

The Benevolent Women's
Craft Society

a comedy by

Mark Steven Jensen

Winner of the Mountain Playhouse's
2003 Grindstone Award
for New Comedy

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First Reading

THE BENEVOLENT WOMEN'S CRAFT SOCIETY was given a public reading at the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis on Oct. 7, 1999. The performers in the reading were:

Lorraine	Victoria Upton
Lillian	Randy Latimer
Emily	Andrea Wollenberg
Jason	Jason Collins
Fiona	Gigi Jensen

Stage directions were read by Matthew Everett.

Second Reading

THE BENEVOLENT WOMEN'S CRAFT SOCIETY was given a second public reading on Nov. 13, 2000. The performance was part of the Monday Night Reading Series at the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis. The performers in the reading were:

Lorraine	Barbara Kingsley*
Lillian	Barbara June Patterson*
Emily	Meg Higgins
Jason	Alex Podulke
Fiona	Kate Eifrig
Offstage voices/ Stage directions	Bick Smith

The reading was directed by Amy Rydberg.

The reading was cast and moderated by Megan Monaghan.

* Member of Actor's Equity Association

Third Reading

On April 16th, 2001, THE BENEVOLENT WOMEN'S CRAFT SOCIETY was performed as part of 2001 HotHouse Festival. Produced by the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis, the festival is an opportunity for playwrights to work with professional directors and actors.

Loraine	Barbara Kingsley*
Lillian	Barbara June Patterson*
Emily	Heather Stone
Jason	Robert-Bruce Brake
Fiona	Ruth Williams
Gene/Stage Directions	Mic Weinblatt

The reading was directed by Erica Christ. Megan Monaghan was the curator of the Hothouse Festival.

First Production

Green Bay Community Theatre first produced THE BENEVOLENT WOMEN'S CRAFT SOCIETY on July 8-19, 2003. The play was part of their Off-Broadway Theatre Festival, a festival of new works. The production had the following cast:

Loraine	Mary Reynolds
Lillian	Kathy Keeney
Emily	Ashley Lorenz
Jason	Jim Lautenbach
Fiona	Kate Riordan

* Member of Actor's Equity Association

CAST OF CHARACTERS

LORAIN--A woman in her mid fifties. She is the leader of the Benevolent Women's Craft Society.

JASON--A Gender Studies professor from the University of Northern California. Somewhere in his thirties.

LILLIAN--A long time member of the craft club. LILLIAN is a widow in her seventies.

EMILY--In her early twenties, EMILY is very pregnant. She is married to a pastor.

FIONA--A single woman in her early thirties. She is into her version of New Age culture.

TIME AND PLACE

In and around Arton, Minnesota, population 592. It is the mid to late 1990s.

NOTE ON DIALECT

Some of these characters speak with a Midwestern Scandinavian accent. This accent is common in rural Minnesota.

ACT ONE

SETTING: White clouds float above the skyline of this rural town--a water tower with the word "ARTON" painted on it, a silver grain elevator, church steeples.

Most of the stage is taken up by a basement interior. This basement is a large craft workshop. A table and some plastic folding chairs take up much of the room. Cardboard and plastic storage boxes are filled with fabric scraps, thread, felt, glue, plastic eyes, and so on. Items made over years past on display throughout. Stairs go up into an unseen main floor.

Mounted on the house's exterior wall is a creatively painted sign which says, THE BENEVOLENT WOMEN'S CRAFT SOCIETY. Surrounding this house is a fenced backyard. It is spring, so the dead yellows and browns are being replaced by the warming green.

Another sign has been stuck into the ground. It says, "SIGN UP TODAY, 9-NOON."

AT RISE: The noon whistle blows.

(LORAINÉ, JASON in midconversation.)

JASON

The noon whistle. It would seem like I am it.

LORAINÉ

(Light Scandinavian accent.)

For Pete's sake, somebody will be here soon enough. I'd offer you coffee, but I'm not going to.

(LORAINÉ nervously pours herself a cup from her coffee machine.)

Ooff, this is hot!

JASON

The ad said everyone is welcome.

(LORAINÉ ignores him.)

Crochet, cross stitch, quilting, I'm not half bad. You should see the original patterns I have made. My mother still uses the log cabin runner I sewed when I was twelve.

LORAINÉ

Yeah, that's nice. Last time I put an ad in the paper.

JASON

I am probably the most harmless man you'll ever meet!

(LILLIAN hobbles into the yard. She uses
a cane.)

LORAINÉ

It makes no difference anyway, with only two of us we'll never have enough crafts ready for Pioneer Days. Guess we're done. Been getting to be a few less ladies every year now. They're either working or dead.

JASON

Isn't there some way that I could help out?

(LILLIAN bursts inside.)

