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Eleemosynary A Play

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Discovering the Depth of Eleemosynary: A Play by Lee Blessing

In the vast landscape of contemporary American theatre, few works manage to weave together intellectual rigor, emotional depth, and lyrical language as seamlessly as Lee Blessing’s **Eleemosynary: A Play**. Premiering in 1985, this three-character drama has captivated audiences for decades with its exploration of family dynamics, the pursuit of knowledge, and the complex ties that bind mothers, daughters, and grandmothers. The title itself—derived from the word “eleemosynary,” meaning relating to charity or almsgiving—hints at the play’s central tension between generosity and emotional withholding. In this comprehensive guide, we will delve into the plot, characters, themes, production history, and enduring relevance of *Eleemosynary: A Play*, offering readers a rich understanding of why this work remains a staple in theatre repertoires.

Overview of the Play

Eleemosynary: A Playby Lee Blessing is a one-act drama that unfolds through a series of interwoven monologues and dialogues. The story revolves around three generations of women: Echo, a brilliant but emotionally distant matriarch; her daughter, Dorothea (often called Artie); and Artie’s teenage daughter, Jessie. Their lives are defined by intellectual achievement, particularly in the realm of spelling bees and competitive memorization. The play’s structure is non-linear, moving between past and present as the characters reflect on their shared history of ambition, neglect, and longing.

The central event is Jessie’s preparation for the National Spelling Bee—a grueling contest that becomes a metaphor for the family’s struggle to communicate. Echo, a former child spelling prodigy herself, has poured her intellectual energy into training Jessie, but their relationship is fraught with unspoken resentment. Dorothea, who rejected her mother’s obsessive focus on achievement, now lives in the shadow of both her mother’s genius and her daughter’s potential. Through their overlapping narratives, Blessing crafts a poignant meditation on the costs of exceptionalism and the redemptive power of compassion.

Detailed Character Analysis

Echo is the dominant force in **Eleemosynary: A Play**. A brilliant woman who achieved fame as a child spelling champion, she uses language as both a weapon and a shield. Her monologues are filled with arcane vocabulary and literary references, revealing a mind that prizes precision over warmth. Yet beneath her formidable exterior lies a deep vulnerability—a fear of being ordinary. Echo’s relationship with her daughter Dorothea is marked by disappointment; she sees Artie’s artistic pursuits as a betrayal of intellectual rigor. In her old age, Echo becomes dependent on Jessie, the granddaughter she has trained to carry on her legacy. The character’s name is fitting: like the mythological nymph, Echo can only repeat what she has heard, trapped in a cycle of expectation and control.

Eleemosynary: A Play. Artie, Jessie, and Echo’s rebellion against her mother’s rigid world of spelling and logic. Her artistic creativity is a form of resistance, yet she remains haunted by Echo’s disapproval. Artie’s monologues reveal a woman caught between two worlds: she cannot match her mother’s intellectual brilliance, and she struggles to connect with her own daughter Jessie, who has been drawn into Echo’s orbit. Her journey in the play is one of reconciliation—learning to accept both her mother’s flaws and her own choices.

Jessie is the youngest and perhaps most complex character in **Eleemosynary: A Play**. Trained by Echo from childhood, she possesses an extraordinary memory and a love for the English language. Yet she is acutely aware of the emotional price of her grandmother’s obsession. Jessie’s internal conflict comes to a head during the National Spelling Bee, where she must decide whether to spell a word correctly according to the rules or to deliberately misspell it in an act of defiance. Her choice becomes the play’s climactic moment, symbolizing the possibility of breaking free from inherited patterns while still honoring family ties.

Thematic Analysis

A central theme in **Eleemosynary: A Play**is the power and limitation of language. The characters are all masters of words—Echo with her encyclopedic knowledge, Jessie with her spelling prowess, and even Artie with her visual vocabulary. Yet they consistently fail to communicate their deepest emotions. Blessing suggests that words can be a barrier as much as a bridge. The play’s title, derived from a word meaning charitable, underscores the idea that true generosity involves not just giving words but also offering emotional presence. Throughout the play, the characters learn that language must be infused with empathy to be truly eleemosynary.

The intergenerational dynamics in **Eleemosynary: A Play**explore how family gifts and wounds are passed down. Echo’s drive for perfection is a burden she places on her daughter and granddaughter. Artie’s rebellion through art is a direct response to her mother’s intellectualism. Jessie, in turn, must navigate these conflicting influences. The play does not offer easy resolutions but instead shows how each generation must find its own path—honoring the past without being imprisoned by it. The spelling bee becomes a crucible where these tensions are tested.

Blessing also interrogates the concept of genius. Is it a gift or a curse? In **Eleemosynary: A Play**, Echo’s intellectual gifts isolate her from those she loves. Jessie’s talent for memorization threatens to consume her youth. The play raises questions about the societal pressure to excel and the cost of exceptionalism. Ultimately, it suggests that true genius lies not in winning competitions but in the capacity for love and understanding.

