

Make Mine Cognac

by Barbara Alfaro

Even saints sometimes forget themselves in session.

—Lord Byron

I am one of those ladies with salt and pepper hair and a vodka tonic smile, living in a quiet community complete with parks, ponds and chubby geese, but once I was a young actress in New York, the shining city of miracles, silliness and off-Broadway plays. It was a time in my life when I was more than a little bit of genuinely crazy.

I had recently separated from my husband, taking only our savings bonds and a fondue pot I was fond of. I felt this more than fair to him as he had the house by the bay, two cars, a cabin cruiser, a sail boat and a law degree. I got married right after graduating from high school and a successful marriage proved a lot more difficult than geometry. Without knowing the steps or reasons why, I found myself beginning my love affair with theatre. It would be lovely to say I went on to become a hugely successful actress but my temperament is more suited to writing technically incorrect sonnets than conquering Broadway. I was living on the West Side of Manhattan in a brownstone called the Rehearsal Club. The Katherine Hepburn movie *Stage Door* supposedly took place in this women's residence where young women studying for or making their living in the performing arts live, very inexpensively. My room was a "converted" linen closet, the same size and décor as the rooms at the Y—a bed, a desk, a chair. All of the residents were in their twenties except for the gray-haired proprietress who acted as a sort of den mother, dispensing advice and valium with equal cheer. Other residents at the Rehearsal Club included a young woman who was an heiress of a famous cornflakes empire and an actress who was currently the lead in a Broadway musical. Their living at the club seemed annoyingly unethical to me as the residence, subsidized by wealthy benefactors, was intended for struggling artists who needed financial assistance not cereal heiresses and Broadway stars. Both these women had the largest and nicest rooms in the house. The Broadway actress never spoke to me, presumably because she was a star or perhaps because I never spoke to her. The heiress was sweet to everyone and always treated to pizza, with extra toppings, whenever she received a check from home.

The fondue pot lasted longer than the savings bonds so, eventually, I had to take a part-time job. I hatched at a steakhouse a few blocks away from the Rehearsal Club. The seasoned hatcheck girl who trained me advised me to always wear knee-high boots so that I could put part of the tip money I made into the boots. Everyone does it, she assured me, just don't get caught. She showed me the wooden hangers in the

hatcheck booth to be used for VIP's coats and fur coats. The hooks were for everyone else. There was some concern on my part about recognizing VIPs. This was long before the current celebrity mania, a time when the only real superstars were movie stars, sports heroes and the Pope. Film directors frequented the steakhouse but who knew what directors looked like. I did recognize a mink coat when I saw one.

The best tipplers were drunks and men from the garment industry who perhaps had *other* connections. The songwriter who made millions with his silly song, "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer," was a frequent customer in the steakhouse and he "stiffed" or never tipped the waitresses, bartenders and hatchecks. All of the restaurant staff "*used to laugh and call him names.*" Trudging back to the Rehearsal Club, after my shifts at the steakhouse, I must have looked as if I were walking in deep, invisible snow because each of my boots had about five pounds of quarters and half dollars inside them and a few fivers for luck.

I was attending the Evening Division of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, nicknamed by some, "the bastard child" of the Academy because everyone knew wealthy students attended the day school and hatchicks like me *schlepped* to night classes. At the Academy I learned to refer to myself as a "student of the art of acting" and to my body as my "instrument."

Toward the end of my second semester, it became clear to me that I needed to begin therapy. My *instrument* was having hallucinations, the fleshy, thick kind that scare the hell out of you. Like Pinocchio, I had fallen in with bad companions and started "popping" various colored uppers, downers and I wasn't exactly sure what-ers. Perhaps these recreational drugs were re-creating my psyche, perhaps Catholic guilt over my failed marriage, perhaps a genetic predisposition toward imagining, perhaps the effect of relentless insomnia or all of the above contributed to my psychic distress. Certainly being cast as Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* and Catherine in *Suddenly Last Summer* for school productions didn't help. Playing Tennessee Williams women is, for some, an almost guarantee of nervous collapse.

I read an article in the *New York Times* about Jungian therapists, or more accurately, Jungian therapists "in training" and how these apprentice therapists charged less than a full fledged analyst. I began therapy with a young analyst who wore pastel shirts and listened to my dreams. My sleeplessness was a major concern. He referred me to a psychoanalyst for a psychiatric evaluation so that I could get a prescription for sedatives. I wasn't sure what to wear for a psychiatric evaluation. I wanted to look neurotic enough to be given a prescription for sleeping pills, but not loony enough to be institutionalized. I decided on a flower print dress—feminine, not sexually ambiguous—and thin strapped sandals—fragile and needy, but not nutty. I got the prescription and the first good sleep I'd had in almost a year.

When not memorizing monologs or hooking coats, I was spending a lot of my boot money on books by Carl Jung. In his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, I learned Dr. Carl Gustav Jung was charming. In *Man and His Symbols*, I learned about anima and animus. In *Job's Answer to God*, I learned man's image of God changes through the centuries. In *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung*, I learned I was reading way over my head.

I auditioned for a part in a Polish play that had been smuggled from behind the Iron Curtain. The playwright's description of the character I played was "voluptuous and exverted." I weighed ninety-eight pounds and was so shy my thoughts trembled.

