

PLAYS FOR
New Audiences

A Division of Children's Theatre Company

Blessings

by Mary Hall Surface

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Blessings was commissioned by the California Theatre Center, Sunnyvale, California, and opened in January of 1990 as *Mixed Blessings*, under the direction of Graham Whitehead. *Blessings* opened at Weisiger Theatre, Centre College, Danville, Kentucky, on February 2, 1994, under the director of Anthony Haigh. The play was a finalist at the 1996 Waldo M. and Grace C. Bonderman IUPUI National Youth Theatre Playwriting Workshop, was published by Smith and Kraus Books in *Most Valuable Player and Four Other All-Star Plays for Middle and High School Audiences* by Mary Hall Surface in 1999, and has enjoyed multiple productions throughout the United States.

The current version (2019) has been updated for contemporary performance.

Playwright's Note:

The idea for *Blessings* happened before I knew I was a playwright. During my first summer with California Theatre Centre (CTC), I taught a creative writing class as part of our summer youth conservatory. The mother of one of my students, a doe-eyed eight-year-old named Whitney, told me, "Just don't ask Whitney to read anything out loud in front of the group. Otherwise, she's fine." This child with learning and processing differences was more than fine. She was one of the most imaginative, funny, and spontaneous kids in the bunch. I loved her.

One day, we were writing poems inspired by images from Shakespeare. (Whitney was one of Titania's most memorable fairies.) The energy in the room was high. The kids were excited by the task and reveled in the new word play. When it was time to share, hands shot in the air. After a few poems were read, I noticed Whitney's hand go up, "Good for me, I thought. I've created a space in which she's willing to try!" Her older brother, also in the class, looked strangely panicked. I'm thinking, "She *wrote* this. So surely she can *read* it." But as the first few words slipped tentatively, then tortuously from her lips, I realized how wrong I was. I stammer, "It's OK, Whitney." But she won't quit. Any giggles from the room disappear as she struggles, cries, struggles. Her brother, at her side like a shot, helps her get through it, arm around her, sounding out the words. The memory of my inability to both understand and manage the moment still stings.

Five years later, when Whitney had grown into a fine young actress, one of the few young people used in our professional productions, her mother approached me. "You've got to write a play about her. People have to understand." That was the beginning of *Blessings*. When the play opened in 1990, Rene was played by – you can guess – Whitney. Another long-time student that also fascinated me played Katie. How could "Katie" be so bright, so accomplished, so acknowledged, and yet so often seem deeply unhappy? What were the blessings and the curses that each of these young women carried?

Blessings explores being lost and found all in one weekend in California's Santa Cruz mountains. Rene, who lives with severe dyslexia and auditory perception deficit, invites us to consider what we carry and what we project onto ourselves and others, both as young people and adults. May this play shine new light on how we perceive and are perceived.

--Mary Hall Surface

Blessings

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SCENE ONE

(A late Friday afternoon in mid-October. Lights up, isolating RENE, 14-years-old, who sits at the window of a rustic mountain cabin. She is water coloring.)

RENE

Pigments. Reds and yellows from clay. Colored clay. Black from burnt wood. Each ground into dust. Water from a river. Paint on the walls of caves. Birds. Stickmen dancing around fire! Pictures of the day: Story-dreams. Trying to speak-- to know. What's outside the cave? Animals bigger than you. Inside? ... No hiding! Follow the map of pictures... to the outside. Take a step. One foot in front of another. Left foot, right foot, left foot... left foot... which--

(RENE's musings are invaded by a memory. A six-year-old KATIE appears, separate. She is playing hopscotch.)

KATIE

Left foot, right foot, both feet, right foot, left foot, both feet, right jump, turn—Can't you play hopscotch?

RENE

(Remembering.)

I...

KATIE

I'm the hopscotch champion.

RENE

Right foot, left foot... which foot?

KATIE

(Giggling.)

Don't you even know which foot is which?

RENE

(Pulling herself out of the memory.)

Both feet, follow the map of colors. Inside. But... which colors--?

(LIGHTS return to the full room as RENE's mother, MAGGIE, and her uncle, RANDY, enter. An upstage door leads to the rustic cabin's porch. Another doorway leads to a hallway to the bedrooms. The main room has a couch, a wood-burning stove, a desk, a dining table and chairs, bookcases, an old upright piano, and a very basic open kitchen.)

