

POUF!

BY LOU CLYDE

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POUF! was first produced by Chapin Theatre Company (Tiffany Dinsmore, Artistic Director; Jim DeFelice, Managing Director) with Evolving Door Theatre Company (Paolo Muccio, Managing Director; Jessica Francis Fichter, Artistic Director) at the Connelly Theater as part of the SheNYC Summer Theatre Festival in New York City on July 29, 2021. It was directed by Jessica Francis Fichter, the assistant director was Cameron Muccio, the dramaturgs were Larry Hembree and Perry Simpson, the set design was by Danny Harrington, the costume and wig design was by Kennedy Roberts, the lighting design was by Laura Anthony, the logo design was by Stacy Farrell, the sound design was by Patrick Michael Kelly, and the production stage manager was Danielle Banks. The cast was as follows:

BETTY MILLER	Hannah Thompson
JOHN MILLER	Richard Edward III
MARY COLLINS	Jamie Carr Harrington
TERESA McCABE	Karen Herschell
MARGO GURSKI	Tammy Smith
RAY CINDRICK	Jim DeFelice

CHARACTERS

BETTY MILLER—28, housewife, married to John

JOHN MILLER—29, works at phone company

MARY COLLINS—32, Betty's sister, mother of 4 kids

TERESA McCABE—60, widowed mother of Mary and Betty

RAY CINDRICK—60s, widower and mailman

MARGO GURSKI—Late 30s, mother of 6 kids

PLACE

The apartment of Betty and John in Brooklyn, New York.

TIME

1958

POUF!

ACT ONE

Scene 1

A Tuesday morning in 1958. Lights up on John and Betty's apartment. Betty is wearing an apron and a dress. John is dressed in a suit, heading to his job as a clerk at the telephone company. John is sitting at the dining room table reading the paper and Betty is pouring coffee into John's cup. He doesn't look up.

BETTY. Want some more toast?

John grunts.

Is that a yes or a no?

JOHN. Listen to this. (*Reading headline.*) "Elvis Presley Inducted into Army."

BETTY. Did he enlist?

JOHN. Looks like he was drafted.

BETTY. I wonder if they're gonna shave his pompadour.

John puts down the newspaper and looks at Betty.

JOHN. Pompa-what?

BETTY. Pompadour. It's named after Madame de Pompadour. She was the mistress of King Louis XV. (*Pronouncing it "XV."*)

JOHN. And she had Elvis hair?

BETTY. No. Elvis has her hair. She had it first.

JOHN. How do you know this stuff?

BETTY. I'm a genius. That's why you married me, right dear?

JOHN. No. I married you for your housekeeping skills. (*Laughs.*)

BETTY. What does that mean?

JOHN. Just kidding.

BETTY. You know who's gonna be upset about Elvis' shaved head?

JOHN. Who?

BETTY. My mother.

JOHN. Why?

BETTY. Didn't you know? She's got a little "Elvis crush."

JOHN. Wow. Well, she's available.

BETTY. I wouldn't wish that on Elvis.

JOHN. No kidding. So, what's on the agenda for today?

BETTY. What day's today?

JOHN. Tuesday.

BETTY. (*Removes list from apron pocket.*) Let's see. Make the bed, tidy, clean the kitchen counters, dust, vacuum, and iron. (*Smiling.*) Just another exciting day in the life of Betty Miller.

JOHN. Well, Betty Miller, what's for dinner?

BETTY. It's Tuesday, so it's Meat Loaf Day. Is that okay with you, dear?

JOHN. Sounds perfect. Try not to overcook it, though. It was pretty dry last week.

BETTY. I know. I got distracted by *Concentration*.

JOHN. What?

BETTY. It's a new game show on TV. I was concentrating so much I didn't notice the timer go off.

JOHN. Only you would get distracted by concentration.

BETTY. I'm good at it. I would have won a car if I was on the show.

JOHN. We don't need a car. We already have one.

BETTY. You're right, dear. As usual.

Beat.

Um, John?

JOHN. Yes, honey?

BETTY. I noticed a sign in the A&P saying they're looking for part-time workers.

JOHN. (*Carefully.*) We've had this conversation before, Betty. You already have a job. You are a housewife.

BETTY. Oh.

JOHN. My housewife. (*Realizing he's on thin ice, attempting to recover.*) My beautiful housewife.

BETTY. But John. I have time on my hands during the day. And we could use the extra money.

