

BEYOND TOLERANCE

A One-Act Comedy Play

by
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(The show begins with a very small pool of light illuminating P.T. as HE speaks from his stage right position. The rest of the stage is dark.)

P.T.: If you'll forgive me for using an introductory phrase that has historically been the opening of tales often ending with clichéd and naive triumphs of good over evil, two terms we now know to be entirely subjective and absolutely riddled with cultural bias, let me say this: Once upon a time, **(a pink light comes up behind a screen to reveal MR. and MRS. SENSIBLE, in silhouette, frozen, peering into a baby carriage; as their lines begin, the two begin their exaggerated movements.)** there was a little girl. Her parents doted on her, of course, as parents will, calling her such things as...

FATHER: Buttercup!

MOTHER: Little kumquat!

FATHER: Look at her toes! They're like peas in a pod!

MOTHER: Like tiny, tiny kernels of corn!

FATHER: Potato bug!

MOTHER: Tree frog!

FATHER: Zucchini stem!

MOTHER: Raisin seed!

P.T.: By the time the girl was barely eight months old, Mr. and Mrs. Sensible had used, at one time or another, every vegetable known to man to describe their little girl, not to mention half the animal kingdom.

FATHER: Butternut squash!

MOTHER: Two-toed sloth!

P.T.: Ah, yes...Mr. and Mrs. Sensible...good parents, in the ancient sense of the word, trying to raise their daughter with all the archaic tools of discipline, responsibility, and love. Fortunately for this little girl—whose given, non-vegetable name, by the way, was Gracious Mary—she eventually outgrew a fair measure of her cuteness, began to display a certain obnoxious side, **(a rubber toy flies out of the baby carriage and beans the FATHER in the head, the PARENTS look at one another with annoyance)** and so her mother and father found more satisfying pursuits, all under the auspices of better providing for Gracious Mary's needs.

FATHER: She's got to go to the very best schools.

MOTHER: And she can't go dressed in rags; she'd be ridiculed!

FATHER: Not my daughter.

MOTHER: Not a chance.

BOTH: We need more money!

FATHER: I'm off to the office.

MOTHER: I'll be home late.

FATHER: **(to MOTHER)** Bye!

MOTHER: **(to FATHER)** Bye!

BOTH: **(to carriage, blowing a kiss)** Bye.

P.T.: So, Gracious Mary was abandoned.

GRACIOUS: **(standing up, as if popping out of the carriage)** Hey! I thought I was your little kumquat! Your delicious rutabaga! What gives? Where did they go?

(The "screen scene" ends. During P.T.'s next speech, the screen disappears, the curtain opens fully, and the lights come up to show the interior of an abandoned poultry-processing plant. Broken and burnt chicken cages dominate the stage; in the background is a crudely painted burlap sign: "U. Burnem—Right Here for 200 Years." With the lights up, we see that P.T. is wearing a jolly commedia style mask. The U. Burnem students scuttle around the set like rats, moving quickly from one pile of boxes to another, trying to get a look at GRACIOUS. They are wearing grotesque commedia masks as well. Throughout the play, only two characters go without masks—GRACIOUS and the Seller.)

P.T.: Now, while this may seem like a pitiful situation, Gracious Mary's circumstances were actually ideal. Had her parents not found their daughter undesirable, then she and I might never have met. And believe me, as you shall see, Gracious Mary needed me. My name, incidentally, is P.T. Burnem, Dean of Burnem University, the finest educational institution in the world.

GRACIOUS: **(to P.T.)** Excuse me, but have you seen my parents?

P.T.: *(aside)* And so it began. *(to GRACIOUS)* Hello, my dear. What a pleasure it is to have you here at U. Burnem, the finest educational institution in the world.

GRACIOUS: Where? Have you seen my parents?

P.T.: Gracious, I think you'll soon not be worrying in the least about your parents. Think of me as your family.

GRACIOUS: But...

P.T.: *(sitting on a pile of boxes as if it were a chair in his office)* Now, before we begin, have you any questions at this point?

GRACIOUS: Uh, well, I do have one.

P.T.: Speak, inquisitive one! Curiosity is the key to education.

STUDENT: Not to mention what it did to the cat.

