

"THE RESURRECTIONIST"

A Play by P.S. Drake

Roles for Six Actors

SYNOPSIS

One medical school. Two love stories. One hundred years apart. It is 1890 and Clara Williams must disguise herself as a man in order to achieve her dream of becoming a doctor. Unfortunate events force her to befriend a surly gravedigger named Jack, who's busy protecting his graveyard from "resurrectionists," or body snatchers who dig up bodies for profit.

Roxie Brown has recently quit her job and moved back home to make it big as a poet. Her dreams may be dashed as her mother gives her an ultimatum- one that causes her to team up with Drew- a genius, bullheaded medical student who gets on Roxie's last nerve.

As the story unfolds, it's clear that love isn't the only thing connecting these two women across space and time.

SETTING

Scenes take place in both a graveyard and a medical school laboratory. The two alternate between 1890 and modern day, depending on the stage dressings.

CHARACTERS

THE PAST -

CLARA - Woman who disguises herself as a man in order to become a doctor.

JACK - Surly gravedigger who watches over his graveyard with a protective eye.

JOHN₁ - Medical student at Clara's school who causes all her problems. (Can also play DREW)

MARY₂ - Clara's friend and housekeeper of the hospital. (Can also play NICOLE)

DR. MILLER₃ - Doctor at the medical school. (Can also play CLERGYMAN, DR. GRAYSON, and MARCELLA)

CLERGYMAN₃ - Clergyman in the graveyard.

THE PRESENT-

ROXIE - Woman who dreams of making it big as a poet.

DREW₁ - Medical student who is a genius, but cold and socially inept.

NICOLE₂ - Roxie's sister who is a medical student in Drew's cohort.

MARCELLA₃ - Roxie and Nicole's mother.

DR. GRAYSON₃ - Doctor at the medical school.

(Numbers assigned to characters whose actors can play multiple roles)

Act I, Scene 1

Medical School Lab, Late 1800s

Clara is sitting at a desk holding a skull. She points to different features of the skull while reciting their names in latin. She is disguised as a man.

CLARA: *Sutura sphenofrontalis, sutura coronalis, sutura occipito...* (She thinks) *Sutura occipito... Occipito... oh, blazes, what is it? (References textbook) Sutura occipitomastoidea!* How could I forget?

MARY: (Knocks on the door) Mr. Williams?

CLARA: No.

MARY: No? I'm sorry, Mr. Williams, did you just say, "no?"

CLARA: Yes.

MARY: "Yes" you said, "no?" Or "yes," I can enter?

CLARA: The difference between "yes" and "no" in this context does not matter, Mary. Both mean "do not enter."

MARY: Oh. Alright. Goodbye, sir. (She pauses) But, sir?

CLARA: Dear God.

MARY: You should know there's a funeral to be had tonight at King's Chapel. I'll be leaving now.

CLARA: Funeral? Mary, wait! (She lets her in) I apologize for my being brusque. We have an anatomy examination tomorrow, and I'm feeling a bit pressed, you see.

MARY: Sir, you're in your first year of medical school. It's a wonder you have time to eat and sleep.

CLARA: Yes, yes, it's all very tiring, or I would imagine it would be tiring if I had any time to imagine at all.

MARY: You're always holed up in this lab! The other gentlemen never stay here as long as you do.

CLARA: The other "gentlemen" do not bother learning at all. I, however, understand that I will one day have a patient that will require knowing my skull sutures. So I stay. And I study.

MARY: (*Dreamily*) Of course, Mr. Williams, how very valiant of you.

CLARA: I insist you call me "Clarence," and I am no white knight. Now then, about this funeral you mentioned?

MARY: Yes! I overheard while cleaning the laboratory. Apparently Dr. Brown's patient, a young man named Thomas, didn't make it out of his appendectomy alive.

CLARA: Knowing Dr. Brown's technique, I'm afraid our boy Thomas never stood a chance. You said it's at King's Chapel? Have you the time?

