE GIRL, Élodie

# THE MOTHER

## ACT ONE

### Scene 1

*The Mother and the Father. A soundscape underlining a growing tension and creating a strange atmosphere.*

MOTHER. Ah, there you are.

FATHER. Yes.

MOTHER. You're a bit late.

FATHER. A bit, yes. All right?

MOTHER. Yes, yes.

*Pause. She resumes, not accusingly.*

Where were you?

FATHER. Mm?

MOTHER. This afternoon.

FATHER. What did you say?

MOTHER. Where were you?

FATHER. Why?

MOTHER. Just wondered. That's all.

*Pause.*

FATHER. What about you? Good day?

MOTHER. Why are you asking me that? When you know the answer.

FATHER. Wanted to know.

MOTHER. You're interested?

FATHER. Yes.

MOTHER. You know perfectly well my day was shitty.

FATHER. (*Astonished by her answer.*) What's the matter with you? Anne...

MOTHER. Nothing. I'm just wondering why you bother to pretend.

FATHER. Me? Pretend what?

MOTHER. To be interested.

FATHER. But I'm not pretending at all, Anne. What are you talking about? I am interested. Very interested.

MOTHER. Well, it's not very interesting. I stayed in, did nothing. Waited.

*Pause. The start of a palpable unease.*

Your seminar, is it tomorrow?

FATHER. Yes.

MOTHER. You're leaving tomorrow?

FATHER. Yes. In the morning.

MOTHER. Good. Are you happy?

FATHER. It's only a seminar.

*Pause.*

You seem upset.

MOTHER. No, it's just... Nicolas.

FATHER. What?

MOTHER. He still hasn't phoned.

FATHER. Why should he have phoned?

MOTHER. Because I'm his mother. I left him a message, but he hasn't called back. As usual. I don't understand why he never tells me what's happening in his life. Why he never comes by to see me. Never. He behaves as if I didn't exist.

FATHER. He's busy.

MOTHER. Doing what?

FATHER. Mm? I don't know. Living.

*She shrugs her shoulders. Pause.*

MOTHER. So?

FATHER. What?

MOTHER. Where were you?

FATHER. What do you mean, where was I?

MOTHER. This afternoon.

FATHER. In the office, darling. Why?

*Pause. He looks at her, vaguely anxious.*

What's the matter with you?

MOTHER. I called the office just now.

FATHER. My office?

MOTHER. Yes. Just now.

*Pause.*

I wanted to talk to you.

FATHER. Oh, yes?

MOTHER. And they told me you weren't there.

FATHER. When?

MOTHER. This afternoon. They told me you weren't there.

FATHER. I was in a meeting.

MOTHER. Oh, so that's it...

FATHER. Yes.

MOTHER. Ah, right.

FATHER. Yes. Didn't my secretary tell you?

*Pause. No answer.*

MOTHER. (*Blandly and lightly, as if she's posing the question for the first time.*) Everything all right?

FATHER. Fine...

MOTHER. (*Still unemphatic.*) Where were you this afternoon?

FATHER. Mm? I told you I was in the office.

MOTHER. You were in a meeting?

FATHER. Yes.

MOTHER. You were preparing tomorrow's seminar?

FATHER. No, no connection.

MOTHER. (*Suspiciously.*) Really?

*Pause.*

Is it tomorrow, your seminar?

FATHER. You're worrying me, Anne.

MOTHER. I am?

FATHER. Yes. You're weird... You are, I promise you, you're weird this evening.

MOTHER. I'm not... Not at all. What makes you say that? I spend my days on my own bored sick, while you're banging little bitches in hotel rooms, so obviously...

FATHER. (*As if he hadn't heard.*) Sorry?

MOTHER. Mm?

FATHER. What did you say?

MOTHER. (*As if nothing had been said.*) I said I'm aware of a great void.

FATHER. It's your fault as well, you know... You don't do anything. You haven't developed any enthusiasms. You stay here, doing nothing. So obviously...the world seems...dreary to you.

MOTHER. What am I supposed to do?

FATHER. I don't know.

MOTHER. See.

*Pause.*

FATHER. You have no interests. Since the children left home, it's as if... I mean, you have to find yourself something to do. Some focus of interest. Some...

MOTHER. I've been had. That's the truth of it. I've been had. All the way down the line.

FATHER. What are you talking about?

MOTHER. There were the children, yes. I took care of them. I certainly took care of the children. Two children, that's quite something. I say two...*three*, including you. Because I took care of you as well. And then I took care of this house.

FATHER. You did.



MOTHER. But now everyone's gone. And here I am on my own. In this big house. Nobody needs me anymore. And not even a phone call...

FATHER. You're exaggerating...

MOTHER. He never phones me. Never. Sara, I'm not saying. But him...Nicolas... Not even a phone call... To ask how I am. To, I don't know, let me hear his voice. He's cut me out of his life.

FATHER. He's in love. It's natural...

*Brief pause.*

MOTHER. *(As if to herself.)* Little bitches in hotel rooms...

FATHER. You... What's the matter with you? Anne... Are you all right? You don't look very...