(A cat yowls loudly, followed by two gunshots.)

GRACIOUS: Well, I saw your sign when I came in, and it says that Burnem University was established right here over 200 years ago.

P.T.: Yes, indeed...we have a long and distinguished history.

GRACIOUS: But I remember as a child when my family and I used to pass by this building. We all held our noses because of the horrible stench. Wasn't this a poultry processing plant just a few years ago?

P.T.: It was, Gracious Mary. The plucking machine ran twenty-six hours a day right where you're sitting.

GRACIOUS: But...

P.T.: Yes, my dear?

GRACIOUS: Then isn't your sign lying?

(P.T. and all of the students laugh loudly. GRACIOUS is startled, realizing for the first time that SHE and P.T. are not alone.)

P.T.: Oh-ho, Gracious, you have definitely come to the right institution. Don't be insulted, but your education is certainly lacking if you presume to be able to distinguish between lies and truth where history is involved.

GRACIOUS: Excuse me?

P.T.: You see, historical truth is a matter of agenda, not fact. And since Burnem U's agenda is of the highest renown, we are in a position to establish truth regardless of the paltry processes of poultry packing plants or whatever else may have actually been on this spot at one time. The *fact* is, we just moved in 3 months ago. There are still feathers in the file drawers. The *truth* is, we've been here for 200 years. Understand?

GRACIOUS: Not really, sir.

P.T.: Oh, but you will! That's the magic and the promise of education. *(aside)* You see what a terrible state she was in? But don't despair; just watch! *(to GRACIOUS)* Now, Gracious, it's customary here at Burnem U. that every student be given an evaluatory examination, just to see where you are, so to speak.

GRACIOUS: An exam?

P.T.: Nothing to worry about, of course.

GRACIOUS: Should I study?

P.T.: Oh, no...no study required. Just answer honestly; it's entirely non-threatening.

GRACIOUS: Well, when are we going to do this?

P.T.: Oh, how about...now?

(P.T. lifts GRACIOUS onto a pile of boxes center stage. The lights go out. Three examiners from the back and sides of the auditorium shine flashlights at GRACIOUS.)

EXAMINER 1: What is your name?

GRACIOUS: Gracious Mary Sensible.

EXAMINER 2: What kind of a name is that?

GRACIOUS: I...my parents gave it to me.

EXAMINER 3: Are you claiming you had nothing to do with your own name?

GRACIOUS: I couldn't talk at the time.

EXAMINER 2: Yet you hated it.

GRACIOUS: I wouldn't say that.

EXAMINER 1: Why didn't you change it if you hated it?

EXAMINER 2: Did your father coerce you into keeping it that way?

EXAMINER 3: Are you a victim of name abuse?

GRACIOUS: No! No. I like my name.

EXAMINER 2: So you claim. Let's start again. Try to cooperate this time.

GRACIOUS: I thought I was cooperating.

EXAMINER 1: I'm going to give you a word. Tell me the first thing that comes to mind after I say it. Black.

GRACIOUS: White.
EXAMINER 2: Black.
GRACIOUS: White.
EXAMINER 3: Black.
GRACIOUS: White!
EXAMINER: Why are you fixated on whiteness?
GRACIOUS: Why are you fixated on blackness?
EXAMINER 3: Don't get hostile.
GRACIOUS: I'm not trying to be.
EXAMINER 1: Back to word association. Black.
GRACIOUS: Whi...I mean, blue.
EXAMINERS ALL: Aha!
GRACIOUS: Aha, what? What?
EXAMINER 3: We'll ask the questions around here.
EXAMINER 2: What do the colors black and blue suggest to you?
GRACIOUS: Um, bruises, I guess.
EXAMINER 1: We know this may be difficult for you, Gracious Mary, but tell us this. When your father abused you, did he leave bruises?
GRACIOUS: No!
EXAMINER 3: No, he didn't leave bruises or no, no one could see them?
GRACIOUS: No, he didn't leave bruises because my father never abused me. He was a wonderful man. Is a wonderful man.
EXAMINERS ALL: Oh, Gracious.
EXAMINER 2: You do realize that, just a moment ago, you did admit he abused you?
GRACIOUS: I did? I didn't say that.
EXAMINER 3: You didn't have to. We understand.
GRACIOUS: What do you understand?
EXAMINER 2: We'll ask the questions here.
EXAMINER 1: Do you actually feel as if you know your own mind better than we do?
GRACIOUS: Of course.
EXAMINERS ALL: Oh, Gracious!
GRACIOUS: What? It's my mind.
EXAMINER: Let's try another tack. Gracious, I'm going to say a word. You reply with the first thing that does *not* come to your mind.
GRACIOUS: If it doesn't come to me, how can I say it?
EXAMINER 3: We'll ask the questions here!
EXAMINER 2: Can't you cooperate?
GRACIOUS: I'm trying.
EXAMINER 1: Don't try. Just do. Now, the first word that does *not* occur to you when I say...black.