LILLIAN

(Thick Scandinavian accent)

Ooff-da-my-da, did I get late! Stepped on a rusty nail while I was planting my cucumbers, oh coffee t'anks--

LORAINÉ

Careful--

LILLIAN

--which earned me a tetanus shot in t'e arm t'at... Oo-la-la, t'is is hot!

LORAINÉ

Here's cream--

(LORAINÉ grabs LILLIAN shoulder.)

LILLIAN

Ow! T'e shot was t'ere!

LORAINÉ

Sorry, Lillian, sit down--

(LORAINÉ pulls out a chair which hits
LILLIAN's sore foot. LILLIAN screams, jerking
her arms in agony. The hot coffee lands on
JASON. JASON screams, clutching his shirt.)

LORAINÉ

Goodness sakes! Take some napkins to wipe yourselves off. Lillian, please sit in that chair, I'm so, so sorry. You sit down too. Can I get you two anything? Coffee?

JASON and LILLIAN

No!

LILLIAN(CONT.)

(Pause. Notices JASON.)

Lorraine. T'ere's a man in here.

LORAINÉ

I've got cold pop.

LILLIAN

Are ya t'e UPS (pronounced "ups") man?

JASON

Jason Breck, hello. I'm joining your craft society.

LILLIAN

Huh?

LORAINÉ

Yeah, funny ain't it? He wants to join.

LILLIAN

T'is is a woman's club! Get your carcass outta here!

JASON

I like to quilt.

LILLIAN

Quilt? I've never heard of a man quilting before. What are you, gay or somet'ing?

JASON

Why yes, I am.

(LILLIAN grabs the pot of coffee, brandishing it like a weapon.)

LORAINÉ

Lillian, for Pete's sake!

LILLIAN

You were just havin' a little fun wit' me, weren't ya?

JASON

No I wasn't. I really do like to quilt.

LILLIAN

Well, ya, ya can't hang around here!

JASON

Arton Pioneer Days is only three months away. To make enough crafts to buy this group home a mini-van, you ladies need me.

LORAIN

It's just the three of us that's come so far.

LILLIAN

T'e home needs a new van, huh?

LORAIN

Yeah, Bernie, y'know, Dolores Johnson's boy, watched some show on TV and learned how to put sugar in a gas tank. So much for the Volkswagen.

LILLIAN

T'at sounds like Bernie. Forty year old nutcase with enough brains ta be a rascal.

LORAIN

They've got a mini-van picked out at Palmer Ford, but we need to raise two thousand.

JASON

(Whistles.)

A lot of knitting, ladies.

(EMILY, very pregnant, waddles into the yard.)

LORAIN

What do you think, Lillian? It will be hard to make enough crafts with just three of us. Lillian?

LILLIAN

Eye-yi-yi.

EMILY

(Enters without knocking.)

I'm late, blame my husband.

LORAIN

Emily!

LILLIAN
(Disgustedly mutters.)

Of course she hadta come.

LORAINÉ
I thought you said in church you would be here.

EMILY
I was just double-checking Tom's backpack to make he sure had clean socks along. Hello Lilly!

LILLIAN
Yeah.

EMILY
(To JASON.)
Oh hello... Are you the UPS (pronounced "ups") man?

LILLIAN
T're's t'ree of us now. Trot your hooves out t'e door.

JASON
With me, there would be four.

EMILY
He wants to join?

JASON
Jason Breck, Professor Jason Breck.

EMILY
Missus Pastor Tom Seaverson! Nice to meet you!

LORAINÉ
There's enough ladies here. Thanks for coming.

LILLIAN
As t'ey say in China, chow.

EMILY
Lilly, he just wants to be one of the Lord's helpers. That's wonderful, but this place really isn't for men. Tell you what, my husband is the pastor at Prairie Creek Lutheran. He's leaving on a canoe trip with the youth group today, but, if you give me your number, I'll have him call you when he gets back. He is always looking for volunteers. For one thing, the steeple for sure needs to be painted this summer.

JASON

I don't like to paint. I like to quilt.

LILLIAN

T'at ain't all you like t'at's odd.

EMILY

Why, what else does he like?

JASON

It's not important.

LILLIAN

Men. He said he likes men.

JASON

Which is way the normal male, female chemistry does not apply to me. So you women have nothing to be concerned about!

(They stare at him.)

I am not a hoodlum. I am a professor. A professor of Gender Studies from the University of Northern California. It's in San Francisco. I'm sure some of you have been there, yes? Fisherman's Wharf, Golden Gate Bridge, Harvey Milk?

(Laughs. They stare.)

I am here, in Arton, on sabbatical.

(They stare.)

Why am I here in Arton? Well, thank you all so very much for asking. I am here to explore the social, cultural, and sexual dynamics of modern women in the rural Midwest. No one is studying modern rural women and their impact on American culture. This research is for a new course that I'm developing. And I have selected your craft group to be a case study!

