

DICKINSON

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Dickinson

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Characters:

Emily Dickinson, the poet
Austin Dickinson, her brother
Edward Dickinson, her father
Emily Norcross (Emma) Dickinson, her mother
Judge Lord, her lover
Lavinia (Vinnie) Dickinson, her sister
Sue (Susie) Dickinson, her sister-in-law and Austin's wife
The Playwright, the playwright of this play
Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a middle-aged preacher

The play is written so that it may optionally be performed by four actors as follows:

Emily Dickinson
The Playwright
All other male parts
All other female parts

Setting:

The play takes place during one night in Emily Dickinson's bedroom in her father's Amherst, Massachusetts mansion. For Emily the time is the late 1800's, while for The Playwright the setting is the same but the time is the early 21st century.

The bedroom has an upstage door leading to a closet, and a window stage left and door stage right, both leading to nothingness. The bedroom is furnished with period appropriate bedroom furniture, including a twin bed, a writing desk stage left, a dresser with some books and a kerosene lamp atop it, a potted live ficus tree, and a large chest on the floor stage right. The books contain scraps of paper on which are written poems by Emily Dickinson. Emily Dickinson and The Playwright remain in the bedroom throughout the play. All other characters perform their lines from the ethereal nothingness of the world outside the bedroom, which may be represented by any available areas of the theatre.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

The Play begins with fog and blue light as strange, ghostly melodies play.

THE PLAYWRIGHT, a man in his early middle age, is asleep at the desk amidst scattered papers, many crumpled into balls. A leather satchel leans against the side of the desk.

The chest of drawers creaks open, and EMILY arises from the chest dressed all in white, stepping onto the stage. EMILY is a petite woman with brown hair, in her mid-thirties. She stares at the audience without seeing them, then slowly turns, sees THE PLAYWRIGHT, and screams. THE PLAYWRIGHT startles backward, falling over in his chair. He scrambles to his feet and sees EMILY. He screams. She points at him and screams. He points at her and screams. They continue alternating screaming at each other several times, but the volume ratchets down and they each slowly sink to the floor in exhaustion during the process. In the end they sit on the floor facing each other, making half-hearted efforts at screams, then giving up.

EMILY

Get out!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

It's all just a dream.

EMILY

Get out!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

It's not real. I'm having a nightmare, that's all. There's no such thing as ghosts.

EMILY

Get out of my room, Sir!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Dickinson

[*Covering his ears and closing his eyes*] Na na na na na na.
Just a dream...wake up soon... [*sing-song*] now I lay me down to
sleep...pray the Lord my soul to keep...If I should die before
I wake... [*Leaps to his feet*]

EMILY

You have no right to be in here, Sir!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

That's it, isn't it? I'm dead, aren't I. This is some
kind of waypoint.

EMILY

[*Leaping to her feet as well*] You, Sir, are a villain, a
doer of crimes, a scoundrel, a disturber of the public
peace, and a state's prison filler!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

I was expecting some kind of tunnel.

EMILY

I call upon the destructive forces of fire, water, light,
tempest, hungry wolves, lightning and thunder to destroy
you!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

You don't look like any relative I remember. Are you my
spirit guide?

EMILY

I'm Emily Dickinson, and this is my bedroom, and you are
invading the chamber of a lady, and you are most unwelcome.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Thank God! Not dead, just dreaming.

EMILY

Dickinson

I assure you that this is no dream.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

You don't know what I know or else you'd know that I know that there's no way this can be anything but a dream.

EMILY

[quizzically] I don't know that you know...

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Don't you get it? I'm writing a play about you, but it's not going well. In fact, it's going horrible. So I fall asleep and dream you up out of nothing, just like...just like...just like the way your poems were discovered in that trunk [*pointing*] after you were dead.

EMILY

Dead? I'm not dead. At least, not in the sense that you mean. And this is most assuredly not a dream. Now leave!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

You leave.

EMILY

I can't. You must.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Why not? Oh, I get it. The whole agoraphobia thing. [*Taps his head*] Clever. My mind's got it all figured out. OK, I'll leave and you can stay. [*He opens the door and starts to step out, grabs the door jamb in a panic, pulls himself back in and slams the door, holding it shut with both hands and breathing hard.*]

EMILY

What's wrong with you?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Dickinson

[*Pointing at doorway*] There's... It's... Only... There's nothing there.

EMILY

Of course there's nothing there. It's the middle of the night, who would you think would be in my hallway.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

No hallway.

EMILY

What do you mean no hallway?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

There's no hallway. No stairs, no walls, no building, no nothing. It's like looking over a cliff, but with no bottom.

EMILY

That's crazy. [*She walks to the door, puts her hand on the knob as if to open it, pauses, thinks better of it, then backs away*] I know you're wrong, but I believe you're right. I've felt it myself. [*Points at the window*] You'll just need to climb down the tree.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[*Walks to the window*] I don't see a tree. [*Opens the window and sticks his head and much of his upper body out the window*] It's just like the door. There's nothing out here but emptiness. Nothing at all but... [*this last is cut-off as EMILY pushes against his butt, attempting to shove him out the window*]

[*Scrambling back inside and to the floor*] What did you do that for? You could have killed me!

