

**WELDINGS**

a play in two acts  
by

Mark Steven Jensen

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## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

GRETCHEN JOHNSON-- A housewife and gardener, late sixties, now dead. The former wife of ERNEST JOHNSON.

ERNEST JOHNSON-- A blacksmith and part-time farmer, early seventies. Former husband of GRETCHEN JOHNSON.

JENNA JOHNSON-- A paralegal at a small law firm, late thirties, early forties, the daughter of ERNEST and GRETCHEN JOHNSON.

RANDY STEVENSON-- A farmer who lives close to Arton. Late thirties, early forties, the father of KIM STEVENSON.

MABEL ZIMMERMAN-- A retired farm wife, still living on the farm, late sixties, wife of CLARENCE ZIMMERMAN.

CLARENCE ZIMMERMAN-- A retired farmer, still living on the farm, late sixties early seventies, husband of MABEL ZIMMERMAN.

TOM ZIMMERMAN-- MABEL and CLARENCE's grandson from Maple Grove, ten to twelve years old.

ETHEL WHITE-- A spinster who lives in the new apartments by the football field, late sixties, early seventies.

KIM STEVENSON-- The son of RANDY STEVENSON, working on the Stevenson farm, sixteen to seventeen years old.

OWEN HAGERSTROM-- A hired hand on the Stevenson farm, former auto mechanic, late twenties to early thirties.

## **TIME and PLACE**

Arton, Minnesota, population five hundred and twenty-three. The town is located about thirty-five miles south of Fergus Falls on highway fifty-five. The duration of the play runs from nine twenty five to eleven forty-five a.m. on a Saturday in the early summer of 1992.

## **NOTE ON DIALECT**

These characters speak with a Midwestern Scandinavian accent. This accent is common in northern and central Minnesota, particularly in the region between Brainerd and Fargo. The dialogue will seem direct and rounded in tone; accents come heavy on the ends of sentences.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the following people who used their fine talents to help fashion this play: Dr. Jerry L. Crawford and Davey Marlin-Jones, whose encouragement, direction, and criticism made this three page experiment into a full evening. Dr. Jeffrey Koep, his common sense and artistic direction guided this play through its first full length production. Joe Aldridge, whose excellent light and set design visualized the play. Dr. Bob Dryden and the theatre department of Brainerd Community College, where the full length script was first staged. The playwriting colony of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who evaluated the initial readings. Very special thanks to Red Shuttleworth, who pushed me and my writing on track. And finally thanks to my wife Jill, who continues to support my work in ways too numerous to mention.

## FIRST PERFORMANCES

WELDINGS was originally written as a one act. This version was staged as a part of WEST!, an evening of short plays, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in May 1991. The production had the following cast:

ERNEST--Bob Maybury

GRETCHEN--Tasha James

JENNA--Danielle King

RANDY--Charles Paddock

The play was directed by Davey Marlin-Jones.

The full length WELDINGS was first staged September 15-19, 1992 at Brainerd Community College in Brainerd, Minnesota. The cast was:

ERNEST--Ed Yunker

GRETCHEN--Gladys Hansen

JENNA--JoAnn Yunker

RANDY--Matt Cooper

CLARENCE--Roger Vaughan

MABEL--Kathy Kirk-Malters

ETHEL--Tammy Haberie

TOM--Dave T. Wilcox

OWEN--John Vinje

KIM--Douglas Pulak

The play was produced by Dennis Lamberson. The set and light design was created by Joe Aldridge and the play was directed by Jeffrey Koep.

WELDINGS was later produced by the Prairie Wind Players of Barrett, Minnesota in April 27-30, 1995. The production has this cast:

ERNEST--Claremont Anderson

GRETCHEN--Grace Coll

JENNA--Betsy Ostenson

RANDY--Dany Peterson

MABEL--Marsha Hesse

CLARENCE--Dayle Ray

TOM--John Paul Jones

ETHEL--Pamela Lent

KIM--Ryan Sauer

OWEN--Dennis Jacobson

The play was designed and directed by Tim Ray. The play was produced by Dayle Ray.

