

## Maynard Dines In

*Maynard Dines In* is a modern farce in two acts, complete with deception, mistaken identities, mayhem, and a surprise ending. Religion, art, gay marriage, starving nonprofit arts organizations, and insider trading—this play has it all. It may be the only play in which the Securities and Exchange Commission plays a crucial role.

More about *Maynard Dines In*.

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### Synopsis

*Maynard Dines In* presents the preposterous escapades of Harold and Gina Blandleigh, a young Queens couple struggling to get ahead. Harold is a shy violist in the Flushing Philharmonic; Gina, who works for wildly successful Wall Street broker Morton Mirmelstein (Mr. M.), is a schemer, always on the lookout for an angle to improve her husband's career prospects. As chance would have it, Mr. M. has suddenly and mysteriously left town, asking Gina to take care of his enormous, ill-tempered cat, Maynard, while he is away. This state of affairs gives Gina an idea: She and Harold will pretend that Mr. M's luxurious townhome is their own and invite the famous classical pianist Yevtuslav Rostronitzin over for dinner in hopes of convincing him to do a benefit performance for the Flushing Phil. Gina is sure that this deception will convince Rostronitzin that he can trust them, because—she is sure—no one wants to give charity to losers, like the struggling Flushing Phil seems to be.

But since this is a fluffy farce, nothing goes smoothly. Rostronitzin turns out to be a lecherous gasbag. Mr. M's gigantic cat, Maynard, escapes, after shredding Mr. M's priceless modern painting. Mr. M's parents arrive unexpectedly; they decide Rostronitzin is some sort of Christian evangelist, trying to convert their son, while Rostronitzin thinks Harold is Mr. M. Then Mr. M's lover, Max, shows up, and is immediately suspicious of what he imagines are Rostronitzin's and Harold's relationships with Mr. M. Meanwhile, Harold's successive attempts to recapture Maynard meet with something less than success while Gina attempts to maintain the increasingly complicated charade. The entire house of cards comes crashing to earth half-way through Act II, but a couple of last-minute surprising twists redeem all the characters.

## **Awards and Production History**

Prior to its premiere, "Maynard Dines In" did well in play competitions:

- \* One of three full-length plays to win the American Theatre Co-op's 2007 annual playwriting competition. (Prize: A promise by ATC's nearly 100 member theaters to consider the winning plays for production.)

- \* Finalist (with two other full-length plays) and eventual second place in the 2001 McLaren Comedy Competition, Midland, Texas. (Prize: \$25 – honest! – and a very good reading directed by Andy Salcedo.)

- \* Winner, Jewel Box Theater's 2000 New Play Competition. (Prize: \$500, which director Murray Ross says probably puts us "among the top 2% earning playwrights in the country." Our sewer line promptly broke – repair cost \$540 – so we can honestly say the money went down the toilet.)

- \* One of 17 finalists (out of 120 entries) in the Ukiah Players' 2000 New American Comedy Festival. (Prize: Script returned in SASE.)

- \* Co-Winner (with three other plays) of Montana State University's Northwest 1999 Regional New Play Conference, March 5-6, 1999. (Prize: A reading, at which we realized "Maynard" was too long. We cut 3,000 words and moved the act break.)

"Maynard Dines In" has received two productions: its premiere in July 2002 by the Maverick Players in Midland, Texas, and in January 2004 at the Manitou Art Theater in Manitou Springs, Colorado. Each production has inspired a rewrite, but we think "Maynard" is finally finished, with the right balance of smart dialogue and preposterous visual humor.

## **Production Particulars**

Cast of Characters:

**GINA BLANDLEIGH:** Resourceful but scheming secretary for Morton Mirmelstein, a wealthy stockbroker, Harold's wife, mid-20s.

**HAROLD BLANDLEIGH:** Gina's husband, mild-mannered violist in struggling Flushing Philharmonic. Mid-to-late 20s, slight build, wears glasses.

**YEVTUSLAV ROSTRONITZIN:** Famous Russian pianist, vigorous, lecherous man in his mid-60s or so.

**MIMI MIRMELESTEIN:** Miriam, mother of Morton, wife of Malcolm, a chatterbox who never ever thinks before she speaks. Mid-50s.

MALCOLM MIRMELESTEIN: Father of Morton, from Yonkers. A down-to-earth man who has an explanation for everything. Mid-to-late 50s.

MAX MORGENSTERN: Morton's estranged male lover, interior designer. Early-to-mid 30s.