JOHN. (*Carefully.*) No way. No wife of mine is working at the grocery store. What would the neighbors think if they saw you ringing up their milk?

BETTY. Who cares what they think?

JOHN. I do! Besides, what would you do if you got pregnant?

BETTY. I'd quit. And in the meantime, I'd be making some extra money to help when the baby comes. Maybe start a college fund.

JOHN. (*Firm.*) The answer is no.

BETTY. But John!

John heads for door.

Don't forget your lunch.

JOHN. What is it?

BETTY. (*Hands him lunch bag.*) I made you a nice tuna fish sandwich.

JOHN. (*Standing. Peeks inside bag, then softening.*) Don't be mad at me, Betty.

BETTY. I'm not mad at you. I'm just worried about you. You hate that job and if I was working maybe, you could...

JOHN. I don't hate my job; I just hate my boss.

BETTY. Okay.

Beat.

Well, have a good day at work.

JOHN. (*Kisses her on cheek.*) You, too. And concentrate on the meat loaf, okay?

BETTY. I will.

John exits through front door. Betty stacks up the plates, talking to herself.

(*Imitating John.*) Concentrate on the meat loaf? Right.

Betty exits with dishes and returns with feather duster.

What would the neighbors say if they saw you ringing up their milk? They'd say, "Hi Betty! How are you?"

The phone rings.

Hello. (*Listens.*) Hi, Ma. (*Listens.*) Yeah, I heard. They *had* to shave it. Elvis is in the army.

Beat.

It'll grow back. (*Listens.*) I'm sorry you're upset. (*Listens.*) The usual. Dusting, vacuuming, ironing. (*Listens.*) No, I'm not. I would tell you if I was. (*Listens.*) Of course, I'm sure. (*Listens.*) Aunt Flo came to visit. (*Listens.*) I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mom, but maybe children aren't in the cards for us. (*Listens.*) I told you. We went to the doctor. He can't find anything wrong. (*Listens.*) Yes. He looked at John's sperm. They swim fast. (*Listens.*) Yes. We know how to do it. For crying out loud, Ma. You want to come over and watch? To make sure we're doing it right? (*Listens.*) I know. I'm sorry. You just want another grandchild. But you already have thirteen. And Mary's pregnant. You'll have fourteen soon. (*Changing subject.*) Hey, speaking of pregnant, did you see *As the World Turns* yesterday? Ellen's pregnant with her married lover's child.

Doorbell rings.

Hey, that's my door. I gotta go. (*Listens.*) OK, talk to you later, Mom.

The doorbell rings again. Before Betty has a chance to open it, sister Mary, who is about nine months pregnant, opens the door.

MARY. Hi, Betty.

Mary waddles into the room and takes a seat at the table.

BETTY. Have a seat.

MARY. Thought you'd never ask.

BETTY. (*Joining her at the table.*) Where are the kids?

MARY. Tommy and Susie are in school and Sharon Jawanski's watching Joey and Ann while I go to the grocery store.

BETTY. But you're here.

MARY. I needed a break. How you doing, Betts?

BETTY. I'm fine.

MARY. Don't lie to your big sister.

BETTY. I'm fine. Just feeling sorry for myself.

MARY. About what?

BETTY. Just stupid stuff.

MARY. Like?

BETTY. Okay. I had an argument with John this morning.

MARY. About what?

BETTY. I told him about the sign at the A&P advertising for part-time help. And he said, "No wife of mine is going to be working at a grocery store. What would the neighbors say?"

MARY. Can I have two fives for a ten?

BETTY. What?

MARY. Sorry. My attempt at humor.

BETTY. And then Mom called to see if there was a bun in the oven.

MARY. And?

BETTY. (*Just looks at Mary sadly.*) You'd be the first to know.

MARY. Before John?

BETTY. Probably.

MARY. You know, it's kind of ironic that Mom's bugging you about getting pregnant. When we were growing up, sex was the last thing she wanted to talk to us about.

BETTY. I know. I remember her praying every night for us *not* to start our periods so that she wouldn't have to explain it to us.

MARY. Remember the book?

BETTY. What book?

MARY. The "*You're a woman now,*" book.

BETTY. Oh my gosh! How could I forget? She handed it to me

when I turned twelve and said if I had any questions, I should ask my sister. Thanks for that, by the way.

MARY. You're welcome.

BETTY. Who were *you* supposed to ask? You didn't have an older sister.

MARY. She said if I had any questions to read it again.

BETTY. How many times did you read it?