**ACT ONE**

(JOHNSON METAL SHOP. The shop is an old wooden shed which ERNEST has full of equipment. He has among other things, a drill press, a feed arc welder, a large grinder, and a gas welder. One corner of the shop has spare parts scavenged from old farm implements. He has a bolt bin from which hangs out bags and small boxes of bolts, washers, and nuts. A blackened workbench is dented, chipped, and scorched from years of use. An impressive tool collection hangs over the workbench. A rotary dial phone hangs from the wall. Four lawn chairs are up front for patrons to sit on. The shed doors are open, ready for customers. The customers will enter from various sides of the stage, depending upon which side of the shop they drive up. Outside the shed doors is a worn out four bottom plow.)

(GRETCHEN stands, very still. She is dressed in coveralls, a worn out feed store cap, and a pair of worn gloves. She is holding a ice cream pail full of old potatoes with sprouting eyes on them.)

(A pick-up slows down and stops. ERNEST enters, carrying a dented stainless steel thermos. He has a big bandage over one arm. He notices GRETCHEN, then goes and deposits the thermos on a work bench.)

ERNEST

I told Jenna I'd go today.

GRETCHEN

Jenna's taking you there? To sign it?

(ERNEST nods.)

GRETCHEN(CONT.)

Then tell her you're too busy. Look at all the work you gotta do. Avoid her, Ernest. Moving into those government apartments means you're just getting closer to the end. And it ain't your time, just like it wasn't right for me to go on from here either. I mean, you won't seriously move into those apartments? Will you?

ERNEST

I'd move off the farm in the fall, after this growing season is done.

GRETCHEN

Leave permanently?

ERNEST

You're gone, gone and dead. You can't rise out of that cemetery. Much as I want you to.

GRETCHEN

So that's it? You'll desert our place?

ERNEST

I'll move back out there again next spring. I'll just live out the winter in town.

GRETCHEN

Once you move to town you won't ever go back out to the place. Do you think you could stand it in there? Those four cramped walls, one door in and out. They are all so antiseptic.

ERNEST

Don't make this difficult.

GRETCHEN

Think about it for your own good. You're gonna die in that place. Work like you have all these years and then spend your final days in low income housing? What is that?

(Pause.)

ERNEST

It would get stuffy.

GRETCHEN

Stuffy? You don't know what that is. My coffin is stuffy. No, I see what's happening. People are just down sizing your needs Ernie, so when it comes time to put you in a cramped casket you won't protest much.

ERNEST

I'll tell Jenna to forget it.

GRETCHEN

That ain't nothing to live in.

ERNEST

I just said I won't go. Besides, I ain't got the time this morning. They'll be a lot of jobs comin' in. So don't bother me as much.

GRETCHEN

You're out here mighty early for a Saturday.

ERNEST

So are you, Gretchen.

(ERNEST walks around the room, trying to remember what was going to do.)

GRETCHEN

What's with you today? Huh? Lit outta the house awful fast. You trying to keep away from me?

(Pause.)

ERNEST

Why do you say things like that? Of course not.

GRETCHEN

I know it's gotten strange. But we can cope, y'know. Taking a little getting used to but. A person dead gets scattered in three places. You'll know what I mean someday by that. My body's laying out there in that graveyard. My soul is up where it's supposed to be. But a big, big part of me is still happy to be with you. You need that part of me.

ERNEST

Wish I could... touch you.

GRETCHEN

In some ways you can.

ERNEST

Most ways, I can't. Not the ways I would want to. Oh, quit this daydreaming. I gotta get to work.

(ERNEST picks up some scattered tools.)

GRETCHEN

Our house still looks nice.

ERNEST

You approve?