Also:

Telephone voice of MORTON MIRMELESTEIN: Gina's boss, wildly successful stockbroker, also known as Pookie and Mr. M. Owner of nice townhome in Manhattan.

Voice and tail of MAYNARD: Morton's cat.

Voice of Zinaida: Rostronitzin's wife

Telephone voice of CECIL RAMSBOTTOM: Famous impresario.

Scene: Summertime, the present, at the luxurious Manhattan brownstone home of Morton Mirmelstein

With one intermission, "Maynard Dines In" is approximately two hours long. It requires one set, which must be both fairly opulent and sturdy (there's skulking on the windowsill). One scene requires some quick demolition, though it takes place in the dark. We are happy to provide information on props and sound cues (some of which we can provide).

### **A Sample Scene from *Maynard Dines In* (Act I)**

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What's happened so far: Gina and Harold are pretending to live in Morton Mirmelstein's mansion while he is out of town and have invited the Russian virtuoso pianist there for dinner to try to convince him to do a benefit concert for Harold's orchestra. Rostronitzin has arrived, revealed himself to be a jerk, and accidentally allowed Morton's cat Maynard to escape while making a clumsy pass at Gina. While Harold and Gina are out looking for the cat, Mimi and Malcolm arrive unannounced. Since they've come to see their son, Morton (aka Pookie), who lives there, and Harold and Gina have said they live there, Rostronitzin naturally assumes that Harold is Pookie—so in the following scene, he thinks Mimi and Malcolm are talking about a violist, while they're actually talking about a stockbroker. Rostronitzin, who does not like to be recognized, has introduced himself as "Ben Cartwright."

MALCOLM: [interrupting] So Ben, whadda you do?

ROSTRONITZIN: [tries to look modest] Same as Pookie. But on bigger scale.

MALCOLM: Really? Pookie's one of the biggest players on the Street.

ROSTRONITZIN: [looks amazed] He play on street?

MIMI: Of course. That's where the money is. How do you think he affords all this? [gestures around room, but doesn't look] But he works hard. Poor dear.

MALCOLM: Yeah, he's always out orchestrating things.

ROSTRONITZIN: Orchestrate?

MALCOLM: What, you think he just fiddles around? Why, he arranged something for Bill Gates just last month.

ROSTRONITZIN: Arrange?

MIMI: Yes, Pookie pulled all the strings for that.

MALCOLM: And he's so sharp, he can peg a movement before it happens! Then, right before it goes flat, he makes the pitch, and the piece is sold.

ROSTRONITZIN: Move peg? Make pitch?

MIMI: He's in tune with everything that goes on.

MALCOLM: He just senses the dynamics, see? It takes a lot of pluck, but he tells me, "don't fret, I'll have a seat when the music stops."

ROSTRONITZIN: He play standing up?

MIMI: I tell him, "Pookie, someday you'll have to pay the piper." But he never does.

ROSTRONITZIN: He not pay?

MALCOLM: Doesn't have to. He gets there a little ahead of the rest. And drops out just before it starts down.

ROSTRONITZIN: He play only when notes are high?

MALCOLM: When they're getting high, anyway. But not just notes - bonds, CDs, any kind of instrument.

ROSTRONITZIN: Pookie has CDs?

MIMI: Oh, lots.

ROSTRONITZIN: But question is, how they sound?

MALCOLM: Sound as a dollar! Say, you don't seem to know much about what goes on in the pit.

ROSTRONITZIN: [proudly] I not play in pit. Or on street. I play on world stage.

MIMI: Oh, an international practice. Pookie does some international, too. Mostly in France.

MALCOLM: When did he say anything about France?

MIMI: You know - he's always complaining about the Parisites he has to work with. Someday, I'd like to go to Paris...

MALCOLM: Well, I know he has contacts in Russia.

MIMI: Where do you practice, Ben?

ROSTRONITZIN: [proudly] I not need to practice much.

MALCOLM: So you've already made a name for yourself?

ROSTRONITZIN: I will not spoil surprise! But here is hint! Tell me - How many pianist {Pronounced: "PEEnist"} do you know?

MIMI: [shocked] Ben! That's awfully personal!

MALCOLM: No, dear, he means "pee-AH-nists." You know, piano players.

MIMI: But, what does that have to do with...

ROSTRONITZIN: Just name one.