(They stare.)

As you can see, I am quite desperate. I promised my department chair a great deal, and if I do not return dragging a mountain of research behind me, my next job will be driving trolley cars! There hasn't been women's organization that will let me interview them or listen in on a meeting or anything! So when I saw, in your quaint local paper, that this Craft Society needed help, I thought I could join and put my hobby to good ol' hometown use! When do we start?

(They stare at him.)

There is a big world out there ladies... Farewell.

(JASON exits.)

LILLIAN

Hasta lumbago, ya kook!

EMILY

And Pastor Tom thinks he'll have adventures canoeing with the Luther League.

LORAINÉ

It's too bad the way he left though.

EMILY

I'll have Tom give him a visit. That man was crying out for a devotion pamphlet.

LILLIAN

Ah, just some lunatic. If he comes back, lock t'e door quick and call t'e sheriff.
(Looks at EMILY.)

Looks like you're ready to blow.

EMILY

But I'm not, I still have two months left.

LORAINÉ

Everything's all right, ain't it?

EMILY

Doctor says I'm fine. It's just how I carry.

LILLIAN

Ooff-da. I'm glad I'm too old to go t'rough t'at business again. T'ree times was t'irty times too many.

LORAINÉ

Don't spook her, it's her first.

EMILY

She can't. God has given me such a gift!

LORAINÉ

I don't see him, he must be gone. So, what are you ladies making this year? I plan on doing my usual wall hangings. I've already started a few.

LILLIAN

Lawn ornaments. I've bought t'e lumber, got my patterns, and put a new blade on t'e table saw. All I need is paint.

LORAINÉ

Exterior latex, the small size?

LILLIAN

T'at'll due.

(Enter FIONA.)

EMILY

Add lace to that order. I'm making pillows.

LORAINÉ

Perfect. We'll have good variety in our booth.

(FIONA knocks.)

LILLIAN

Cripes almighty, look who showed up now.

LORAINÉ

You don't need to knock, Fiona, come in.

FIONA

It's past noon, I know, but it's quite a drive from Elbow Lake. Emily, I didn't know you were having a baby!

EMILY

Yeah, jeepers, I haven't seen you since last summer.

LORAINÉ

You've got time for crafts with your new job?

FIONA

These lawyers are so flexible. They'll let me make up the hours on Saturdays. Besides, my horoscope said that I should follow a creative pursuit this summer. The stars encouraged me to join you all again! Is that neat-o or what?!

LORAINÉ

Yeah, that's nice. How's your mother?

FIONA

Recovering. Already out in the garden.

LILLIAN

T'at's the way to do it.

LORAINÉ

Yup, sure is.

EMILY

Yes.

(Awkward silence.)

EMILY

Busy hands make the Lord smile.

(They all laugh nervously and nod. Awkward silence.)

FIONA

I should place my order and get back to the firm.

LORAINA

Yeah okay, there. So what do you want to make this year?

FIONA

Well, I've given it careful, careful thought, and I've decided to honor my Native American heritage.

LORAINA

You're part Indian? I didn't know that.

FIONA

Through marriage. My great-great grandfather's second wife was Indian.

EMILY

Oh?

FIONA

Yes. Chippewa!

(Awkward silence.)

LORAINA

So, what is it then, sweetie, that you want to make?

FIONA

Earth jewelry. Is there any place, Loraine, where we could order pinto beans, wheat, sunflower seeds, that sort of thing?

LORAINA

I know where we can order those. A nice craft Fiona.

FIONA

The Great Spirit helped me select it!

LORAINA

Oh, yeah? Well, I'm glad he did that for ya then.

(Above, wheels grind over a hardwood floor. At the top of the stairs, part of a wheelchair appears. A man sits on the chair, but only his legs are seen.)

GENE'S VOICE

Ya gonna make us dinner or what?

LORAINÉ

Almost done, Gene, almost done.

(There is a snort, and the wheelchair disappears.)

LORAINÉ

Dues are forty-five dollars and I'll send out your orders this afternoon. Everything should be here next week.

FIONA

(Gives LORAINÉ money.)

See you next Tuesday.

LORAINÉ

Glad that you can join us this year, Fiona.

FIONA

May your wigwam stay happy.

(FIONA exits.)

LILLIAN

Why she lives with her mother.

EMILY

She's sweet, though.

LILLIAN

Here's my money.

EMILY

I'll have to write a check, but don't cash it until Friday, okay?

LORAINÉ

That's fine. Thank you both for coming.

(LILLIAN and EMILY walk out into the yard.
LORAINÉ follows them. The exterior wall closes
behind them.)

LORAINÉ(CONT.)

Looks like summer is finally here.

LILLIAN

Already not much left of May.