GRETCHEN

Can't knock your house cleaning too bad. Bathroom is maybe getting a little grungy. But the farm still looks good.

ERNEST

I couldn't keep up your garden.



GRETCHEN

Wouldn't expect you to. Just keep up our house. Then you'll do fine. You'll do very fine.

ERNEST

If someone saw me staring into space like this, they'd really think I'd gone louie. Talking to you I... I can't even remember what I was supposed to do this morning. I came out here early, now why was that?

GRETCHEN

Nice of you, loving me so much after I died. Means I still got business in town.

ERNEST

That's right. Gotta finish sharpening those plow blades and then mount them on Stevenson's plow. Ran outta time to finish them last night. I told him ten o'clock. What time is it? Twenty five after nine. He'll be planning to plow today, nice as it is.

GRETCHEN

Keeps us alive, being on our place.

ERNEST

Quiet! You're makin' me confused!

GRETCHEN

I can't be doing that, goodness me! I'll be a little quieter. But I won't leave. You don't got to worry about that. I'll be around these dirty walls, whispering.

ERNEST

Want some music? I'm gonna get some on. Can't work without good music.

GRETCHEN

Do you still, Ernest? Still, y'know, like you used to. That hasn't changed has it?

ERNEST

Gretchen. You're what's missing.

(ERNEST turns on the radio. Polka music is heard, turned down low.)

GRETCHEN

I'll set up here then.

ERNEST

Do what ya want.

GRETCHEN

I better get my potatoes ready for gardening. Should I plant two rows or three?

ERNEST

More potatoes around, the better.

(ERNEST turns up the polka music. It is quite loud, as ERNEST likes to hear it over his tools while he's working.)

ERNEST(CONT.)

(Humming.)

Ah, ho dee dee da dee....

(He grabs a vise grip, goes to a pile of four plow blades, picks a blade up, and turns on his grinder. Sparks fly as he sharpens the blade.)

GRETCHEN

Well. I better get busy!

(GRETCHEN takes out a knife and begins selecting the potatoes she will plant. She cuts the potatoes in halves and quarters, being careful to leave an eye on each section.)

(Over the noise, a car is heard pulling up. JENNA enters, dressed in the latest spring fashion she purchased at Herbege's. She carries a purse.)

JENNA

Dad! Dad!

(ERNEST doesn't see her. JENNA walks in front of him.)

JENNA

Hey, Dad!

ERNEST

Huh! Jenna?

(ERNEST reaches for another plow blade.)

JENNA

C'MON, YOU SAID YOU'D GO TODAY!

ERNEST

Hm?

JENNA

We talked on the phone. YOU SAID YOU'D MAKE TIME!

(ERNEST shuts off the grinder.)

GRETCHEN

She's gotten real professional looking.

ERNEST

Hm?

JENNA

YOU SAID YOU'D--

(She notices the polka music.)

Here.

(JENNA shuts off the radio.)

GRETCHEN

Getting almost too professional.

ERNEST

Don't get your clothes dirty. Brush anything you're liable to get grease on those sleeves.

JENNA

Hello to you too.

ERNEST

Yeah. Been awhile since you've been to the shop.

JENNA

Hasn't been that long, has it? Well, the firm's been keeping me busy researching cases. Y'know. Lawyer's employing each other. Heard any good lawyer jokes lately?

(Pause.)

You'd make time if I came on Saturday. So, I'm here. Let's go.

ERNEST

Never said that.

JENNA

Yes, you did.

ERNEST

I did?

JENNA

Yes.

GRETCHEN

Been bugging him all morning.

JENNA

Talked to you last Wednesday on the phone. You do remember that don't you?

ERNEST

Well... can't now. Got these blades to finish for the Stevenson's. He'll be wanting to plow today, nice as it is, so... I gotta get these sharp.

JENNA

The rental office closes at noon. It'll take a little time. You sign the rental agreement, put down a deposit, and you're set to move in. Just think Dad, next winter no more snow blowing. Someone else does it for you.