(GRACIOUS pauses for a long time)

EXAMINER 3: She's not cooperating.
GRACIOUS: I'm trying! I don't know how to answer.
EXAMINER 1: Let's take a step back. Gracious, when I said "black," did the words "male dominating ego-ethnocentricity" *not* occur to you?
GRACIOUS: No. I mean yes. I mean, I've never thought those words in my entire life!
EXAMINERS ALL: Mm-hmm!
P.T.: ***(speaking to the audience while the EXAMINERS silently continue the test)*** So, after extensive but entirely non-threatening screening, my Burnem U. analysts were able to produce an indisputable profile of Gracious Mary Sensible.
EXAMINER 3: ***(handing folder to P.T.)*** Here's the report on Sensible. Good luck, P.T.; she's a tough one. Very uncooperative.

(Exits along with other EXAMINERS, leaving GRACIOUS stumbling about, exhausted and confused)

P.T.: The report, while alarming, had its positive points. In particular, I was encouraged to learn of Gracious Mary's high marks in the area of nonsophistication and naiveté. Though obviously tainted by her parents attempts to provide her with stifling moral boundaries ***(nonchalantly reaches over to grab GRACIOUS by the hair so SHE doesn't stumble off the front of the stage)***, Gracious' profile indicated that she was eminently teachable—the proverbial blank slate

upon which I could scribble. **(to GRACIOUS)** Now, by way of further introduction to our institution, I want you to meet one of my most distinguished pupils—Andrew G. Thapplemporp.

(ANDY enters—a small, vicious-looking character)

GRACIOUS: **(extending her hand)** How do you do, Andrew?

ANDY: That's offensive.

P.T.: Why, Andy?

ANDY: Nomenclature harassment. I never gave her permission, neither implicit nor explicit, to call me by my first name.

GRACIOUS: I'm sorry, Mr. Thapplemporp.

ANDY: I don't have to take this. I do not have to take this.

P.T.: Take what, Andy?

ANDY: Further harassment. What are you, stalking me?

GRACIOUS: What did I do?

P.T.: Andy?

ANDY: Harassment by assumption. First you called me Andy; then, when I objected to that, you turned right around and called me Mr. Thapplemporp.

GRACIOUS: But I just thought...

ANDY: Did it ever occur to you that I didn't want you to call me anything? Did it? You must be one of those name sickos.

GRACIOUS: I didn't mean to offend. I'm sorry.

ANDY: Oh, "I'm sorry," is it? Like that's supposed to make up for everything. And don't think I've forgotten about the hand issue.

GRACIOUS: Hand issue?

ANDY: You held out your hand to me earlier. Did I ask you to do that?

GRACIOUS: Well, I guess it's just traditional to...

ANDY: Tradition?

STUDENTS: **(a la Fiddler)** Tradition, tradition! **(raspberry)**

ANDY: Tradition? Tradition? So just because it's a time-honored form of harassment in your culture to shove your hand into my personal space, you figure it's okay, is that it? Is it? Just because everybody else has done it for years, do you think that gives you permission to violate my rights now? Just because it's customary, does that...

P.T.: All right, Andy. Good demonstration.

ANDY: Does that give you any right to take your hand and...

P.T.: **(slapping ANDY's hand)** Enough, Andy. Down, boy! **(ANDY growls at P.T.)** Don't you growl at me. **(to GRACIOUS)** He gets a bit carried away. **(to ANDY)** Sit, now. Good boy. So, what do you think, Gracious?

