

~ UNC Austen conference (summer 2013) ~

The UNC Understudies

present

Faint Not, My Beautiful Cassandra:

A theatrical amusement

*Most ignobly stripp'd from the larger body of the juvenilia,
Specifically Love & Freindship and The Beautiful Cassandra,
Adapted and performed without consent of the YOUNG NOVELIST,
Who was out chasing butterflies
When we called*

Dramatis personae ~

Prologue/Policeman: Joe Fletcher

Isabel/Cassandra's mother: Merriam Al-Fuhaid

Laura's mother: Emma Brodey

Laura: Ashley Guy

Marianne/Jane: Michele Robinson

Cassandra/Sophia: Jaclyn Zubrzycki

Augustus/Laura's father/Hackney driver: Adam McCune

Edward/Chef: Ted Scheinman

PROLOGUE [*Policeman alone, center stage; stern*]: Ladies & gentlemen, if you would please befavor me with your silence — I am here incapacitated as a prologue, though in the imminent dramatical dispopulations, I shall be called “policeman.” The playwright has asked that I read this brief apostle: [*unfolds paper & reads*]

“Kind audience, we pray you refrain from the taking of snuff, the making of love, the adjusting of bonnets, the locking-up of daughters, elopements of any kind — and that you silence any pet birds or... [*puzzled, then proud*]...**noble** telephones!” Er, mobile telephones, yes.

The playwright also desired me to complain that the following scenes of excitement, intrigue, and monstrous sensibility are all deprived from the juvenilia of one Miss Jane Austen, in particular a short novel called *Love & Friendship* and an even shorter novel called *The Beautiful Cassandra*. The action begins with the first novel, but before long Cassandra will appear to inquest a story of her own. These two tales will compete for your attention while charming your eyes, chafing your ears, and fickling your tummy bone. The playwright conforms me that the fourth wall will be broken numerous times, but that no damage will be conflicted on the building. If that in't magic, then I ain't a prologue! And so, without further askew, I present: THE PLAYERS!

I.

SCENE: *Two writing tables bookend the room. A divan rests center-stage (if possible, fainting couch). The divan should be large enough that at least two adults can faint on it comfortably at one time. At the stage-left table sits Isabel; at the stage-right table, Laura. A map of Europe hangs from the back wall next to a mirror. Marianne, fidgeting like a teenager, sits on the couch in the center, bored and perhaps tomboyish.*

ISABEL: *(already writing)* ...but O, my Laura, once more I entreat you to give my daughter a regular detail of the misfortunes and adventures of your life — but invariably you exclaim ‘No, my friend, never will I comply ‘til I may be no longer in danger of again experiencing such dreadful ones.’

LAURA: *(aside)* O! dreadful! *[swoons]*

ISABEL: But surely, Laura, that time is now at hand. You are this day...*[beat, during which all three look up anxiously]* ...fifty-five. If a woman may ever be said to be in safety from the cruel persecutions of disagreeable lovers and obstinate fathers, surely it must be at this time of life. Please, my dearest, consider. Your faithful, Isabel.

[Letters, some in envelopes, some unfurled, fall from the ceiling to indicate that time has passed and messages have been received.]

LAURA: *[writing; slowly pluming herself]* Although I cannot agree with you in supposing that I shall never again be exposed to the misfortunes of my earlier days, yet to avoid the imputation of obstinacy or ill-nature *[like Marie Antoinette]* I will gratify the curiosity of your daughter; and may the fortitude with which I have suffered the many afflictions of my past life prove to her a useful lesson in the dangers of...THE WORLD.

[Laura cocks an eyebrow. Marianne sits bolt upright as though pinched. Lights, briefly.]

II.

[Laura is pacing, rereading with a critical eye the letter she is about to send. Marianne is following and listening, semi-furtively.]

LAURA: My dearest Marianne — As the daughter of my most intimate friend I think you entitled to the knowledge of my unhappy story, and the misfortunes that await young ladies whose sensibilities are perhaps — *[flamboyant]* — too TREMBLINGLY alive.

[Laura arrives at the map and hands Marianne the letter in a careless gesture, without glancing at her. Marianne looks flummoxed. Laura produces a fan.]

LAURA: My father was a native of Ireland *[now the fan is a pointer]* and an inhabitant of Wales *[ditto for each]*; my mother was the **natural** daughter of a Scotch peer by an Italian opera-girl — I was born in Spain and received my education at a convent in France. Though my charms are now considerably softened and impaired by the

misfortunes I have undergone, I was once beautiful. [*A frowning appraisal in the mirror.*] My only fault, if a fault it can be called, was a sensibility too tremblingly alive to every affliction of my friends, my acquaintance, and **particularly** to every affliction of my own. [*Marianne rolls eyes.*] But O [*another glance at the mirror*] my accomplishments even begin to fade. [*Tries a halfhearted skip in the air.*] I can neither sing so well nor dance so gracefully as I once did. And I have entirely forgot the Minuet Dela Cour....