MARY: The service is at six PM today, with his burial shortly thereafter.

CLARA: Six PM... (*Checks her pocket watch*) Yes. Very good... Thank you, Mary. It's time for your payment.

MARY: Oh, Mr. Williams- Clarence! In lieu of money, could I join you on your adventure tonight?

CLARA: I'm afraid that's not possible. You know I work alone.

MARY: I just thought-

CLARA: That's non-negotiable. (*Hands her coins*) Your payment.

MARY: Thank you. Goodbye, Clarence. (*Goes to leave, but then turns around*) Sir, this may not be my place to discuss this with you, however, I feel like I must say something.

CLARA: (*She's studying the skull*) Mm, what is it?

MARY: Unless you plan on marrying that damn skull, it may be time to begin looking for a wife!

CLARA: Mary! You would be correct, it is neither your place, nor your concern to bring up marriage with me!

MARY: I simply want you to be happy!

CLARA: (*Upset*) I am quite happy already, can't you tell? Can't you tell how amazingly happy I am?!

MARY: I just thought if you had someone to share your life with, you'd be-

CLARA: I will share my life with my patients! I intend to live as a bachelor for... (*She thinks*) Yes. Forever. I believe you should go now.

MARY: But, sir, I-

CLARA: Go. (*MARY exits, CLARA resumes studying*) Why am I such a twat? (*She gets up, goes to the door*) Mary, wait- (*Runs into JOHN*)

JOHN: Oof! Something on fire, Clarence?

CLARA: No, John. No more so than usual.

JOHN: (*Picks up skull*) Charming. It's not as though our futures as doctors will rest on our ability to name some dratted skull sutures.

CLARA: That's where you and I differ, John. For I am quite positive it does. (*She grabs the skull*) Your business?

JOHN: As I'm sure you are aware, next week begins our course in dissection.

CLARA: I am well-versed in reading a schedule, yes.

JOHN: Are you also familiar with our arrangement for gathering specimens?

CLARA: No one goes out of their way to speak with me, so no.

JOHN: That's because you avoid us all like the damn plague. How many times must we ask you to come along on a hunting trip before you say yes?

CLARA: Hunting is for barbarians.

JOHN: Then to the music hall, for a drink and a smoke?

CLARA: I loathe cigars.

JOHN: To the ocean? For a swim?

CLARA: Absolutely not! (*JOHN looks at her*) It's so cold and... wet.

JOHN: Of course. About the arrangement- human cadavers are increasingly difficult to find, so if any student is made aware of a death, they must tell me. Then I can make arrangements for its retrieval. Have you any burials to report of?

CLARA: Not a one.

JOHN: Shame. You're not concerned?

CLARA: Not in the least, John. God provides. Have you any other pressing matters to discuss?

JOHN: No, I'll leave you with your...(*gestures to skull*) friend. (*He goes to leave, then stops*) I must say, it would behoove you to start associating yourself with the rest of us. I wouldn't want your time here to be ruined by your inability to make nice. Something to think about. (*Exits*)

CLARA: (*To herself*) Threaten me all you want, you incorrigible bastard, but I am not giving up my specimen that easily. (*Checks her pocket watch*) I must get ready.

She goes to the door, looks out, checks to see no one's coming, "locks" it. She talks while taking down her hair, pulling off wig, etc, putting on a dress, transforming into women's garb.

You can have your manly drinking and killing sessions, and your utter lack of responsibility for your profession. I, however, will have exactly one more dead body in class on Monday than you will. (*She grabs a shovel*) Let's go! (*Exits*)

Act I, Scene 2

Graveyard, Late 1800s

There's a small group of mourners surrounding a tombstone. A clergyman speaks to them. Clara stands disguised as a mourner in back.