MALCOLM: Liberace, of course. What an entertainer he was! The only one who can hold a candle to him ... get it? ... a candle? ... is Michael Feinstein.

MIMI: Of course, it's not quite the same. He sings, too.

ROSTRONITZIN: [looks crestfallen] No, is not same ... [hopefully] But maybe you hear crowds chanting on street? "Rosty, Rosty!"?

[MIMI and MALCOLM look puzzled]

MIMI: Frosty? Not this time of year.

MALCOLM: No, not "Frosty." "Rosty." You know, that politician who got in trouble for using government funds for his own stuff.

MIMI: Oh. I didn't know he played piano.

ROSTRONITZIN: [sighs] Is not important.

End Scene

### **Review of 2004 Production**

'Maynard Dines In' serves up a comic banquet

By JASON WALTERS – SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

A true theatrical farce is a complicated piece of machinery. It requires countless independent parts to work in concert and relies on precision timing to ensure smooth operation.

Such is the case with "Maynard Dines In," the most recent production in the Manitou Art Theater's 2003–04 season, directed by Eve Tilley and written by Mark (Gazette theater critic) and Lauren Arnest.

The action takes place in the apartment of absent Wall Street broker Morton Mirmelstein, where his personal assistant Gina (Heidi Link) has involved her husband Harold (Brandon Jacobs), a neurotic violist in a struggling philharmonic, in a Machiavellian scheme to provide Harold a bit of job security.

Unfortunately, organizing a benefit for the ill-fated orchestra

requires enlisting the help of renowned Russian pianist Yevutslav Rostronitzin (Robert Tiffany), who is reluctant to degrade himself in such a fashion.

Just when plans couldn't get any worse, Morton's bloodthirsty cat, Maynard (having missed his daily Prozac dose), goes missing, and we become witnesses to a disaster involving a priceless work of art, Groucho glasses, several cases of mistaken identity, and a painstakingly prepared dinner that's not quite kosher.

Initially, I felt some resistance to the events unfolding. It wasn't until the first act was well on its way that I surrendered to what is, in reality, a finely crafted comedy.

The success of "Maynard" depends on a bizarre tension among its characters to maintain its comic momentum. The frantic shuffling of characters on and off stage accomplishes this skillfully, for the most part – often to hilarious effect.

Jacobs has a truly melodramatic flair, and is splendidly convincing as the play's whipping boy. We take pleasure in his descent into near madness as the murderous Maynard gradually tears him and his clothing to bits.

Although Link has impressive stage presence and a bright personality, I was unable to buy her as the scheming conspirator Harold is frequently accusing her of being. I don't fault Link for this; it seems her character was shortchanged from the beginning.

Tiffany, although an impressive and entertaining stage presence, never finds consistency in his Russian accent. David Rasmussen, as the missing Morton's one-time lover Max, holds his own without falling too far into stereotypes.

Sue Breeze as Mimi Mirmelstein channels every Jewish mother in the history of stage and screen. She has so much fun in the role that I was able to forget that I've seen her character. Tom Foster Spiers owns the role of Mimi's longsuffering husband, Malcolm, His deadpan delivery gives us the play's most ridiculously hilarious moments.

The intimate Manitou Art Theater is well suited to this production, although its acoustics aren't great. Dialogue on stage is easily lost

in the slightest noise from the audience.

At times, the dialogue seemed rushed, and as a consequence, more than a few lines were stumbled over. And though not as strong as it could have been, the farce's effect wasn't lost, even when two actors broke character to chuckle at an amusing moment.

"Maynard Dines In" is populated by stock characters; however, Tilley and the Arnests have managed to use them in such a precise yet slapdash maze of comic conspiracy that they appear new to us. This is where its success lies.

### **Playwrights' Note**

In 1994 Mark (who was not yet my husband) and I found ourselves employed at the legal publishing subsidiary of a major publishing company. We were denizens of what today's corporate slang calls a "cube farm," toiling amid a vast honeycomb of grey cubicles lit by banks of strangely harsh and anxiety-producing fluorescent lights. The building itself, a monument to thoughtless development, sat alone on an arid plain many miles north of Colorado Springs.

I was a refugee from the legal profession, having decided after earning a law degree in 1979 that I did not want to practice law. So I earned my living writing articles for lawyers to tell them how to practice law—a classic example of the maxim, "those who can't do, teach!" Mark was doing penance for a rudderless youth as an itinerant jazz pianist, having awakened one morning to find that the stream of life had deposited him on these unpromising shores—editing the bone-dry data churned out by me and the other lapsed lawyers who had taken refuge there.