ERNEST

Don't you have work?

JENNA

It's Saturday.

ERNEST

Too many Saturdays.

(He picks up a blade he sharpened.)

Ouch, this is hot.

(ERNEST sticks the blade in a five gallon bucket of water.)

JENNA

You know it's a real great condominium. You saw it. And close by the shop. Next to the school. You won't miss a single football game, you can just walk out across the grass. Did you hear me? Dad?

GRETCHEN

Keep ignoring her and she'll think you've gone deaf.

JENNA

Did you hear me?

ERNEST

I know now, I heard ya! Things got busy here. Weather turned warm this week. I got farmers coming in from all over.

(ERNEST walks over to the grinder.)

JENNA

Where are these farmers?

ERNEST

Expect to be busy now. Should be nice till Tuesday.

JENNA

I'm asking for an hour. One hour, that's it. We'll look over the place and pay the deposit. Dad, don't start that up now! Dad! YOU CAN'T SPEND AN HOUR WITH ME? NOT EVEN ONE?

ERNEST

Don't talk so loud.

JENNA

Well!

ERNEST

All that shouting's nonsense. When you called last week there hadn't been three days of warm weather. What's gonna happen to my business if they come by and I'm closed?

JENNA

Leave a note.

ERNEST

By the time I'm done gallivanting they'll be halfway to that new outfit in Fergus Falls.

JENNA

We've talked about this.

ERNEST

Looks like we'll just talk some more.

JENNA

Oh fine. If that's the way it is. Get all your work done. I'll call during the week.

GRETCHEN

This can't go on. You got to stop it.

ERNEST

She's leaving.

GRETCHEN

And that's no good. We can't treat our daughter that rough.

ERNEST

Well....

(To JENNA.)

Hold on, don't leave like that. Goodness sakes! You want coffee?

JENNA

No thanks.

ERNEST

Can't make it as good as your mother. I've been trying though. And I don't like that coffee maker you gave me for Christmas. That's too computerized. Just isn't the same when it ain't from a pot on the stove. Something about that. I've been doing some experimenting.

(ERNEST holds up his thermos.)

JENNA

I'm fine, you don't have to.

ERNEST

C'mon. Can't make your trip a complete waste of time.

(ERNEST pours out a cup of coffee.)

JENNA

Dad, I said I didn't.

ERNEST

I hear ya, I hear ya. Try it, anyway.

JENNA

(JENNA looks down at her cup.)

We could come back, pick up donuts.

ERNEST

Don't need to drive outta here mad.

(JENNA drinks.)

JENNA

It's... good. Real good.

ERNEST

If I can make good coffee, must mean the rest of me is doing okay.

JENNA

This is an apartment. Not the home.

ERNEST

It's three miles closer to the home than I ever care to be. Enjoy the coffee. Good pot, huh?

JENNA

Perfect.

ERNEST

Was hoping you'd be impressed. Take some more when you're done with that.

JENNA

You bet.

(ERNEST goes back to the plow blades. JENNA dumps the coffee in a nearby wastebasket. A pick-up drives up.)

GRETCHEN

How far are you on that plow? Randy Stevenson's here.

ERNEST

Randy's already coming in? My gosh! Haven't even finished sharpening the blades!

JENNA

Randy?

GRETCHEN

You told him ten, didn't you?

ERNEST

I'm pretty sure I said ten.

(Sound of a pick-up starter grinding.)

RANDY

(Off stage.)

DAMMIT!

(The pick-up door squeaks open and then slams. Enter RANDY STEVENSON, a middle-aged farmer. He carries four more plow blades, which he drops on a work table.)

ERNEST

Catching the rooster, Mr. Stevenson?

RANDY

Ha! No, barely even moving, and it's almost mid morning. Had a rough night, slept through my alarm. Now the damn pick-up's on the fritz.