

The Death of Vaudeville

By Jeremy Mason

SAMPLE

©2018
Jeremy Mason

CAST OF CHARACTERS

OLIVER DANIELS

About 30 years old. Was a young vaudeville performer who now runs his own show. He was the first baby born of 1900. He sees the end.

LILLIAN

28 years old. She is a young Vaudeville performer who wants to move on to the "talkies."

HANK

About 30 years old. Oliver's best friend and performance partner. He is loyal.

AESTHETIC

I have endeavoured to explore a flawed and imperfect character living in the beginning of the depression. The production should be a balance of performative vaudeville, presentational spectacle and real human emotion. I have envisioned a sense of energy that ripples through the play, I have chosen to represent this with sound but I welcome other thoughts. The feel and aesthetic of the 1930's should be mashed with the present day. There is no worry to make this a real period piece. There should be a sense of mystery, of mystique of aloofness that asks us questions of how we understand live performance and it's relevance in a contemporary and historic time period.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The playwright wishes to thank the support from The Alberta Playwrights' Network, The Allied Arts Council of Lethbridge, CASA Lethbridge, Jamie Dunsdon, Josh Halliwell, Raquel Burston, Kathy Zaborsky, Andrew Merrigan, and Derek Stevenson.

Scene One: The Overture

(As the lights fade a single “ghost light” glows and an hum of energy fills the theatre. A ghostly figure enters the stage, takes it in and breathes. The hum builds to a crescendo and suddenly “pop.” The hum is gone, the performance lights are at full and the ghostly figure springs to life as OLIVER. We are in a performance.)

OLIVER: Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I want to welcome you to an evening of the absurd, the spectacular and the hilarious...an evening of Vaudeville! Now I can see some of you out there with that look on your face. “Vaudeville? I thought Vaudeville was dead!” Well sir, vaudeville is not dead. Regardless of what you may think, tonight vaudeville is alive and well. But before we begin I should introduce myself. Oliver, Oliver Daniel is my name, but you can call me mister Vaudeville. I was born on the stage...literally. My mother gave birth to me right here on this stage. Don’t believe me? Okay, I’ll show you. You see that’s the beauty of vaudeville, it can re-tell history. *(Calling off.)* Mother. I say, mother!

(LILLIAN enters dressed as an old pregnant woman. This should be campy.)

Mother how are you?

LILLIAN: Look at me. I’m ready to pop.

(OLIVER bends over and puts his ear to her belly.)

Pop!

(OLIVER is startled and jumps back. LILLIAN laughs.)

OLIVER: Okay, mother that’s enough! Get in position.

LILLIAN: Sheesh, no sense of humour, this boy.

OLIVER: Here we go. Lights!

(The lights shift.)

It was a crisp January morning in 1900 and my mother was working the late shift in an old vaudeville theatre. When suddenly...

LILLIAN: A kick.

OLIVER: That’s right, I kicked her from the inside.

LILLIAN: But—but he’s not due for another three weeks.

OLIVER: I was an early riser.

LILLIAN: Help, I need some help.

OLIVER: But no help was coming.

LILLIAN: Really?

OLIVER: Yes.

LILLIAN: But it would be much easier to deliver a baby if there was someone coming, like maybe a nice doctor or something.

OLIVER: Ma! No one is coming.

LILLIAN: But why?

OLIVER: It makes the story more interesting.

LILLIAN: Well, okay.

OLIVER: So, as I was saying...no help was coming. On the sliver-ridden boards she laid and there was nothing to do but pray.

LILLIAN: Oh lord, are you there?

(HANK enters dressed as God.)

HANK: I am here.

LILLIAN: God is that you?

HANK: Who else would it be?

LILLIAN: A doctor?

HANK/OLL: There's no doctor.

LILLIAN: Sheesh, can't a girl dream. Well, seeing as how you're no doctor can you please help me through this?

HANK: I shall.

LILLIAN: Use your magic powers to make this baby wait?

HANK: That I cannot do.

LILLIAN: But aren't you God?

HANK: Yes, but this baby is special. This baby will save vaudeville.

LILLIAN: Save it?

HANK: Yes. He needs to be born and he needs to be born now.

LILLIAN: Do I get a say in this?

HANK: No.

(HANK waves his fingers with Godly powers and LILLIAN screams in pain.)

OLIVER: And so I was born.

(A fake baby shoots out of LILLIAN.)

It was beautiful.

LILLIAN: You are special and you will be loved. Good-bye my sweet.

(LILLIAN dramatically croaks.)

OLIVER: She died and there I was. *(Pause.)* And now here I am, thirty years later. Now just to be clear I don't think I'm some sort of messiah fella, it just makes for a better story if it seems I have some sort of purpose.

(The "performance" lights begin to fade. The hum builds again. OLIVER notices.)

But the truth is, you're all here to witness my final performance...before I die. That's right, tonight I die with Vaudeville. *(Pause.)* So without further ado...welcome, to the death of vaudeville.

(Music.)

Scene Two: Getting Seen

(LILLIAN paces. After a moment HANK enters.)

LILLIAN: There you are.

HANK: You're looking radiant today.

LILLIAN: You're late.

HANK: Was held up—

LILLIAN: Doing what?—

HANK: Getting a cut *(he motions to his trim hair.)*

LILLIAN: Well...good, you were beginning to look like a bushman.