GRACIOUS: About him? I...I think he's horrible.

(ANDY growls again, moves as if to attack GRACIOUS. P.T. clotheslines him and ANDY drops to the floor, out cold.)

P.T.: Horrible? Horrible, Gracious? Oh, no. Andy has learned, perhaps better than any other of my students, to apply one of Burnem U's number one tenets.

GRACIOUS: What's that?

P.T. and STUDENTS: **(trumpet flourish)** "Everything is offensive."

P.T.: You see, Gracious, we are constantly assaulted in dozens of ways that we're not ever aware of.

GRACIOUS: But if we're not aware of the assault, why should we care?

P.T.: Excellent question, Gracious, and the answer is crucial to understanding the mission of U. Burnem. **(ANDY begins to wake up)** One of the great aims of education, Gracious, is to heighten our awareness of the things that *should* bother us. Stand still now, and don't say a word. Andy...

GRACIOUS: No, don't sic him on me again.

P.T.: He'll be all right. Just stay completely still.

ANDY: **(circling GRACIOUS for a moment)** I'm offended.

P.T.: Why?

ANDY: Fashion harassment. I should not have to look at this color combination.

P.T.: Good boy. What else?

ANDY: I'm offended.

P.T.: Why now?

ANDY: Spatial displacement. I once stood precisely where she is, and I remember feeling a distinct sense of ownership.

GRACIOUS: Well, what if I said that I find you offensive?

ANDY: You don't know what you're talking about.

P.T.: Gracious, your spirit is admirable, but I think you ought to wait...

(ANDY starts to snarl at GRACIOUS.)

GRACIOUS: He's doing it again.

P.T.: **(taking a treat out of his pocket)** This usually works. Andy. Andy, here boy. Come and get it.

ANDY: **(to GRACIOUS)** Bring it on, little girl. You think you're good? Come on. Try and label me. I dance, I shuffle, you can't touch me.

GRACIOUS: I'm offended!

ANDY: Why?

GRACIOUS: Oxygen abuse. You're breathing my air and you didn't ask permission.

ANDY: That's ridiculous. P.T., tell her. That's stupid.

P.T.: Well...

ANDY: It is! It's stupid!

GRACIOUS: I'm offended!

ANDY: Get away from me!

GRACIOUS: Offense abuse. I never told you you could come here and tell me what offended you about me. I never gave consent.

P.T.: Bravo, Gracious. Well done.

ANDY: It is not well done! She's not playing fair.

P.T.: **(aside)** Right away I saw I had a prodigy on my hands.

(HE turns back to see that ANDY has latched on with his teeth to GRACIOUS' sleeve)

GRACIOUS: He's biting me!

P.T.: Down, Andy! Down! Let go. Release, Andy. Release. Give me some help, here! **(Several others come in and pry ANDY's jaws from GRACIOUS' sleeve. They drag ANDY away, snarling and barking.)** Take him outside. Pull yourself together, Andy!

GRACIOUS: That was one of your best students?

P.T.: He's persistent; one must give him that, Gracious.

GRACIOUS: I know what I'd like to give him.

CHASER 1: **(rushing in breathlessly)** P.T., we saw him! He's in the building!

P.T.: Right now?

CHASER 1: Yes! He was down in the basement, trying to make a sale.

GRACIOUS: What's going on?

P.T.: **(aside)** About this time, we ran into a minor disturbance. **(to GRACIOUS)** My dear, I have a bit of business to attend to. Why don't you go down the hall to Room 7?

CHASER 1: P.T., he might be getting away!

P.T.: One thing at a time! Gracious, you run along now.

GRACIOUS: Well, okay. 'Bye.

P.T.: **(sweetly)** 'Bye! **(harshly, after SHE's gone)** Who saw the little rat?

CHASER 2: I did! I saw him down in the basement with three students. They were reading.

P.T.: Sick! In our own building! Has anyone seen him lately?

CHASER 3: I did! He ran by me in the hall upstairs!

CHASER 4: And I think I saw him in the cafeteria!

CHASER 5: I'm sure he was in the bathroom!