[*Marianne performs a dainty pirouette and curtsey while Laura isn't watching.*]

MARIANNE: “But your mother, dear Marianne, had seen the **world**. She had spent a fortnight in Bath, and had supped one night in Southampton.”

ISABEL: Beware, my Laura — !

LAURA: [*recovering herself*] ... she would often say. And also:

ISABEL: [*as though delivering a dark prophecy, or a ghost story*] Beware of the insipid vanities and idle dissipations of London, of the unmeaning luxuries of Bath and of the stinking fish of Southampton!

[*Marianne holds her nose for the amusement of Cassandra, who giggles*]

LAURA: But Alas! How was I to avoid those evils I should never be exposed to? What probability was there of my ever tasting the dissipations of London or the stinking fish of Southampton? Ah! How little did I then think I was ordained so soon to quit that humble cottage for the deceitful pleasures of the world.

MARIANNE: [*now on couch; Cassandra reads letters over her shoulder*] Well, at least we're getting to the good stuff.

CASSANDRA: But what of me, darling sister? Shall I be deprived of such lovely decadences, too?

MARIANNE: [*taking pen in hand*] Oh dearest Cass, never — never, if I can help it. [*writing*] O noble Cassandra, You are a phoenix. Your taste is refined, your sentiments are noble, and your virtues [*counts on fingers; gives up*] innumerable. Your conversation is rational, and your appearance singular. If the following tale afford one moment's amusement to you, every wish will be gratified of your most obedient & humble servant... [*grins in Cass's face*] — **moi!**

III. [*more letters tumble from on high*]

CASSANDRA: Ooh do go on! [*Cass now enacts the tale as Marianne scrawls*]

MARIANNE: Cassandra was the only daughter of a... [*thinks*] **celebrated** milliner in Bond Street. [*ISABEL takes CASS by the hand & both put on an air.*] Her father was of

noble birth, being the near relation of the Duchess of Blumpkin's butler. [*Mother & daughter curtsey to one another.*] Cassandra had attained her fifteenth year....

CASSANDRA: Oh please, can it be sixteen?

MARIANNE: ...her sixteenth year and was lovely and amiable...

CASSANDRA: [*affecting to swoon*] ...and I had chanced, alas, to fall in love with an elegant bonnet that Mother had just completed, bespoke to the Countess of Greater Little Pymly.

MARIANNE: Cassandra placed the bonnet on her gentle head and walked from her mother's shop to make her fortune.

[*Cassandra dons bonnet and flits about the stage, finally arriving at LAURA'S door. She adjusts her bonnet after this turn 'round the stage.*]

LAURA: One evening in December, as my father, my mother, and myself were arranged in social converse round our fireside [*they are*], we were on a sudden greatly astonished by hearing a violent knocking on the outward door of our rustic cot.

[*CASSANDRA raps loudly, with a mischievous look.*]

FATHER: What noise is that?

MOTHER: It sounds like a loud rapping at the door.

LAURA: It does indeed! [*aside*] — cried I....

FATHER: [*slowly, after a moment of deliberation*] I am of your opinion; it certainly does appear to proceed from some uncommon violence exerted against our unoffending door.

LAURA: Yes! I cannot help thinking it must be somebody who knocks for admittance.

FATHER: **That** is another point. We must not pretend to determine on what motive the person may knock — though that someone **does** rap at the door, I am partly convinced.

LAURA: Shan't we admit them?

FATHER: You have no objection, my dearest?

MOTHER: None!

[*Cass slinks away from the door as she sees Edward approach, with what looks like a three-volume novel under his arm; Edward is surprised at his quick admittance. It is*

Laura who invites him in and offers a chair. Cass retires to stage right and begins quietly tearing letters into small pieces, which she collects in her bonnet.]

LAURA: [*writing, but mainly staring wistfully into the distance/past*] The noble youth informed us that his name was Lindsay — [*coming to herself, clears throat*] hem, for particular reasons, however, I shall conceal it under the name of Talbot!

EDWARD: My father, you see, is a mean and mercenary wretch. Seduced by the false glare of title and fortune, this stubborn man insisted I marry Lady Dorothea. “Nay, never!” cried I. “I grant you, Lady Dorothea is lovely and engaging, and I prefer no woman to her; but know, sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your wishes— [*stands up, with great self-seriousness, hand over heart*] No! **Never** shall it be said that I obliged my father.