HANK: Sometimes a lady likes a bushman.

LILLIAN: She doesn't. Trust me. Did you bring that coat I asked you to?

HANK: Yeah, right here.

(HANK hands her a large suit coat.)

LILLIAN: Great, this'll work perfect. Now if only we had Oliver.

HANK: Oh, he's gonna be late.

LILLIAN: How late??

HANK: Not sure, we both had a few.

LILLIAN: When?—

HANK: —last night.

(LILLIAN stares at him.)

Well, we just went for one after the show, and you know.

LILLIAN: After the show where you bungled the lyrics to our song?

HANK: Yeah—

LILLIAN: Where you missed a whole entrance?

HANK: Yeah—

LILLIAN: Where your mustache fell off?

HANK: That's why I got a cut and a shave, now the tape will stick better.

LILLIAN: My point is, the show was a disaster and you decided to go spend the night at the bar.

HANK: Isn't that a good reason?

(LILLIAN begins to walk off, upset.)

Hey, I was only kiddin'. Look, we just went to blow off a little steam and drum up some bums to fill the seats tonight. We had a few and Ollie said he wouldn't be in 'til later.

LILLIAN: When is later?

HANK: Not sure.

LILLIAN: *(Sighs.)* Fine. I guess we'll go over our song.

HANK: Sure thing.

(LILLIAN and HANK, start to rehearse a number. OLIVER enters with a bottle of wine.)

OLIVER: Good morning all!

LILLIAN: It's one o'clock.

OLIVER: *(To HANK.)* Hank, you didn't tell her.

HANK: I told her.

OLIVER: I'm only slightly late.

LILLIAN: It doesn't matter *how* late you are; what matters is that you *were* late. We have so much to work on and show time is—.

OLIVER: That's why I have this.

LILLIAN: Wine?

HANK: Wine.

(HANK grabs it to inspect.)

OLIVER: We have to celebrate.

LILLIAN: Celebrate? For what?

HANK: This is some fine wine Ollie.

OLIVER: Why thank-you Hank...I stole it from a suit on third.

LILLIAN: Oliver!

OLIVER: Oh, don't worry he won't miss it. Now crack it open, before he comes looking for it.

HANK: What are we celebrating?

OLIVER: Last night I was able to convince the manager of the Orpheum to check out our act tonight.

HANK: He said yes!?

OLIVER: He certainly did. So you see, dear Lilly—

LILLIAN: Lillian.

OLIVER: Lillian. All of that despicable drinking we did last night, led me to a conversation with a lovely young lady who was the assistant of Mr. T.M. Elliot—

HANK: *(To LILLIAN.)* Manager of the Orpheum.

LILLIAN: I know.

OLIVER: Now this conversation with the lovely young miss led me down a path *(to HANK)* with a few twists and turns—

(HANK and OLIVER giggle to each other.)

LILLIAN: Get on with it.

OLIVER: Well this path led me to Mr. Elliot himself and after a very charming conversation—I was the charming one of course—I was able to convince him to come see our act...tonight!

LILLIAN: Tonight? He's coming tonight?

OLIVER: That's what I said.

LILLIAN: Last night was a train wreck and the routines stink.

OLIVER: Yeah, that's what he said. So I told him we had new material we were trying out tonight.

LILLIAN: But we don't have new material.

OLIVER: Well I told him we did.

LILLIAN: But we don't.

OLIVER: Well...we better start working on something then.

(OLIVER sits down and starts to drink from the bottle of wine.)

LILLIAN: *(To HANK.)* Is he serious?

HANK: He seems serious.

LILLIAN: *(To OLIVER.)* We have no new material.

HANK: I have some one-liners I wrote a few weeks back.

LILLIAN: *(To HANK.)* We're not just stringing together one-liners. *(To OLIVER.)* Excuse me Oliver, with all due respect, we have no new material and no time to write anything. Us going on tonight for Mr. Elliot is only going to show how amateur we really are.

OLIVER: Lillian, dear Lillian, when you first came to us—2 weeks ago?

(HANK holds three fingers up.)

Three weeks ago, you gave a very compelling argument that led me to assume that you were going to be Hank and I's salvation. And that salvation would be in the form of getting us into the big time. Essentially dominating the vaudeville circuit. So, I have worked very hard to give us the first step at that, and now I need you to deliver your end of the bargain.

LILLIAN: There's no time.

OLIVER: Hank and I are professionals. Right Hank?

HANK: Uhh...

OLIVER: And as professionals we'll be able to perform whatever you put in front of us. Now there's nothing you've been working on, or even been rattling around in that pretty little head of yours?

(LILLIAN looks infuriated. She takes a moment and composes herself.)

LILLIAN: What about a ventriloquist act—

HANK: I hate puppets.

LILLIAN: But instead of puppets Hank *is* the puppet. So the joke becomes that it's obviously not a puppet, but we do some of the same routine elements that would happen in a traditional ventriloquist act.

OLIVER: I love it! Let's get to work.

(OLIVER leaves with the bottle of wine.)

HANK: Great idea Lillian. If you need any jokes, just let me know.

(HANK scurries off after OLIVER, leaving LILLIAN. The hum builds again. Transition in time.)