RANDY

(Bursting through the front door, carrying a few groceries.)
Success. Love that market at the bottom of the hill.

MAGGIE

(Staggering under the weight of more groceries.)
These qualify as mountains, you maniac.

RANDY

What, sis, just a few hairpin turns.

MAGGIE

At sixty miles an hour! You were smart to stay here, Rene.

RANDY

(To RENE.)
So what do ya think of my home-away-from-home? Been checking things out?

RENE

I was water coloring.

RANDY

Lemme see.

RENE

(Covering her work.)
I didn't finish. Show you later.

RANDY

Whatever you say. When's Charlie supposed to get here, Mags?

MAGGIE

(Putting away groceries.)
Depends on traffic.

RANDY

Man, a guy should never go eight years without seeing his best buddy from high school. How do we loose touch?

MAGGIE

(To RENE.)
Want some juice? Or a coke?

RENE

No thanks.

RANDY

(To RENE.)
Quiz time! Santa Clara High School. Charlie: #24; yours truly: #18. We were--

RENE

Basketball stars!

RANDY

Yes! See, this kid doesn't have any trouble remembering the important stuff, do you, little one.

RENE

Nobody calls me that anymore.

RANDY

Sure, no problem, Doodle Bug.

RENE

Uncle Randy!

MAGGIE

Rene is a freshman this year.

RANDY

High school! How's it goin'?

(MAGGIE tunes in even more carefully.)

RENE

It's going.

MAGGIE

You've got a couple of classes you like.

(No reply.)
Honey?

RENE

Couple.

MAGGIE

Your study skills class—

(RENE crosses away from them.)

RANDY

Blow it off, Van Gogh. Look at all these mountains waiting for you to paint or hike. Anything you want.

RENE

(At the window.)

I like the light in the trees. Looks like fingers. Are those ... redwood trees yours, too?

RANDY

They're Jesse's more than mine. Told you about him, right? Spent his whole life up here. Takes care of the cabin for me. Great guy.

MAGGIE

Is he here this weekend?

RANDY

He never leaves. He's helping us out. Cooking and stuff.

MAGGIE

Ooo, we have a chef for the weekend!

RENE

Where's the meadow... with the wildflowers?

RANDY

Now you're talkin'! Got it all mapped out.

(Checking his fitness app.)

Hiking goal: 25.4 miles. I LOVE the mountains! You comin', sis?

MAGGIE

I stopped following after you when I was ten!

RENE

I'll wike--- hike if I can stop and pick wildflowers.

RANDY

Deal.

MAGGIE

But Charlie could be here anytime. We need to be here to welcome them.

RENE

Them?

MAGGIE

Charlie's new girlfriend Angela. Remember?

RANDY

Ooo right, the new *amour*. What about his kid?

MAGGIE

Katie spends weekends with her Mom.

RENE

(More to herself.)
Hallelujah.

RANDY

What, you little girls not get along last reunion time? What'd she do? Pull your pigtailed? Throw your Barbie off a cliff?

RENE

(Insightfully.)
Why is everything a joke to you?

RANDY

Uh, just keeping things light. That's my job.

MAGGIE

Let's walk to that meadow—

RENE

(Heading out.)
No, I'll go.

MAGGIE

But—

RANDY

Just take a left at the bottom of the drive then follow the road to where we turned in. Remember the sign?

RENE

(She doesn't.)
Sure.

RANDY

The trailhead is right there. Walk a quarter mile up and then – wildflowers!

MAGGIE

I can come--

RENE

(Leaving.)

I'm fine.

RANDY

She's fine.

(RENE exits out the front door.)

MAGGIE

See what I mean?

RANDY

Relax, Mags. Put some wood on the stove.

(MAGGIE crosses to the wood basket then carries pieces of wood to the wood-burning stove.)

MAGGIE

She fades in and out of being who I know! She's never closed up like this. Talking – that's how we've survived!

RANDY

This is a “get-away” cabin, sis. Give it a rest for the weekend--

MAGGIE

And just watch while she sinks or swims?

(As she becomes more agitated, she stuffs more and more wood into the stove.)

She walked into that high school and bam -- they stuck labels on her forehead: “Learning challenges, special needs.”

RANDY

You're kidding.

MAGGIE

They might as well have. She's not coping!