CLERGYMAN: "Dust thou art, to dust returnest." May God welcome our dear Thomas into His kingdom. (*CLARA cries loudly*) Thomas was a bright young lad, with a golden heart. (*CLARA cries again, louder*) May Thomas's passing remind us all of our transient existence of our mortal coil. (*CLARA wails*) I believe we're done here. (*Half-heartedly*) In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (*Exits*)

CLARA: (*Throws herself on his grave*) I WILL NEVER FORGET YOU, MY SWEET BOY... (*She checks headstone*) THOMAS. I'LL MISS YOU FOREVER. I LOVED YOU LIKE YOU WERE MY OWN BROTHER. (*She checks to see everyone's left*) I hate that part. (*She pulls a shovel out from under her dress*) Very well, then. (*Starts "digging"*)

JACK enters, sees CLARA "digging" up the grave.

JACK: Aye! Aye! What are you doing?! Are you digging up that grave?

CLARA: Uh, uh, no sir! Just thought I would plant some flowers, is all!

JACK: Do you take me for a fool?

CLARA: Do you take me for a liar?

JACK: You'll have to forgive me, we've been having quite the problem with body snatchers lately.

CLARA: Body snatchers? How horrifying.

JACK: Indeed. A corpse barely turns cold before somebody's digging it up out of the ground. It's maddening.

CLARA: Who- who would do such a thing?

JACK: They call themselves resurrectionists. Schools are running out of bodies to slice open, so doctors, students, clergymen, even fellow gravediggers, less virtuous than I, are partaking in the business.

CLARA: You're a gravedigger?

JACK: Have been for the better part of my life. I oversee the grounds here. And now it's my duty to protect it from unlawful citizens, or anyone else willing to put aside their morals for a few guineas.

CLARA: Put aside their morals? I believe the situation is much more complicated than you believe it to be.

JACK: Nothing complicated about desecrating a grave, miss.

CLARA: (*Scoffs*) Perhaps these people are doing this out of necessity? Capital punishment provides less than a hundred bodies a year, and that's for every medical school in the country.

JACK: So the solution is to put more people to death?

CLARA: No, but they clearly don't need their bodies anymore. And perhaps there are some students who have even more to prove than others and would do anything to ensure their success.

JACK: You seem to be taking this argument personally.

CLARA: (*Hesitates*) Yes. Well. My brother is studying to become a doctor, so I often hear of his troubles. (*Impatiently*) Look... what did you say your name was?

JACK: I didn't. The name's Jack.

CLARA: Look, Jack. May I ask you to leave me be with Thomas, here? To say goodbye. Properly.

JACK: You must have been pretty good friends.

CLARA: Yes, we were quite close. I never failed to leave his company with anything less than a smile on my face and a heart filled with love.

JACK: I find that hard to believe.

CLARA: Why?

JACK: Because this Thomas you speak so highly of was nothing but a cussed ratbag.

CLARA: I'm sorry? How dare you speak of my Thomas like that!

JACK: *Your* Thomas was a regular ass. He used to hide behind the tombstones and jump out at children walking by. I chased him out of here constantly. I even caught him having relations with his cousin once behind the mausoleum.

CLARA: (*Flummoxed*) They were very close.

JACK: At least now I can keep my eye on him. (*Pats his grave*) who's having the last laugh now, aye Thomas? In any case, you can stay and mourn him, but I'm not leaving until you do.

CLARA: It's extremely undignified to be treated like nothing more than a common criminal.

JACK: I'm simply doing my job.

CLARA: Right. Well. (*She sits by the grave, closes her eyes, bows her head. After a moment she looks up to find JACK watching her*) Must you watch me like that?

JACK: If you make contact with Thomas, can you tell him I'm gonna court his cousin just to spite him?

CLARA: I will do no such thing! Actually, I'm done here. Farewell, Thomas! Rest in peace and what-not. (*To JACK*) And to you, farewell. This meeting has been most intolerable.

JACK: From your mouth to God's ears, miss. Safe travels. (*CLARA exits, JACK walks to Thomas's tombstone*) No way a beauty like that was the least bit interested in a monster like you.