MARY. Skimmed it once. I learned everything from Connie MacGillicuddy.

BETTY. Connie MacGillicuddy?

MARY. *She* had an older sister. (*Beat, then sweetly.*) Just think. Someday you'll be giving the book to your own daughter.

BETTY. Right.

MARY. It'll happen.

BETTY. I'm not so sure. We've been trying for a couple of years.

MARY. Give it time.

BETTY. It's frustrating. Every month it's the same old story.

MARY. You know, I know this lady a couple blocks away who tried to get pregnant for nine years. She just gave up. Then bam! She had six kids in a row.

BETTY. Wow.

MARY. It's like once she got pregnant it cleared the highway for all the rest.

BETTY. The highway? What are you talking about?

MARY. The Fallopian tubes. That connect the ovaries to the uterus so the sperm can find their way to the eggs.

BETTY. I thought you skimmed the book.

MARY. I got an A in Biology.

BETTY. You got A's in every subject.

MARY. No, I didn't. I got a C in Chorus. I'm still bitter about that.

Beat.

Mr. Few did not recognize raw talent when he heard it. (*Starts to*

sing off-key, in an attempt to make Betty laugh.) “God bless America. Land that I love.”

When Betty doesn't laugh Mary takes Betty's hand and squeezes it.

(Tenderly.) It'll happen.

BETTY. I'm just so sick of this. I don't want to think about Fallopian tubes. And sperm. And motility.

Beat.

And if I see one more pregnant woman...

MARY. I'm sorry.

BETTY. *(Immediately regretting what she said.)* Oh, no. Not you. I'm happy for you, Mary. You know that.

MARY. I know.

BETTY. Forget I said anything.

MARY. Deal. But I think that you need a distraction.

BETTY. Yes! Other than housework.

MARY. Like the job at the A&P.

BETTY. Exactly. But we know how John feels about that.

MARY. Well.

Beat.

Maybe he'd be okay with you working a *different* job.

BETTY. I don't think so.

MARY. Hand me the paper. Let's look at the want ads.

Mary opens the newspaper to the want ads.

Ah. Here we go. Help wanted female. The A&P is looking for someone.

BETTY. *(Feigning surprise.)* Really! What else is there?

MARY. Cleaning woman.

BETTY. Already got that job.

MARY. Hey, too bad you're not a man. They're looking for a Mister Softee truck driver.

BETTY. Really! I could do that. And it's a man's job?

MARY. Yep.

BETTY. Why would you need a pickle to drive a Mister Softee truck?

MARY. A pickle? What?

BETTY. (*Looking south.*) Do you really need to have one to drive an ice cream truck?

MARY. No!

BETTY. It is ridiculous, but it doesn't matter.

MARY. What do you mean?

BETTY. John would never let me get a job. Which is dumb because if I got a job, I could help us save money.

MARY. I know!

BETTY. And John could finally finish up his degree.

MARY. Stupid male pride. Hmm.

Beat.

What if he doesn't know about your job?

BETTY. (*Laughing.*) You are a bad influence on me big sister!

MARY. I am big. And getting bigger.

BETTY. Only about a month left.

MARY. I look like a whale.

BETTY. You look beautiful.

MARY. Liar. Hey, can you do my hair? Make me look like Jayne Mansfield, please.

Betty and Mary exit.

BETTY. (*Offstage.*) Did you see *As the World Turns* yesterday?

MARY. (*Offstage.*) I did, but then the baby started crying. I missed that whole conversation with Claire. What happened?

BETTY. (*Offstage.*) She was trying to keep Jim from leaving her, so she took an overdose.

Sound of hair spray offstage.

MARY. (*Offstage.*) She didn't die, did she? (*Coughs.*)

BETTY. (*Offstage.*) No. After the commercial she was being treated by Dr. Cassen. I guess he *happened* to be in the neighborhood.

More sounds of hair spray.

MARY. (*Offstage.*) I thought he died. (*Coughs.*)

BETTY. (*Offstage.*) No. He was faking his death so he could catch his wife in bed with that lawyer.

MARY. (*Offstage.*) Oh. That's right.

Betty and Mary return. Mary is wearing a very poufy wig. Mary sits in John's chair and Betty continues to pouf the wig.

BETTY. So, did you decide on a name yet?

MARY. Jack wants to name him Marlon if it's a boy.

BETTY. You're kidding. After Marlon Brando?

MARY. Yep. Mom wants us to name him Bartholomew.