RANDY

Whoa, Maggie, you wanna burn the place down!

MAGGIE

Sorry.

(She stops. The fire is under control.)

RANDY

Who's not coping? Little One is fine.

MAGGIE

You don't know that. You only see her three, four times a year.

RANDY

I got this weekend together, didn't I?

(Hugs her.)

So we could have a weekend all about ... me.

(They laugh. Then RENE bursts back through the door, triumphant. She has a big beautiful bunch of wildflowers.)

RENE

Look!

RANDY

A successful safari!

RENE

I picked these by the road. I'll go to the meadow later.

MAGGIE

They're beautiful.

RENE

(Describing the flowers.)

Gold... and a water-green.

MAGGIE

And violet.

RENE

Blue-violet. Vase. Quick.

(RANDY jumps comically to the rescue to find a vase.)

It's beautiful up here, Mom. Smells cool, wet!

RANDY

(Producing a vase.)
How's this?

RENE

It's got to be right for the flowers. That's not.

RANDY

Picky, picky.

RENE

I'm an *artiste!*

MAGGIE

(Taking a vase from the bookshelf.)
How's this?

RENE

It fits.

(RENE goes into the kitchen to put the flowers in water. RANDY crosses to the table, pulls big hiking maps out of his backpack and spreads them out on the table.)

I'll give them to Charlie's... her ... Angela. She'll need to feel welcome.

RANDY

Ever seen a real map, Rene?! White and blue trails go across the ridge. Come look.

RENE

You can just tell me where we're going to hike.

RANDY

I need an assistant scout. Help me pick the route.

MAGGIE

Randy—

RENE

I don't like maps... those kinds--

(Suddenly there is the sound of a car horn outside, honky exuberantly.)

MAGGIE

That's got to be Charlie.

RANDY

(Heading to the door.)
Yo, crazy Charlie!

(RENE, relieved not to have to try to read the map, watches as MAGGIE and RANDY cross to the door, fling it open, and reveal a smiling CHARLIE with his arms open wide.)

MAGGIE

Charlie!

CHARLIE

Hey, hey, hey!

(The following lines are rapid and overlapping. Everyone is talking at once and hugging.)

MAGGIE

Look at you! San Diego must be your kind of town!

RANDY

Whoa! Still crazy after all these years! How ya been?

CHARLIE

Maggie, you're amazing. Randy, you are old and ugly like me!

(After bubbling over each other, CHARLIE playfully strikes a pose and the other join in.)

Two bits—

CHARLIE and RANDY

Four bits.

CHARLIE, MAGGIE and RANDY

Six bits, a dollar. All for the Panthers, stand up and holler.

(They let out a playful "holler" and laugh, just as ANGELA appears at the door with a heavy garment bag.)

ANGELA

Charlie, you didn't tell me you were a cheerleader in high school.

CHARLIE

We're just being crazy, sweetheart.

CHARLIE and RANDY

As usual!

CHARLIE

Maggie, Randy, this is Angela Thompson.

ANGELA

Nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you.

MAGGIE

Welcome.

RANDY

How'd you get stuck with an ole guy like this?

ANGELA

(Laughing.)
Just lucky I guess.

MAGGIE

And this is Rene.

CHARLIE

What?! The last I saw you, you were, what, six? Now look at you!

ANGELA

We really appreciate the invitation, Randy.

RANDY

Gotta show off my new place!

MAGGIE

I can't believe it's really you, Charlie.

CHARLIE

Well, it's me.

KATIE

(From off, on the porch.)
What about ME?!

CHARLIE

I almost blew the surprise. Close your eyes, Rene.

(RENE does not close her eyes. She stands motionless.)
Oh, come on. You're not too old to play a little game. Close your eyes!

KATIE

(Entering.)
Surprise!

CHARLIE

Too soon!

KATIE

I didn't want to wait anymore.

CHARLIE

Rene, you remember Katie.

RENE

Yeah.

CHARLIE

We talked her mother out of her for the weekend, just so you two girls could be together.

ANGELA

(Putting her arm around KATIE.)
And us two girls.
(KATIE moves away from ANGELA.)

KATIE

Hi Rene.

RENE

Hi.

ANGELA

Isn't this wonderful? Now everyone has a friend for the weekend.

MAGGIE

Well...

(Awkward pause.)