MOTHER. *(Her tone suddenly completely normal.)* I'm fine. What about you? Had a good day?

FATHER. *(Disconcerted.)* Mm? Yes.

MOTHER. You had meetings?

FATHER. Why are you doing this?

MOTHER. Why am I doing what?

FATHER. You keep repeating yourself.

MOTHER. You didn't have a meeting?

FATHER. I did. I told you I did.

MOTHER. Just one?

FATHER. Yes.

MOTHER. So? Did it go well? Did you close the deal?

FATHER. Mm? Yes.

MOTHER. Great. I'm very happy for you.

*Pause.*

FATHER. *(Walking on eggshells.)* And you...

MOTHER. Oh, I just stayed here. I didn't do much. Tidied up a bit. Oh, yes, I did go out... Did some shopping. I bought a dress. Want me to show it to you? You won't like it, though. It's not your style. It's red. Need some bravado to carry it off. Or else some really important occasion. I'll wear it to your funeral.

FATHER. Have you been drinking today?

MOTHER. Me?

FATHER. Yes. Have you been drinking?

MOTHER. Not a drop.

FATHER. You haven't been drinking?

MOTHER. No. Why are you looking at me like that?

FATHER. No reason.

*Pause.*

MOTHER. Actually, I should never have had children.

FATHER. What?

MOTHER. I realise now. I should never have had children. Especially with someone like you. Someone who works, I mean. Who has meetings. And seminars.

FATHER. Anne...

MOTHER. It's true... When we met, I was what, twenty-two? Naïve. How could I have known? If you're twenty-two, you have no idea what a huge cheat life is. You don't know anything about it. You can be had so easily. Especially by a man like you. Apparently presentable, superficially, at least. Later, as time passes, you find you have to dig a bit deeper. And that's when you find out the extent of the disaster. Anyway, and I don't mean this as a compliment, Pierre, you were a...pathetic father. Really. I've been meaning to tell you.

FATHER. Me?

MOTHER. Yes. Pathetic. The complete opposite of a role model. At least for Nicolas.

FATHER. Why are you saying this?

MOTHER. It's what Nicolas told me. He told me he's always taken you as an anti-role model. Obviously, he's an artist. He told me that as far as he was concerned, to be anything like you would mean his life was a failure. To some extent, I agree with him.

FATHER. Are you listening to what you're saying to me? Anne... Are you listening to yourself?

MOTHER. As for Sara... Well. She may have admired you a bit. Yes. Vaguely. Until she was nine or ten. You can't blame her for it.

After all, you are her father. And then she's not very... Not very intelligent, if you think about it.

FATHER. Are you talking about Sara? Are you talking about your daughter?

MOTHER. Oh, don't make that face... It's never been a secret. I've always preferred Nicolas... Where's the harm in it? But Sara, I don't know... (*Whispering, so as not to be overheard.*) I find her unsympathetic. Don't you? Right from the time she was born, really. I noticed right away that she was unsympathetic. It's something physical. Something about her face. Some expression. Don't you think? I remember that first day, yes, the day she was born, I remember feeling strangely repelled.

*Pause.*

What about you, how was your day?

FATHER. What were you doing while...

MOTHER. (*Suddenly accusatory.*) While *what*?

*Brief pause.*

(*Playfully.*) I had you there, didn't I? You didn't know what to say...

FATHER. I was late back. Is that it? Is that why you're angry with me?

*Pause.*

Is that why?

MOTHER. Your meeting went on longer than anticipated.

FATHER. Yes. But...

MOTHER. So? What's the problem? There is no problem... Why do you always make things so complicated? Are you hungry?

FATHER. I've already eaten.

MOTHER. See.

*Pause.*

FATHER. Listen... Seems to me there's something funny going on. You... Are you feeling a bit tired? Perhaps I should call a doctor...

MOTHER. No, it's just...

FATHER. Just what?

*Pause.*

MOTHER. It's that girl...

FATHER. What girl?

MOTHER. You know very well.

*Pause.*

That girl...

FATHER. Who?

MOTHER. Please...

FATHER. What?

MOTHER. Stop it...

*Pause.*

FATHER. You mean...

MOTHER. Yes.

*Pause.*

The girl he's in love with.

FATHER. Nicolas?

MOTHER. Yes. D'you think she has something against us? I mean, against me?

FATHER. No, I don't think so. I mean, I've no idea. Why?

MOTHER. It's since he's been seeing her. Before, he used to drop by the house. On Sundays. Not every Sunday, admittedly. But some Sundays. Whereas now... I leave him messages, he doesn't even answer.

FATHER. He's growing up.

MOTHER. You call that growing up? I call it being cruel. I hate it.

FATHER. He's twenty-five.

MOTHER. I know he's twenty-five.

FATHER. Sometimes you seem to forget.

MOTHER. How could I possibly forget? Let me remind you I was there the day he was born.

*Pause.*

No, it's not that. It's something else. I want him to be in love and to live with that...*girl*. He does what he likes. It's his life. But that's no

reason to forget me. I mean...it's ridiculous, but I'm becoming jealous. Can you understand? Jealous of that...*girl*. When I'm his mother. It's just incredible. It's incredible. Sometimes I tell myself... I should never have had children with a man like you. Cowardice is in the genes. It gets passed on. Like ugliness.