BETTY. Of course, she does. Another Apostle grandson.

MARY. I should tell her we're naming him Judas.

BETTY. (*Laughing.*) She might have a heart attack! Do you have a girl's name picked out?

MARY. Linda.

BETTY. Oh. Linda. That's a nice name. (*Hands Mary a mirror.*) Here you go. You look beautiful.

MARY. Wow. How do you do that?

BETTY. It's all in the hair spray.

MARY. No, it's not. When I pouf my own hair I end up looking like Albert Einstein. You have a knack for this.

BETTY. Yeah?

MARY. You do.

BETTY. Thanks.

MARY. You really do. (*Considering.*)

BETTY. I enjoy it.

MARY. (*Standing up.*) You know what, Betty? You should do this professionally.

BETTY. Do what?

MARY. Be a hair stylist.

BETTY. What do you mean?

MARY. You could style hair.

BETTY. Where?

MARY. Here!

BETTY. Here? In my house?

MARY. Sure! Lots of people have in-home salons.

BETTY. Are you kidding? First of all, who would want me to do their hair?

MARY. A lot of people. If word got around about how amazing you are. You're like an artist with a comb and a can of hair spray.

Beat.

Ooh! Ooh! I can be your advertising manager.

BETTY. Get out.

MARY. No! Really. I'd do it pro-bono.

Beat.

That means for nothin'.

BETTY. You're crazy.

MARY. We need a name. I'm good at this. Let's see. How about The Hair Lair?

BETTY. Um.

MARY. Betty's Hair Lair?

BETTY. I don't think so.

MARY. I know. Just Teasin'!

BETTY. What?

MARY. Get it? Just Teasin'!

BETTY. You're crazy. But you may as well forget it. John will never go for it.

MARY. How will he know?

BETTY. What do you mean? How will he *not* know?

MARY. You're just having a few friends over during the day.

BETTY. I am?

MARY. Yeah. They can watch the stories with you.

BETTY. While I style their hair?

MARY. Sure! They can watch *As the World Turns* while you're doing your magic. Wait. I've got it!

BETTY. What?

MARY. The name of your salon. As the Scissors Clip!

BETTY. No.

MARY. As the Comb Teases?

BETTY. How about As the Husband Strangles?

MARY. Come on. Think about it. (*Standing.*) I better go. I need to get to the A&P before Sharon kills me. Or before the kids kill her. Wanna come?

BETTY. Nah. (*Sighing.*) I got work to do.

MARY. Think about it.

Mary exits. Betty takes another look at the want ads and scoffs. She looks in the mirror and applies hair spray to her already big hair. She then pulls out the ironing board, which makes a screeching sound, sets up the iron, and sets a laundry basket next to the ironing board. She pulls out the iron when she hears a knock on the door. Before Betty has a chance to open the door, her mother Teresa enters carrying a purse.

BETTY. Ma! Come on in. (*They hug, then sarcastically.*) I wasn't expecting you.

TERESA. Oh. I was in the neighborhood.

BETTY. Want a pop?

TERESA. I don't wanna be a bother.

BETTY. No bother. Is root beer good?

TERESA. Yeah. If it's no bother.

Betty exits and Teresa looks around. Walks to ironing board and checks over Betty's ironing. She adjusts the iron.

You ironing?

BETTY. (*Offstage.*) Yeah. You want ice?

TERESA. If it's no bother.

BETTY. (*Sound of ice tray cracking.*) It's no bother.

Betty returns with mug of root beer.

TERESA. You don't want one?

BETTY. Nah.

Beat.

So, you going to see Dad?

TERESA. It's the fifth, isn't it?

BETTY. What'cha bringing this month?

TERESA. A flag.

Teresa removes flag from purse and waves it.

BETTY. Oh. He'd like that.

TERESA. Yeah. He was very patriotic.

BETTY. I know.

TERESA. So, I was wondering.

BETTY. What were you wondering about, Ma?

TERESA. John.

BETTY. John? What about him?

TERESA. Oh, I was just wondering. *(Clears throat.)* Does John finish the job?

BETTY. What?

TERESA. Finish the job.

BETTY. Ma, what are you talking about? What job?

TERESA. Betty. I am just wondering. Does John, you know, finish... the job?

BETTY. You're going to have to translate for me, Ma. I am not following you.

TERESA. *(Very uncomfortable.)* When you two are having...

BETTY. Sex?

TERESA. Marital relations, does John, you know, finish?

BETTY. You mean does he ejaculate?