[The family applauds, earnestly.]

EDWARD: My father accused me of having studied [*a beat as he prepares himself for an odious word*] **novels**; I scorned to answer; it would have been beneath my dignity. [*Looks down at the obvious novel in his hand; slips it behind his back*] Well, I mounted my horse and set out for the World!

FAMILY: [*unison, marveling*] THE WORLD!

[EDWARD pivots abruptly to Laura]

EDWARD: But O my Laura, whom I have loved these past four minutes beyond all strength of reason, or probability, when will you reward me with yourself?

[Parents beam with pride.]

LAURA: O, this very instant, my dear and amiable Edward! [*winks at Marianne*]

EDWARD: Well, that’s dashed convenient — your being in a wedding dress and all, I mean. [*LAURA curtsies as he kisses her hand.*]

LAURA: We were immediately united by my father... [*it happens quickly on stage; Cass throws her shredded letters like confetti. FATHER turns to audience with pride.*]

FATHER: For true, I had never taken orders — but [*crossing self; drawing self up*] I **had** been bred for the church!

MARIANNE: Jesus, in his own way, had likewise been bread for the church. [*here she should probably have some bread.*]

CASS: [*Schoolmarmish*] O but sister, you become too silly, and I fear we lose the thread of your narrative! And these ... *people* are so frivolous and conceited!

MARIANNE: [*drawing Cass close to her*] But soft, Cass, a scene of **MONSTROUS** sensibility awaits! For upon the arrival of Laura and Edward at the family seat of Edward's most particular friend Augustus....

LAURA: ... which was but a few miles distant....

MARIANNE: ...and on sending in their names, were immediately admitted to Sophia, the wife of Edward's friend

LAURA: [*Taking Cassandra by the hands and leading her in a quasi-minuet*] ... and after having been deprived during the course of three weeks of a real friend, imagine my transports at beholding one most truly worthy of the name. [*Sisterly dance continues.*]

MARIANNE: [*narrating to CASS*] Sophia was most elegantly formed — a soft languor spread over her lovely features, increasing their beauty. She was all sensibility! And *feeling!*

LAURA: And so we flew into each other's arms [*they do so*] and after having exchanged vows of mutual friendship for the rest of our lives, instantly **unfolded** to each other the most inward secrets of our hearts.

[*Each woman removes a letter from her bosom and literally unfolds it. They exchange letters.*]

MARIANNE: O! but they were interrupted in this delightful employment by the entrance of Augustus!!

LAURA: For never did I see such an affecting scene as was the meeting of Edward and Augustus.

EDWARD: My life, my soul!!

LAURA: ...exclaimed the former.

AUGUSTUS: My adorable angel!

MARIANNE: ...exclaimed the latter, as they flew into each other's arms.

LAURA: It was too *pathetic* for the feelings of Sophia and myself.

[*They faint alternately on the couch; the men revive them.*]

POLICEMAN: (*knocking and entering; addresses Augustus*) Sir, we have received complaints from your creditors.

AUGUSTUS: We scorn to reflect a moment on our pecuniary distresses.

SOPHIA: The very idea of paying our debts! You shall make me blush.

MARIANNE: Hm. That sounds too much like Fielding.

LAURA: Exalted creatures!

POLICEMAN: Then you must be hanged at dawn.

[POLICEMAN seizes AUGUSTUS and takes him away. LAURA and SOPHIA sigh and faint on the sofa.]

EDWARD: I must repair to my imprisoned friend and hasten his escape! O, for a steed of fire! *(leaves)*

[LAURA and SOPHIA revive.]

LAURA: Where is my Edward?

MARIANNE: But no Edward appeared. In vain did they weep *[they do]*—in vain even did they sigh *[they do]*—no Edward returned. This was too cruel, too unexpected a blow to their gentle sensibility—they could not support it—they could only faint. *[They do.]*

CASSANDRA: Such faintings, my sister! Do not such silly people travel with a phial at least of smelling salts?

MARIANNE: O Cass, ever the eldest and most amiable. *[Crushes CASS to her bosom with overemphatic affection]* I have hardly finished your own tale of glamour and intrigue!

CASSANDRA: But I pray you would!

MARIANNE: *[clears throat; opens notebook; brandishes quill]* Cassandra — the beautiful, divine, unsurpass'd Cassandra — then proceeded to a pastry-cook's, where she devoured six ices, refused to pay for them, knocked down the pastry cook, and walked away.