EMILY

No, it's all a dream. You said so yourself.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Dickinson

I didn't know you were such a bitch. Hey, that's helpful!
[Scrambles and finds a pen and paper, begins to jot down
some notes]

EMILY

You said you were writing a play?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Yes, yes. Five plays actually. About the five poets at
the turn of the century who did the most to influence
poetry throughout the twentieth century.

EMILY

Oh, so you're from the future? And I'm one of the five?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Yes, of course. You're the most important one of the five.

EMILY

Oh, I think I like that.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Wonderful.

EMILY

And the turn of the Century, so I'll be... [counting], why,
I'll be seventy years old then. How old do I live to be?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Uh...there's a little problem.

EMILY

You can tell me! Eighty? Do I live to be eighty?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Fifty-five.

Dickinson

EMILY

Fifty-five what?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Fifty-five years. You die when you're fifty-five years old.

EMILY

But you said, "Turn of the Century". I distinctly heard you say, "Turn of the Century."

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Well, you're kind of an odd bird. I included you because your poems weren't published until around the turn of the century.

EMILY

Just fifty-five?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

And of course, you were writing way ahead of your time so you really had to be included. Sort of like you were moved up a grade in school.

EMILY

Well I'm glad I died at the age of fifty-five. Sooner would have been even better. Did you know I began cutting out advertisements for tombstones when I was twenty-six?

THE PLAYWRIGHT

No, but that's good. [*begins writing notes again*]

EMILY

[*Curious, looking over his shoulder*] What have you got so far? Tell me!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Dickinson

[*From his notes*] EMILY is a petite woman with brown hair, in her mid-thirties.

EMILY

That's it? And you call yourself a writer? No wonder you're having such a hard time. You're incompetent, that's all.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

[*Writing and underlining*] Bitch, no doubt about it.

EMILY

Let's see. Emily is small, like the Wren; and her hair is bold, like the Chestnut Bur; and her eyes...her eyes are like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Wow, you are good.

EMILY

So is that the problem that you're having with the play? The fact that you're an incompetent writer? I mean, that's no sin, I'm sure you can't help it.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

No, no, it's not me. It's you! I've been researching you for three years and I still don't have the answer. Or rather, I have too many answers. Everyone has a theory about you—something to help them complete their PhD thesis, or get them a bestselling book, or just generally get them some publicity. They're literary grave diggers digging you up over-and-over, and they all sound right at first. But then...

Why did you have them destroy your correspondence? I mean, researchers have pieced together thousands of letters but the ones that really matter, the ones that really answered the questions, destroyed, all destroyed.

EMILY

The riddle we can guess, we speedily despise.

Dickinson

THE PLAYWRIGHT

So we extrapolate from hints in the letters that survive.
We read clues into your poems, hoping that they offer
truths.

EMILY

Tell all the truth but tell it slant. The truth must
dazzle gradually, or every man be blind.

I'll tell you a truth. When Jesus tells us about his
Father, we distrust him. When he shows us his home, we
turn away, but when he confides to us that he is
"acquainted with grief," we listen, for that is an
acquaintance of our own.

[Walking to the window and looking out] It's as if the
plague had ravaged the streets, nothing doing, no visiting,
no gossiping, no sociability, no railroad...all is still
enough. I am homesick here, even if it is home.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Do you still write?

EMILY

I have no other playmates.

[She removes a scrap of paper from a book on the dresser.]

I was the slightest in the House;
I took the smallest Room.
At night, my little Lamp, and Book,
And one Geranium

So stationed I could catch the Mint
That never ceased to fall.
And just my Basket,
Let me think—I'm sure—
That this was all.

I never spoke, unless addressed,
And then, 'twas brief and low.
I could not bear to live aloud,
The Racket shamed me so.

Dickinson

And if it had not been so far,
And any one I knew
Were going—I had often thought
How note-less, I could die.

[Puts the paper on the dresser]

My own words so chill and burn me.

[THE PLAYWRIGHT takes the paper containing the poem, pulls some reading glasses from his pocket and begins to examine the scrawl on the page]

Spectacles won't help you understand my poems. *[Laughing]*
I don't think a telescope would assist you. Perhaps they
are not meant to be understood.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Will you help me?

EMILY

[Firmly] No.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Just a little. Just enough to keep your words alive.

EMILY

[Hesitatingly] No.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

People aren't reading poetry anymore. If we don't do
something, your poetry might die. Then what would happen
to you?

EMILY

Maybe I'll help just a little. Nothing specific, mind you.
So, where do you want to start?