Yet, in this soul-killing existence a ray of moonlight shone: Mark had a night job as the town paper's classical music critic. A few months after starting this job, Mark's boss decided he hated reviewing theater—which mostly involved giving up evenings and backsides to hard chairs in church basements and the like viewing the tedious efforts of earnest, but amateur, community actors as they pushed creaky theatrical vehicles (the only ones for which they could afford the royalty payments) uphill—so Mark inherited this job as well. Night after night we watched these spectacles. By day, on long lunchtime walks out on the barren plains surrounding our place of employment, we discussed what



we had seen: what worked in the plot and performance and what did not. Then one night one of the producers of plays for a small dinner theater lamented to us the scarcity of material for her kind of theater. She said there just weren't many good light comedies calling for a single set and no more than eight actors that were newer than the 1970s. Of the plays that a small community group like hers could afford to produce, these were the ones her audiences seemed to enjoy most. This planted the seed: Could we write such a play? We felt that we could.

We set out some general goals, based on our experience as theater viewers. These were the traits that, to us, a successful comedy—and particularly a farce—must have: Interesting and ultimately likable characters who get themselves into a jam doing something they should not be doing, who have to juggle more and more deceptions in order to keep their whole naughty house of cards from collapsing. We wanted a plot that tied up all the loose strands—preferably with a little twist at the end. We also decided to minimize profanity: We had seen too many of what we called "screaming f-word" plays, in which obscenities serve as a cheap—and not often successful—way of heightening humor or dramatic tension.

Searching for a premise, I remembered a story my sister told about a friend of hers who was a percussionist in a symphony orchestra. Desperately in need of a favor from the orchestra's conductor, he and his wife decided to invite the fellow for dinner to feel him out. It turned out the conductor was the one who did the feeling—of the percussionist's wife! He was a pompous, demanding and uncooperative Don Juan who French-kissed the hostess upon leaving. This was our beginning: The percussionist became a mild-mannered violist—violists are funnier than percussionists—in a sinking B-rate orchestra; the conductor became a famous but fading Russian pianist. From here we just began to spin a tale. The couple pretends to live in the wife's boss's house while the boss is mysteriously out of town in order to convince the Russian pianist to do a benefit performance for the husband's orchestra. The boss dotes on his huge, irascible cat. Unbeknownst to the couple, the boss's parents and his gay lover are also separately on their way over. We tried to make everything go wrong that could possibly do so.

Over the next four years, Mark and I honed the plot and dialogue. Often this took place on our lunchtime walks. In 1995, we married. In 1996, we were laid off from our jobs—and that was a real stroke of luck. Mark's work at the paper kept expanding—now he was reviewing fine art as well as theater and classical music. I began doing freelance editing at home. We often worked on the play seated at Mark's computer as we sipped our morning coffee, or on an afternoon tea break. Several trial readings with friends revealed to us that the

work was way too long! The first draft lasted two and-a-half hours. We cut and cut, trying to get to that magic point where nothing else can be taken away without compromising the integrity of the structure. For the most part, we adopted a "50-word" rule, noticing that speech (in comedy more than drama) sounded unnatural if the characters spoke more than 50 words at a time. We struggled with the difficulty of imparting background information naturally through the characters' dialogue, but for the most part we believe we've avoided the sort of exposition that James Agee lampooned in *Casablanca*: "Oh, Victor, please don't go to the resistance meeting tonight." We aimed for the point at which every moment is important to the plot, without seeming to be so. Words and gestures should seem to be natural, as they are in life—casual, accidental, unplanned. Yet in the play, we wanted all of these words and actions to converge in an unexpected, but—in hindsight—inevitable and tightly woven mesh. (The way, I guess, we hope that everything in real life counts in some unforeseen way as well!) Although the soul of farce is implausibility that seems plausible in its own universe, we ventured further into fantasy than is the norm in the person of Maynard, the cat. We hope he adds a touch of the outlandishly absurd—even the supernatural, if you will—so as to be memorable. We love cats, and he is the distilled essence of feline imperious intractability.

Our purpose in writing "Maynard Dines In" was simply to entertain. It contains no profound or provocative insights. We just wanted to write a play that could be produced in any modest American theater and that would leave its audiences, out for a night on the town, satisfied with the evening's entertainment.

-- Lauren Arnest (edited by Mark Arnest)