FATHER. Right. Listen... I'm going to call a...

MOTHER. No.

FATHER. What?

MOTHER. I don't want you to leave me alone.

FATHER. Let me at least fetch you a glass of water.

*Pause. He goes out to fetch a glass of water.*

MOTHER. I've been thinking about your seminar story, you know. This seminar tomorrow. It is tomorrow morning you're leaving? If you knew how much it makes me laugh. A seminar? I can just imagine you trying to think of some excuse to explain your trips away... You really think I'm jealous? I am, but not on your account. He's the one I miss. He's my son. And I'm in the process of losing him. My little darling. My joy. Whereas I've already lost you. Years ago. So go off with your girlfriends... Whatever happens, I'm already on my own. I've been had all the way down the line.

*He comes back.*

FATHER. What were you saying?

MOTHER. I was saying what an asshole you are.

*Pause.*

Anyway, you have a good day?

FATHER. (*Not knowing what else to do.*) Here. Take this.

*The Mother drinks.*

MOTHER. (*Disappointed.*) Water?

FATHER. Yes.

MOTHER. Isn't there anything else?

FATHER. No. Better not.

MOTHER. I'd have preferred a...

FATHER. I know, but no. It's water.

*Pause. She finishes drinking.*

MOTHER. Thanks.

FATHER. Better?

MOTHER. All right.

*Brief pause.*

FATHER. Sure?

MOTHER. Yes, yes.

FATHER. Better?

MOTHER. Yes. Much better.

*Brief pause.*

FATHER. You ought to go to bed.

MOTHER. I'm not tired.

FATHER. All the same, you ought to go. You ought to take a sleeping pill.

*Pause. She takes a deep breath and tries to change the subject.*

MOTHER. (*Lightly.*) What about you? You have a good day?

FATHER. Are you doing this on purpose? Anne, are you doing this on purpose?

MOTHER. What?

FATHER. You've already asked me dozens of times.

MOTHER. Asked you what?

FATHER. Asked me if I've had a good day...

MOTHER. Me? Don't talk nonsense.

*Pause. She suddenly looks at him suspiciously.*

You seem peculiar, Pierre. You do, I promise you. Have you been drinking? Pierre... Look me in the eyes... Have you been drinking?

FATHER. Look...

MOTHER. You have been drinking.

FATHER. What are you playing at?

MOTHER. Me? Nothing. I'm just concerned about you, that's all.

*Pause.*

By the way, it is tomorrow, your seminar, isn't it?

FATHER. Stop it. Do you hear me? Stop pissing me about.

*Pause. Break.*

MOTHER. I know very well you're going to end up leaving me. What difference does it make if it's tomorrow or some other day?

FATHER. What are you talking about?

MOTHER. I'm not an idiot. I may seem like one. But I'm not an idiot.

FATHER. What are you talking about?

MOTHER. I know very well you're going to end up leaving me.

FATHER. Are you saying this because of the seminar?

MOTHER. Now the children have gone, there's nothing to keep you here. I know all that.

FATHER. You're talking gibberish.

MOTHER. Stop treating me like an idiot. I know it's your turn. You all leave, one after the other. Having used me up. I'm no use to you anymore. You've always told yourself you wouldn't leave, because of the children. Now they're not here anymore. So? What are you waiting for? The door's wide open.

FATHER. You're off your head, Anne.

MOTHER. You're finally going to live the life you want to. No need to hide. It's going to be a huge relief to you. A huge relief. No need to invent these seminars for me... Or meetings. You'll be able to have it off with your little whores in broad daylight. Fuck them from behind. You know, basically, you're a really horrible man. *I hate to say this, Pierre.*

FATHER. What?

MOTHER. You're a horrible man.

*Blackout.*

## Scene 2

*Same situation as at the beginning of Scene 1. Almost no transition. The actors' tone of voice is neutral and everyday.*

MOTHER. Ah, there you are.

FATHER. Yes. I'm a bit late. Didn't you get a message from my secretary?

MOTHER. Yes, I did... She told me you had a meeting.

FATHER. Yes.

MOTHER. Did it go well?

FATHER. Yes, yes. We finally closed the deal.

MOTHER. The Markousin deal?

FATHER. Yes. Finally in the bag.

MOTHER. Great. You must be pleased.

FATHER. More exhausted than anything else. What about you? Everything all right?

MOTHER. All right. Nothing special.

FATHER. You stayed in?

MOTHER. Yes. Tidied up a bit.

FATHER. Have you eaten?

MOTHER. Yes. There's some chicken left in the fridge, if you feel like it...

FATHER. No, thanks. I'm not really hungry.

*Pause.*

So you stayed in? I mean, all day?

MOTHER. Mm? Yes. Well, no. I did some shopping. I bought a dress. Guess what colour? Red!

FATHER. Red?

MOTHER. I know. Now I need to find the right occasion to wear it.

FATHER. Are you all right? You seem...

MOTHER. What?



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