SCENE TWO

Dickinson

[During this scene and the scenes that follow, different aspects of EMILY's life and character are revealed. All of them are "true", all of them are her, however history does not disclose which predominate (indeed, if any did predominate). The actor playing EMILY must understand that each scene represents a different personality of EMILY, almost a different person entirely, but with hints foreshadowing other personalities. In fact, her life and letters exhibited this same divergence of personalities based on her intended correspondent. So the analysis of EMILY as a character must be performed on a scene-by-scene basis in addition to the performance as a whole.]

THE PLAYWRIGHT

It's been said that you turned away from the world and locked yourself in your room because of a failed love affair, that white was the sign of mourning for your lost relationship with some man. Your sister Vinnie encouraged those rumors.

VINNIE

[Enter VINNIE, a sexually attractive, saucy coquette a few years younger than EMILY. VINNIE is hard working, practical, organized, and protective.]

They weren't rumors. That was the God's honest truth!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

And when you were young you were popular and happy. You even belonged to the P.O.M. society.

EMILY

[smiles] Poetry of Motion.

VINNIE

Oh, the way we used to dance. Father never found out what the P.O.M stood for or we'd have never been let out of the house.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Dickinson

You went for rides with Henry Emmons, discussed books with Ben Newton, spent evenings with Vinnie and Joseph Lyman...

VINNIE

Joseph wanted to marry me.

EMILY

Those were some pleasant times.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

But they were never more than friends to you, were they?

EMILY

I learned from them.

VINNIE

But Father needed me around, and Joseph was afraid of Father.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

In fact, the closest you ever came to getting married was after your Mother and Father was dead, wasn't it?

EMILY

Judge Lord.
[Enter JUDGE LORD]

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Your Father's closest friend, the strictest man on the court bench, and twenty years older than you.

VINNIE

And married. You didn't mention married. [Exit Vinnie]

JUDGE LORD

Until my wife died, God rest her soul.

Dickinson

THE PLAYWRIGHT

You loved him.

EMILY

I confess that I loved him. I rejoice that I loved him. I thank the maker of heaven and earth that gave him to me so that I could love him.

JUDGE LORD

We were never improper.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

So why didn't you marry him, after his wife died? He wanted to marry you very much.

JUDGE LORD

Why Emily? Why didn't you marry me?

EMILY

Papa still has many closets that love has never ransacked. I did, did want him tenderly. [*She spins in a soft dance*] the air was soft as Italy, but when it touched me I spurned it with a sigh, because it was not him. It is strange that I miss him at night so much when I was never with him, but my love invokes him as soon as my eyes are shut, and I wake warm with the want that sleep had almost filled. I dreamed last week that he had died, and one had carved a statue of him and I was asked to unveil it. I said that what I had not done in life I would not do in death.

JUDGE LORD

I wanted her so badly.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

You refused him for all of those years.

EMILY

Dickinson

Don't you know that he was happiest while I withhold and not confer? Don't you know that "No" is the wildest word we consign to language? To lie so near his longing, to touch it as I pass. The gate is God's, and for his great sake, not mine, I did not let him cross. But I promised him that it's all his, and I will lift the bars and lay him in the moss when the time is right. It was anguish I long concealed from him to let him leave me, hungry, but he asked the divine crust and that would doom the bread.

JUDGE LORD

Yes, and I believed you. I went on believing you until my stroke and death. And the irony of the matter is that you were never a virgin. What you were withholding, you had already given away!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

The same divine crust that Sam Bowles asked?

EMILY

[Emily spins to face THE PLAYWRIGHT] Sam Bowles was just a friend. A friend of the entire family. He was nothing to me beyond that.

JUDGE LORD

Lies, Emily, all lies. Tell him the truth!

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Yes, that was mostly true, wasn't it. But not completely. "Title divine, is mine! The wife, without the sign!" do you remember, Emily. A draft of that letter to Sam wasn't destroyed with the rest. It still exists, and I've read it.

EMILY

[Sinking to the bed]

Title divine, is mine. The wife, without the sign. Acute degree, conferred on me, empress of cavalry. Royal, all but the crown. Betrothed, without the swoon.

JUDGE LORD

Dickinson

He never even considered marriage. He was happily married already, for heaven's sake. And a lady's man. Why, you weren't even an affair. A one night passing fling. Curiosity sex, a momentary gratification.

EMILY

"My Husband", women say, stroking the melody. Is *this* the way? Here's what I have to "tell you." You will tell no other? Honor, is its own pawn.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

And how did he respond?

EMILY

He was Sam Bowles. He was a friend...

JUDGE LORD

Scoundrel...

EMILY

Famous newspaper editor...

JUDGE LORD

Muckraker...

EMILY

Care free spirit.

JUDGE LORD

Ne'er-do-well. [*Exits*]

EMILY

Like trains of cars on tracks of plush I hear the level bee. A jar across the flowers goes. Their velvet masonry withstands, until the sweet assault, their chivalry consumes. While he, victorious tilts away, to vanquish other blooms.