Production History and Critical Reception

Eleemosynary: A Playpremiered at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1985. It was later produced Off-Broadway at the Theatre de Lys (now the Lucille Lortel Theatre) in 1986, directed by David Trainer. The production starred notable actresses including Tandy Cronyn as Echo, and received positive reviews for its innovative structure and poetic dialogue. Critics praised Blessing’s ability to create a compelling drama with only three characters and a minimal setting.

Over the years, **Eleemosynary: A Play** has been revived numerous times by regional theatres and educational institutions. Its manageable cast size and powerful themes make it a favorite for drama programs. The play has also been adapted into a television production. Scholars have examined the work through feminist and psychological lenses, noting its nuanced portrayal of female ambition and generational trauma. It remains a significant entry in Blessing’s oeuvre, which includes better-known works like *A Walk in the Woods* and *Fortinbras*.

Key Scenes and Symbolism

The National Spelling Bee is the play’s central metaphor. It represents the arena where family

expectations collide with individual identity. Jessie’s preparation for the bee mirrors her psychological struggle: each word she masters is a step toward her grandmother’s approval, but also a step away from her mother’s world. The bee’s competitive nature highlights the play’s critique of a society that values achievement over relationships.

The title word appears in the play as a spelling word that Jessie must consider. Its meaning—charitable or relating to almsgiving—becomes a lens through which the characters examine their own behavior. Echo gives her knowledge but withholds emotional warmth. Artie gives her freedom but not direction. Jessie’s final decision in the bee involves an act of charity: she chooses to misspell the word as a gift to her mother, a symbolic offering of connection. The word thus encapsulates the play’s message that true giving requires sacrifice and understanding.

Throughout **Eleemosynary: A Play**, Blessing uses bird imagery to evoke freedom and entrapment. Artie’s paintings often feature birds, and she speaks of wanting to fly away from her mother’s influence. Echo, in contrast, sees language as a cage that defines and protects. Jessie is the fledgling who must learn to use her wings. The imagery reinforces the play’s themes of liberation and confinement.

Why Eleemosynary: A Play Matters Today

In an age of increasing emphasis on measurable achievement—from standardized tests to competitive college admissions—**Eleemosynary: A Play**offers a cautionary tale about the human cost of such pressures. Blessing’s exploration of intergenerational conflict remains deeply relevant as families continue to grapple with expectations and individuality. The play also raises important questions about gender roles: Echo’s intellectual ambition is portrayed as a deviation from traditional feminine nurturing, while Artie’s artistic rebellion challenges stereotypes. The female-centered narrative provides a rich opportunity for discussions about women’s agency and legacy.

Additionally, the play’s meditation on language and emotional connection resonates in our hyper-connected yet often emotionally distant world. It reminds us that words can heal or harm, and that communication requires more than vocabulary—it requires vulnerability. For theatre practitioners, **Eleemosynary: A Play**remains a rewarding challenge, demanding delicate balance between lyrical monologue and raw emotional honesty.

Educational and Theatrical Significance

As a staple of contemporary drama, **Eleemosynary: A Play**is frequently studied in university theatre courses and performed in community and academic settings. Its compact structure (one act, three characters) makes it accessible for low-budget productions, while its depth allows for nuanced interpretation. Directors often focus on the play’s poetic rhythm and non-linear timeline, creating a dreamlike quality that underscores the characters’ fractured memories. Acting challenges include delivering lengthy monologues with emotional authenticity and managing the rapid shifts between past and present.

For audiences, the play offers an intimate glimpse into a family’s private struggles. The lack of a traditional plot in favor of character-driven revelation may require patience, but the payoff is a moving, thought-provoking experience. Critics have noted that **Eleemosynary: A Play**rewards multiple viewings, as new layers of meaning emerge with each encounter.

Comparative Analysis Within Blessing’s Works

Lee Blessing is known for plays that explore ethical dilemmas and human relationships. While *A Walk in the Woods* deals with political negotiation and *Fortinbras* offers a comedic take on Shakespeare, **Eleemosynary: A Play**stands out for its intimate scale and its focus on female experience. It shares with his other works a deep skepticism of certainty and a belief in the possibility of change. The play’s use of clever wordplay and intricate language is distinctively Blessing, showcasing his ear for dialogue and his ability to make intellectual

concepts emotionally resonant.

Conclusion

Eleemosynary: A Play by Lee Blessing is a masterful work that transcends its deceptively simple premise. Through the lives of Echo, Artie, and Jessie, it examines the intertwining of love, ambition, and the search for identity. The play’s title word—meaning charitable—reminds us that the greatest gift we can give is not knowledge or achievement, but understanding and forgiveness. Whether you are a theatre enthusiast, a student of drama, or someone interested in family dynamics, this play offers a rich, rewarding experience that lingers long after the final curtain. Its continued relevance and emotional power ensure that **Eleemosynary: A Play** will remain a cherished piece of American theatre for generations to come

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