[This scene plays itself out, with EDWARD in chef's hat as pastry cook.]

MARIANNE: *[whispers to CASS]* Jolly good show!

CASSANDRA: *[whisper]* Thank you, dearest!

MARIANNE: [*alto voce*] She next ascended a hackney coach and ordered it to Hampstead, where she was no sooner arrived than she ordered the coachman to drive back again.

CASS: Drive back again!

[*This all plays out on the divan/sofa, with AUGUSTUS as hackney-driver.*]

MARIANNE: The coachman now... [*thinks, quill poised*] demanded his pay!

AUGUSTUS: [*working-class accent henceforth*] Indeed, er, miss, I must demand my pay!

MARIANNE: She searched her pockets over again and again; but no money could she find. The man grew peremptory.

AUGUSTUS: That's right, PEREMPTORY.

MARIANNE: She placed her bonnet on his head and ran away.

AUGUSTUS: Oy, miss, you ain't proper. The bonnet what you've blinded me with is for a *lady*! Don't you know the bloomin' difference?

[*CASS smiles & squeals with transgressive delight and traipses along.*]

MARIANNE: A quarter of a mile brought her to her paternal roof in Bond Street, from which she had now been absent ... [*checks iPhone*] nearly *seven hours!!!*

CASS: I entered the door and was pressed to my mother's bosom by that worthy woman. [*i.e. ISABEL*]

[*MARIANNE applauds. LAURA clears her throat, and MARIANNE and CASS look at LAURA.*]

LAURA: But to continue with my *own* tale, dearest Marianne — We instantly set out in search of our loves.

[*LAURA and SOPHIA rush away from the couch.*]

LAURA (*petitioning invisible passers-by*): Have you seen my Edward? Have you seen my Edward?

[*Offstage, voices respond: "No Edward 'ere!" "We've got an Edmund, if that's any 'elp!" LAURA and SOPHIA continue wailing 'EDWARD' and then stop, out of breath.*]

MARIANNE: From their melancholy reflections they were most fortunately relieved by an accident truly apropos; it was the lucky overturning of a gentleman's phaeton.

[EDWARD and AUGUSTUS charge across the stage pantomiming a ride in a phaeton at full speed, then tumble violently to the earth to the sound of a SHRIEKING HORSE and GRINDING WHEELS. LAURA and SOPHIA rush to the men.]

LAURA: These two were but a moment ago in so elevated a situation, this fashionable, high—now they are laid low and sprawling in the dust. What an ample subject for reflection on the uncertain—

SOPHIA: But 'tis Augustus and Edward!

[SOPHIA shrieks and faints on the ground. LAURA screams and runs mad. After this goes on a while, EDWARD groans. LAURA rushes to his side.]

LAURA: Dear youth! I implore you not to die!

EDWARD: Laura, I fear... I have been overturned.

LAURA: Oh! tell me Edward, tell me I beseech you before you die, what has befallen you since we were separated?

EDWARD: O 'tis a tale of such feeling that three volumes could not contain it. But I will, I will—*[sighs deeply and dies]*

[LAURA runs mad again, sobbing.]

LAURA: *[Like Ophelia gone mad]* Talk not to me of phaetons—Give me a violin. I'll play to him and soothe him in his melancholy hours—Beware ye gentle nymphs of Cupid's thunderbolts, avoid the piercing shafts of Jupiter—Look at that grove of firs—I see a leg of mutton—They told me Edward was not dead; but they deceived me—they took him for a cucumber.

[SOPHIA revives.]

SOPHIA: Night is approaching—the damps begin to fall. Oh, Laura—there is such a violent pain in my delicate limbs. I fear I have caught a cold by my continued faintings in the open air! The exertions of your fits of frenzy have warmed your blood, but I have been exposed to the chilling damps of the night!

[SOPHIA coughs; someone should spritz her with water. LAURA rushes to SOPHIA'S side.]

LAURA: Your disorder has turned into a galloping consumption!

SOPHIA: [*still coughing*] Take warning from my unhappy end... Beware of fainting-fits... Run mad as often as you chuse, but **do not faint**... [*dies*]

LAURA: [*after a moment of grief, standing and turning at Marianne*] I took up my residence in a romantic village in the highlands of Scotland, where I have ever since continued my unceasing lamentations for the death of my husband and my friend. Adieu, my dearest Marianne.

[*LAURA leaves the stage. A beat.*]

CASSANDRA: Well, that was rather anticlimactic.

MARIANNE: [*Hands on hips*] Wait 'til you read *The Watsons*!

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