JACK exits. JOHN enters.

JOHN: Now where the devil is that Thomas fellow buried? (*He looks around, finds Thomas's grave*) Ah, there he is. God does provide, doesn't he? I need my tools. You be a good boy and stay put. (*Exits*)

"THE RESURRECTIONIST"

The stage is empty a beat, then CLARA sticks her head out from where she exited. She checks for JACK, sees it empty then runs to the tombstone and furiously begins digging. She pulls out a rope. JACK enters

JACK: AYE! AYE!

CLARA: *(Under her breath)* Shit.

JACK: I suppose the rope is for gardening, too?

CLARA: No, the rope is for hanging myself! *(A voice offstage calls for JACK)*

VOICE: Jack! We need you over here! We got a fresh one!

JACK: Oh, balls. *(To CLARA)* If I see anything amiss with that grave when I return, you'll never be allowed in this cemetery again. You hear me?

CLARA: Noted!

JACK exits, CLARA waits a moment, then drops the rope and begins "digging" again.

CLARA: Come on, Clara! Get the lead out!

JOHN enters. CLARA doesn't notice. He picks up the rope and sneaks up behind CLARA, he puts it around her neck

JOHN: You wouldn't happen to be stealing *my* body, now would you?

CLARA: *(Turns her head, sees it's JOHN)* Your body? What allows you to claim it?

JOHN: *This* does. (*He tightens the rope*) It's awfully surprising. I never run into women in my line of work. They're usually much too frail.

CLARA: (*Struggling*) It was a woman who brought you into this world. "Frail" is the last term I would use to describe our sex.

JOHN: You talk a lot for someone with a rope around their neck.

CLARA: You're not going to kill me.

JOHN: No? Then I wouldn't need to dig a body up out of the ground. I would have a nice fresh one all ready for me to take apart bit by bit.

CLARA: That's it. (*CLARA elbows him in the side and escapes from the rope*)

JOHN: I'm going to kill you! (*They scuffle, CLARA drops her pocket watch from her sleeve in the chaos, JACK enters*)

JACK: What the devil is going on here?!

CLARA: Just go away, Jack! Everything is under control! (*JOHN chases CLARA around the tombstones*)

JOHN: This isn't your problem to deal with, mate. Now leave!

JACK: Nonsense! This is my cemetery! (*CLARA lines up a punch for JOHN. JACK gets in-between them. CLARA ends up decking JACK in the face*) Oh, good God!

CLARA: Jack! I told you to go!

JACK: You just punched me in the face!

JOHN: Perhaps I should leave...

JACK: Dear God in heaven, that hurts.

CLARA: Hold still. (*She inspects JACK's nose*) It's just some minor damage to the cartilage of your nasal septum. There will be mild swelling and perhaps a brief nosebleed. (*JACK and JOHN look at her questioningly*) What? I... read it in a book once.

JOHN: You can read?

JACK: Everybody out! The both of you, get out of my cemetery! Perhaps check St. Paul's down the street. Maybe they've got some corpses they could hawk to you!

JOHN: *(To JACK)* I feel as though I should apologize for all of this-

JACK: Get out!

JOHN and CLARA exit separately from one another. CLARA leaves behind her pocket watch

JACK: *(To CLARA)* And I'm following you till you're off the grounds!

JACK exits behind CLARA. A moment later, JOHN enters and approaches the tombstone, he finds CLARA's pocket watch, he picks it up and inspects it

JOHN: "Clarence Williams." I thought she looked familiar. That bastard lied to my face. *(JACK enters)*

JACK: Oh, for the love of-

JOHN: I'm going! I'm going! Just forgot to grab my shovel, is all. You have a nice night. Peace and blessings to you. *(Exits)* *(JACK settles, exhausted next to Thomas's tombstone)*

JACK: *(He speaks to the tombstone, annoyed)* What? Not even a thank you?