TERESA. *(Does a sign of the cross then puts her hands over her ears, shaking head.)* Such language! I wouldn't put in my hand what you just had in your mouth! Your dad is probably rolling over in his grave.

BETTY. I'm sorry, Ma.

TERESA. I thought I raised you to be a lady.

BETTY. You did. I'm sorry, Ma.

TERESA. (*Waits for a response from Betty.*) So, does he?

BETTY. Finish the job?

TERESA. Yes, does he?

BETTY. Yes. He finishes the job. Every time.

Betty moves to the ironing board.

TERESA. Good.

Beat.

And when the two of you are...

BETTY. Making whoopee?

TERESA. Yes, thank you. When you're "making whoopee" is it more of a sprint or a marathon? Because I've heard the longer it takes a man to finish, the more he finishes with, if you get my meaning.

BETTY. I wish I didn't.

TERESA. Well?

BETTY. It takes as long as it takes, Ma.

TERESA. And when you two are doing...

BETTY. The horizontal tango?

TERESA. Oh, I like that. Yes, when you two are doing...the Tango, do *you* finish as well?

BETTY. Me? Do I finish?

TERESA. Because I've heard that if you finish together...

BETTY. Mom!

TERESA. That if you finish in a tie, it helps the...swimmers go deeper. If you get my meaning.

BETTY. No!

TERESA. I'm just trying to be helpful, Betty.

BETTY. If Dad weren't rolling over in his grave before, he is now.

TERESA. (*Beat.*) One more thing.

BETTY. Please, Ma.

TERESA. When he finishes...

BETTY. Mom.

TERESA. Does he finish in the right place?

BETTY. Mother!!!

TERESA. All right. I'm (*Responding to Betty's glare.*) ...done.

BETTY. Good because I have a question for you.

TERESA. (*Getting excited. Happy to be of help.*) Oh, good! What?

BETTY. Why do I have to iron hankies?

TERESA. Because they're wrinkled.

BETTY. So, what? It's not like John is going to *wear* this hanky. He just shoves it into his pocket until he needs it.

TERESA. But it's nice to have an ironed hanky.

BETTY. Why?

TERESA. Because there's no wrinkles in it when it's ironed.

BETTY. Never mind.

TERESA. Your dad liked his hankies *starched*.

BETTY. Starched?

TERESA. Yeah. He liked the smell of the starch when he was blowing his nose. He told me.

BETTY. So, you starched his hankies?

TERESA. Yeah. Maybe John would like his hankies starched.

BETTY. Maybe John should give up his hankies. Start using tissues.

TERESA. What?

BETTY. Think about it, Ma. (*Holding up hankie.*) He blows his nose into these things. Then shoves them back into his pocket.

TERESA. So...

BETTY. Then I wash his nose contents with my blouses.

TERESA. His nose contents?

BETTY. Yes.

Beat.

His boogers.

TERESA. Don't be crude, Betty. It's nasal mucus.

BETTY. Ick. That sounds even worse.

TERESA. No, it doesn't.

BETTY. (*Frustrated.*) Who cares? He should just blow his nose into a tissue then throw it in the trash can. Instead, I'm washing (*Glances at Teresa.*) "it" out of his hankies, then ironing them. And now you're suggesting I starch them.

TERESA. You don't have to starch them, Betty. I was only just sayin' that your Dad liked the smell of starch. But *you* don't have to starch them.

BETTY. (*Frustrated.*) I know.

Beat.

I know.

TERESA. (*Looks at Betty.*) What's wrong, Betty?

BETTY. Nothing. I'm fine.

TERESA. You don't sound fine.

BETTY. I am.

Beat.

Hey, did you see *As the World Turns* today?

TERESA. Yep. Sister Argentina is up to something.

BETTY. I don't think she's a real nun.

TERESA. What makes you think that?

BETTY. She did the sign of the cross backwards.

TERESA. (*Jumps to her feet and slams her hand on the table.*) I never noticed that! A fake nun on *As the Word Turns*! Wow. (*Considering.*) Unless...

BETTY. Unless what?

TERESA. (*Knowingly.*) The actress playing Sister Argentina might be Protestant.

Teresa finishes her drink.

Well, I better get going. So, you like the flag?

BETTY. Yeah. Dad would love it.

TERESA. Want to come with me to the cemetery?

BETTY. (*Considering.*) Nah. I got all these hankies to iron.

TERESA. Okay.

The play doesn't end here...

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