RANDY

Well, come on in everybody.

(Everyone moves towards the couch and chairs. RENE keeps her distance.)

KATIE

Thank you.

RANDY

Nice place, huh?

KATIE

(To RANDY.) I'm so glad you've got a piano. I need to practice.

ANGELA

This is vacation.

(KATIE crosses to the piano and plays a few scales.)

RANDY

Whoa, she's good. *(To KATIE.)* You like to hike?

ANGELA

I haven't been on a real hike in years! I don't know if I can make it up anything too steep!

KATIE

I could.

CHARLIE

You can do anything, sweetheart. Why I bet you'll beat everybody to the top of the mountain.

MAGGIE

Rene, don't you have something for Angela?

(RENE doesn't move.)

Gold and blue-violet?

(RENE crosses to the flowers.)

ANGLEA

Ooo, I love surprises.

(RENE gives ANGELA the flowers.)

Aren't they cute! And aren't you a sweetie to buy them for me!

RENE

I picked them.

ANGELA

Oh! How nice.

RANDY

Should have gotten some flowers for Katie, Rene.

RENE
I didn't know she was coming.

KATIE
Well, I did. So, what happens first?

RANDY
I have got the most spectacular place to watch the sunset.

ANGELA
I bet it's beautiful from up here. Charlie, let's—

KATIE
(Beats ANGELA to her dad.)
Come on, Dad.

CHARLIE
Sounds good.

(All begin to exit, except RENE. The following lines are rapid, overlapping.)

ANGELA
Shouldn't we get our things unpacked first?

RANDY
Race ya to the blue trail!

CHARLIE
Walk, buddy, walk!

ANGELA
Do we need jackets?

MAGGIE
We're fine.
(Noticing that RENE has not budged.)
Rene, are you coming?

RENE
I'll catch up. I want to shoes my change—
(Slowly correcting herself.)
Change my shoes.

KATIE
Can I help you find them?

RENE

I know where they are.

MAGGIE

But you don't know which trail to follow.

RENE

Yes I do.

MAGGIE

Look for the blue markings on the trees.

KATIE

You can follow the colors, can't you?

(RENE bristles, as KATIE has, unknowingly, invaded RENE's private painter's world.)

MAGGIE

Are you sure you—

RENE

I do... can do this, Mom. Go on.

(MAGGIE and KATIE exit. RENE pauses and looks around the cabin, as if for an escape route. Then she takes a deep breath and looks for her shoes.)

If I were shoes, where would I be?

(RENE searches under the couch, in her backpack. Her exasperation builds.)

Why can't you remember, stupid brain. Stupid broken brain!

(RENE hurls a pillow from the couch across the room just as JESSE enters the cabin. He is carrying a stack of wood for the stove.)

JESSE

Sorry. I didn't think anybody was here.

RENE

They're not.

JESSE

Aren't you anybody?

RENE

Yeah. Sorry. I'm Rene.

JESSE

Jesse. You're the niece. Nice to meet you.

(JESSE crosses over to wood basket. RENE crosses to retrieve the tossed pillow.)
Got to make sure we got plenty of wood for you folks. Usually just Randy up here on the weekends. Only me rest of the time.

RENE

You like it? Living here.

JESSE

Wouldn't live anywhere else.

RENE

You must like being by yourself.

JESSE

Guess I do.

RENE

I wish I could be alone.

JESSE

(Hurrying.)
I'm done in a second. Just stocking the wood—

RENE

Wait. I didn't mean... Sorry, I'm just ... I don't know.

JESSE

You're what?

RENE

I don't know.

JESSE

Well... you're how old?

RENE

Fourteen.

JESSE

Ah. That's when you run around with friends. And text.

RENE

I'm... different.

JESSE

Oh. So... where'd everybody go?

RENE
To watch the sunset.

JESSE
You don't like sunsets?

RENE
I do. But I didn't want to do "everybody."

JESSE
If you want... I've got this place... not mine. It belongs to the mountain. My "looking spot."

RENE
What do you look at?

JESSE
Lots of things. You can see clear across to the next ridge. You look out. And you can look... the other way. You know.

RENE
Can I go there?

JESSE
The trail is kinda tricky.

RENE
Show me. We'll see a sunset that "everybody" won't.

JESSE
OK, "Rene," right?

(RENE nods. They exit.)

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