"I am casting you against type," the director told me, adding, "The character you play represents man's inhumanity to man."

I accepted the part of “The Girl.” None of the characters in the play had a name. We—“The Girl,” “The Hero,” “The Young Woman,” “the Mother,” “Old Man I,” “Old Man II,” and intriguingly, “Woman’s Voice Under the Blanket”—were, we were told, all symbols. Acting a symbol is about as easy as singing a Picasso.

After weeks of rehearsal it became depressingly clear that no one in the cast had the slightest idea of what the play was about. There was some discussion about whether it was a comedy. This was the one thing I was sure it was not. Comedy may be born in pain (recall the chap on the banana peel) but it rarely retires there. The director said something about “symbolic juxtaposition.” Finally, one of the symbols clanged. “What the hell is this play about?” demanded Old Man II. The director smiled that knowing, smug smile directors and successful orthodontists seem able to accomplish and said the play’s “meaning, its poetry, its symbolism cannot be explained. It cannot be verbalized.” I knew then that all was lost. I was appearing in a play that could not be verbalized. What was it? A ballet without dance?

My part consisted of walking onstage, giving a brief speech, and sitting silently onstage for the remainder of the play. The only other acting I had done was “the lead” in a children’s theatre production of *Sleeping Beauty*. In that production, I walked onstage, pricked my finger, and played possum for an hour. There seemed a tendency on the part of directors to place me onstage and just leave me there.

The play began with “The Hero” lying in bed, studying his hands. He gave a monolog on sexuality, women, and war. “The Young Woman,” an actress who quite possibly had the best figure and the worst diction in New York, entered his bedroom. She gave a monolog on sexuality, men and war. During her speech a man and woman appeared at opposite sides of the stage and walked slowly toward each other, scattering small paper valentines as they walked. They embraced and walked offstage. “The Mother” ran onstage, screamed, and hit “The Hero.” After a long exchange between “The Hero” and “The Mother,” “Old Man I” entered off-stage right and pretended to die.

A funeral scene occurred. Six actor-mourners, wearing raincoats and carrying umbrellas, walked onstage. A short exchange between “The Young Woman” and “The Mother” followed, while offstage a voice shouted in German. I was willing to buy all of this, conceding that something does not have to be understood by me to have validity. But what I found perfectly mystifying was why the six mourners, closing and tucking their umbrellas, suddenly also fell dead. Seven bodies strewn on miscellaneous spots on the stage may have had a dramatic effect on the audience. It certainly had an effect on the members of the cast who, when not worried about going up on lines, were worried about falling down over bodies.

At this point in the play, for reasons known only to the playwright—and even here I have my doubts—an actor crawled onstage, paused center stage, barked twice, and said, “Make mine cognac.” He mimed downing a drink with his right paw and crawled offstage. I did not have a copy of the entire script, just the two pages that contained my scene, so I never knew if the two barks were written by the author or were added by the actor. I was afraid to ask. I cannot explain, verbalize, or dance out the effect this moment had on me. It indelibly marked my psyche. During rehearsals and performances, I had to bite my lower lip and pinch my arm to keep from laughing. If the play had a long run (*thankfully* it did not) it is possible that I would today speak with a permanent lisp and never be able to wave my left arm. The only thing more terrible and mysterious than this moment was that immediately following it “Man’s Inhumanity to Man” entered offstage right. I stepped over several “dead” bodies, walked downstage and asked the air, “Is this the Kitty Kat Café?” I then sat

at a small table, extremely downstage right, ordered a cream puff and a cup of coffee, and recited a monolog about soldiers and the Black Forest.

The play was done in the round. I was so close to the audience I could discern colognes. Had the house lights been up and the play been a comedy, I could have examined bridgework.

I had been directed to be “mechanical and puppetlike,” a sort of Machiavellian Muppet. I walked, stood, and sat in sparse, machine-like moves. On opening night, completely, I confess, out of puppet, I happened to cross my leg. Between the action and its completion, I kicked a member of the audience in the shin—hard. He was a big man and able to bear pain soundlessly. I do not know who was more startled. Bathed in embarrassment, as if in full spotlight, our eyes locked and for one mad moment I thought we were going to say hello. I carefully tucked my leg back “onstage” and considered apologizing but I was afraid this would lead to an introduction or worse, chitchat. He looked warm and conversational. [“The leg’s fine. How long have you been acting?”] Breaking illusion seemed sacrilege enough; conversing during that break, unthinkable. He smiled and rubbed his leg. My fears of comradeship confirmed, I looked away. The incident was closed, except for his date’s rather insensitive query, “Did she hurt you, Eddie?” For Eddie and for me it had been a very real moment, possibly the only real moment in the play. I was understandably somewhat apprehensive for the remainder of the play, a soliloquy by “Woman’s Voice Under the Blanket” and a scene between “The Hero” and “Old Man II.” I could not shake a feeling of acute intimacy with Eddie.

I believe in karma and know that in the silent scheme of all things there was a reason for my appearing in this play. But it, like the meaning of the play, even now, all these years later when I am a student of the art of remembering, has yet to be revealed to me. In the meantime, Eddie, if you are reading this, and we should ever meet for an after-theater drink, make mine cognac.