P.T.: When? How long ago?

CHASER 6: **(pointing to the back of the auditorium)** Look! Look, there he is! Let's get him!

(All but P.T. start to rush offstage.)

P.T.: No! Don't rush him; go quietly.

(The others duck down, trying to sneak up on their quarry. In the back of the auditorium, a small man with a briefcase is talking to an audience member, whispering. This is the SELLER.)

SELLER: **(to audience member)** Excuse me. I wonder if you might be interested in something that is guaranteed to give you a renewed sense of well-being. If I could just... **(HE begins to open his briefcase when HE notices that HE is about to be captured)** Uh-oh. Sorry, got to run.

CHASER 2: Flick on the lights! There he goes!

(The house lights come up as the CHASERS go after the SELLER, yelling and bumping into one another as they chase him around the auditorium and up on the stage.)

P.T.: Don't let him get away! There he is! Get after him! Faster, faster! (*aside*) I apologize for the disturbance, folks, but I think you'll see in a little while why it was so important for us to pursue this particular individual. (*back to the CHASERS, who seem to have cornered the SELLER*) Now, jump him! Jump him!

ALL CHASERS: (*in a pile on the stage, ad-libbing*) We got him! Don't let him get away! Pile on, pile on!

P.T.: Where is he? Where is he?

CHASER 3: We got him, P.T. He's at the bottom of the pile.

P.T.: Well done! Up, up, everyone! Get up! Let me see the rascal. (*When the pile has been dismantled, the only thing under it is the SELLER's crushed hat. P.T. picks it up, disgusted.*) "He's at the bottom of the pile, P.T." "We've got him, P.T."

CHASER 1: I thought we had him.

P.T.: You thought so.

CHASER 6: Yes, we did. Didn't we? (*all nod*)

P.T.: And you worked so hard to catch him.

CHASER 5: Very hard.

P.T.: Well, guess what?

ALL: What, P.T.?

P.T.: (*hitting them on the head with the hat*) YOU MISSED! Now, get out of here and find him.

ALL: (*ad-lib*) Yes, P.T. We're on it. Don't you worry. We'll get him.

(*They exit.*)

P.T.: (*to audience*) This was a low point for me. Not only did we not apprehend that most insidious threat to the well-being of our school, but another disconcerting report was about to follow. (*HE turns to MS. MUSSENTOUCH and GRACIOUS, who have just entered*) Ah, Ms. Mussentouch. What do you think of our star pupil?

MS. MUSSENTOUCH: Star? Hmph. She has been terribly disruptive.

P.T.: Really? How so?

GRACIOUS: I only...

MS. MUSSENTOUCH: She stood up during the middle of the class and proclaimed that she felt... (*softly, as if speaking profanity*) that people should be held responsible for their own actions.

P.T.: What? I don't believe it.

MS. MUSSENTOUCH: Believe it, P.T. I practically had to quell a riot in there.

P.T.: Gracious, is this true?

GRACIOUS: I don't understand what the big deal is.

P.T.: Did you or did you not utter the words Ms. Mussentouch says you did?

MS. MUSSENTOUCH: She'll probably try and deny it.

GRACIOUS: I will not deny it. I said it and I believe it.

P.T.: (*taking MS. MUSSENTOUCH aside*) I'm very sorry, Mabel. Please try to remember Gracious' background, if you would.

MS. MUSSENTOUCH: What, is she ethnic? The daughter of alcoholics? Born left-handed and forced to go right? I saw none of that in her Victimization Profile. Of course, she is a girl...she has that going for her. But what other excuse could she possibly have?

P.T.: Her parenting, Mabel. (*confidential*) I don't want this spread around, but they brought her to church every Sunday.

MS. MUSSENTOUCH: No!

P.T.: I'm afraid so.

MS. MUSSENTOUCH: (*hugging GRACIOUS*) Oh, you poor, dear child. I'm so very sorry. Gracious, I want to tell you that we've all been through hardships; the road to recovery is long, but we're with you. Come back to class just as soon as you can. (*SHE exits*)

GRACIOUS: What did you tell her?

