

BEFORE LESBIANS

A full-length play

by

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CHARACTER LIST

JAMES: Male, Caucasian, early 20's. Upper middle class. Works for the government.

CHARLOTTE: Female, Caucasian, early 20's. Upper middle class.

HENRY: Male, Caucasian, mid-20's. Middle class. Interest in personal accounting business.

VIVIAN: Female, Caucasian, mid-20's. Middle class. Bookworm.

LOCATION: Shippensburg, Pennsylvania area, 1861-1865

* Gettysburg is pronounced Gett-ihs-burg by people local to the area.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

This play was inspired by an article called "The Female World of Love and Ritual" from a Queer History class that I took at Oberlin College in the 1990's. The magic of letter writing during the 1800's to maintain such close relationships between women fascinated me and is integral to how women were able to carry on affairs with each other. In the 1800's, women often had romantic friendships with other women prior to marriage that they were expected to drop once they got married. Therefore, very close relationships with other women were not seen as threatening until women became more economically independent, as a result of the Civil War. The term "lesbian" was not invented until the late 1800's, along with Boston marriage who were women in long term live-in relationships with each other, economically independent of men. Women were assumed to be asexual creatures in the mid-late 1800's, only having sex for the purpose of procreation. It was also assumed that women did not have sexual relationships with other women, even in Boston marriages later in the century. However, it is simultaneously safe to assume that this is untrue and that society did not want to acknowledge such behaviors. The Civil War was a turning point for women who wanted to enter the medical field. Already led by Elizabeth Blackwell, the first female physician in the United States in 1849, medical efforts during the Civil War were often led by women like Clara Barton, who founded the Red Cross, and Dorothea Dix, who was in charge of the Army Nursing Corps.

Act I
Scene I

SETTING: Shippensburg City Hall. July,
1861.

AT RISE: JAMES and CHARLOTTE sit on a
bench. JAMES is wearing a
soldier's uniform. CHARLOTTE is in
a white dress.

JAMES

I hope you know this isn't how I wanted to do this.

CHARLOTTE

Of course, darling, I know that.

JAMES

We were going to have a grand wedding with all of our
family and friends at the church.

CHARLOTTE

I understand how important our country is to you.

JAMES

To us. You're being so brave, my dear.

CHARLOTTE

I know that I am not the only one.

(Enter VIVIAN and HENRY,
similarly dressed in soldier
and wedding attire. HENRY
looks around)

HENRY

I assume this is where we get married before we run off to
war?

JAMES

(glumly)

It is.

HENRY

(puts his hand out)

Mr. Pritchard. Fourth infantry Pennsylvania.

JAMES

(shaking his hand)

Mr. Cardinal. Twenty second infantry Pennsylvania. My soon-to-be-wife, Miss Davis.

HENRY

Oh, yes! And mine, Miss Bloom.

(VIVIAN shakes hands with
JAMES and CHARLOTTE)

VIVIAN

Very nice to meet you.

CHARLOTTE

And you.

(VIVIAN and HENRY sit on the
bench opposite them)

HENRY

A long wait you've had?

JAMES

Nearly three hours.

HENRY

Oh, good! It is shorter than Newville.

JAMES

Did you come all the way here from Newville to get married?
That's so far!

HENRY

It has taken most of the day to find a place to get married. The lines were too long in Newville so we went to Greenspring and then Oakville but the lines were enormous. And Oakville isn't very big! This seems to be the shortest line yet. I suppose this is what happens when the President calls up more volunteers.

JAMES

I suppose it is. But I doubt they'll need anymore after this. When do you leave?

HENRY

Tomorrow morning.

CHARLOTTE

Oh, my!

HENRY

Yes. You can see our urgency.

JAMES

Of course. Perhaps..

(HE thinks, then gets up)

Excuse me a moment.

(JAMES exits SR)

HENRY

Are you feeling warm, darling?

VIVIAN

I'm all right.

HENRY

This uniform is very warm. I don't think it's made for such hot weather.

(to CHARLOTTE)

So, you two live here?

CHARLOTTE

Yes, not far. I've never been to Newville before. Is it more of a city than this is?

VIVIAN

Hardly.

HENRY

We like quieter towns.

CHARLOTTE

More rural.

VIVIAN

Yes.

(awkward beat)

CHARLOTTE

The war can't last much longer, can it?

HENRY

What?

CHARLOTTE

I'm sorry, I...

(Re-enter JAMES)

JAMES

It's all settled.

CHARLOTTE

What is?

JAMES

I have arranged for my dear cousin...

(HE gestures to HENRY)

...to marry his fiancée at the same time as we get married.
And there are only two couples in front of us.

HENRY

Oh, how wonderful! Miss Bloom, did you hear that?

VIVIAN

That's terribly kind of you.

JAMES

It's such a small thing to give as a wedding present to a fellow soldier and his bride on his way to war. And you've traveled so far.

HENRY

Thank you. Cousin.

(THEY both giggle)

CHARLOTTE

Perhaps we can celebrate afterwards together with a dinner at our house before you head home. We're just on the outskirts of town but it will put you on the right road for your return.

VIVIAN

Oh, that's a delightful idea. What do you think, Mr. Pritchard? It will make it more festive.

HENRY

I don't know. We really ought to get back home. I have to leave early tomorrow.

VIVIAN

But, dear...

JAMES

What if we do an early dinner so you are able to get back home and have a good night's rest?

(aside to HENRY)

Wouldn't want to steal your wedding night away.

(THEY laugh and clap each other on the back)

HENRY

Good man. All right, we'll stay for a quick dinner. Thank you.

(VIVIAN is simultaneously relieved and irritated)

So, do you have any news about where you will be traveling?

JAMES

I don't. But I hope it's to South Carolina.

HENRY

Oh, South Carolina! It is despicable what they are doing to President Lincoln there!

JAMES

Absolutely deplorable!

(VIVIAN looks impatient with their conversation)

VIVIAN

(to CHARLOTTE)

I wonder if there is somewhere here I can freshen up. I feel sure that my hair is a wreck after being in the carriage for so long.

CHARLOTTE

(to VIVIAN)

Let's go see.