P.T.: Oh, just a little background. Now, run along to class. (*GRACIOUS exits. P.T. speaks in an aside*) Unfortunately, despite my high hopes for Gracious Mary, the incident with Ms. Mussentouch was only the beginning. Over the ensuing days, it seemed that all I heard was report after dismal report about her progress.

TEACHER 1: P.T., this prodigy of yours just disrupted my entire class with her vulgarity. Bare in mind I'm quoting here, but she used the words "God-given talent."

TEACHER 2: How am I to conduct a class with Gracious Mary piping up with things like, "Just because it's traditional, does that make it wrong?" She is impossible.

DISTRAUGHT STUDENT: Gracious Mary told me that I ought to learn to think for myself. I don't have to, do I? Do I? Somebody answer me! (*begins wailing*)

TEACHER 3: P.T., about this Gracious Mary...

TEACHER 4: P.T., this Sensible girl...

TEACHER 5: You wouldn't believe what she just did!

(Everyone shouts at once for P.T.'s attention. P.T. steps away from them and addresses the audience.)

P.T.: And as if that weren't enough, the Seller was making his shadowy, elusive, dangerous presence known more and more often.

CHASER 1: I saw him! I saw him! I almost had him, too.

CHASER 2: Me, too!

CHASER 3: And me!

CHASER 4: I had a hold of his coat!

CHASER 5: I grabbed his briefcase!

CHASER 6: I swear I touched his foot!

CHASER 1: I had his arm!

CHASER 2: Me, too!

CHASER 3: And me!

CHASER 4: I had his pant leg right in these fingers!

CHASER 5: He was right there, right in front of me. I reached out and...

P.T.: Did you catch him?

ALL CHASERS: Hmm?

P.T.: Did you catch him?

ALL: Noooo.

CHASER 6: But I brushed his knee with my hand.

CHASER 1: I almost had him!

CHASER 2: Me, too.

(They continue in this vain as the others start in again with complaints about GRACIOUS MARY. Finally, P.T. raises his arms in a commanding gesture. Everyone cowers, silent.)

P.T.: I will have a talk with Gracious Mary Sensible. I believe that she eventually will become an asset to this institution.

TEACHER 2: But...

P.T.: And I would thank you to trust me and have patience. Go find her and send her to me. As for the Seller, he is winning at his sneaking game. You ***(to the CHASERS)*** are losing...badly. You must change tactics. Walking around with your mouths open and your knuckles dragging until you happen to bump into him is not working. You must begin to think like him. Think sneaky. Think dangerous. Think subversive. Go where he would go. Explore the dark places. And when you see him, wait. Go quietly, slowly, like a snake. And when you can't possibly miss...GRAB HIM! Now go! All of you!

(All exit as GRACIOUS MARY enters.)

GRACIOUS: They said you wanted to see me, P.T.?

P.T.: Yes. This way, Gracious. Walk with me.

GRACIOUS: Who's the Seller?

P.T.: Where did you hear of him?

GRACIOUS: Someone just went by me hitting himself on the head and muttering, "Think like the Seller. Think like the Seller."

P.T.: The Seller, Gracious, is a dark and awful little man whom you must avoid at all costs. Somehow he has infiltrated Burnem U., but it is only a matter of time before we catch him.

GRACIOUS: What does he sell?

P.T.: Drugs. Specifically, opium.

GRACIOUS: That's terrible.

P.T.: Yes, it is. But there's no need to be alarmed about that. As I said, he will shortly be apprehended. I am, at this point, much more concerned about you, Gracious Mary Sensible.

GRACIOUS: I'm all right.

P.T.: Are you? How do you like it here at U. Burnem?

GRACIOUS: Well, there is one thing.

P.T.: Yes, my prodigy?

GRACIOUS: When I was very young, I saw my parents as the absolute authority. I believed what they said. Now, though, in order to learn, I have to be ready to throw away their influence.

P.T.: You're making me prouder by the moment, Gracious Mary.

GRACIOUS: I am like a child again here at U. Burnem, ready to learn what you have to teach.

P.T.: Just the attitude you need! Wonderful.

GRACIOUS: But, if I'm going to keep furthering my education, won't I eventually need to throw out what I learn here, too?

P.T.: Get over here. Sit down.
GRACIOUS: But I thought...

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