

***O'Keeffe!* a one woman play celebrating the life of American Artist Georgia O'Keeffe**

Synopsis: Artist Georgia O'Keeffe struggles to survive independently within her passionate and tempestuous relationship for 30 years with husband Alfred Stieglitz, "the father of modern photography," while trying to understand and control her creative process. Stieglitz photographed her more than 500 times and was the first to exhibit her work. Although forever grateful, she struggled to maintain her independence. The conflict between individualism vs. a shared life is at the heart of everyone's personal journey, thus the play is as much about us as it is about O'Keeffe.

O'Keeffe! has been produced throughout the U.S.A., and in Bermuda and Mexico.
McDermott, L. (2006). *O'Keeffe!*. New York: Playscripts.

ACT I

Lights up on a woman with her back to the audience. She is looking at "pictures" hung on the canvass. She is wearing a butcher's apron. Throughout the play the use of the apron indicates that the artist is working.

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

I paint pretty pictures. Perfect technique. Good use of materials. I did everything my teachers told me to do. Pretty little pictures. This one I did for Vanderpoel. This one for Chase. There's a teacher in every one of you. Pretty little pictures and not a one of you that cries out, "O'Keeffe"!

She turns out, but does not yet recognize that there are people there.

I have things in my head—shapes—that no one has taught me how to draw. I have feeling inside that no one has shown me how to get out—shapes and feelings that are me! These pretty little pictures are not me! They are teachers and other artists—done to please, to sell, to make a living—well now—there's nothing wrong with making a living—one must live. . .

I can't be just a teacher. What do I teach? Art? My God what is that? Oh sometimes you just wonder why? What is the use? To paint their way just to sell the stuff. . . There is something inside that I have got to let out—but how? And what? And why do I have this desire if I'm not allowed to do it? Why is it there? Just to drive me crazy? Well it's working.

Oh my God I don't want to be mediocre. I know that there is more to me than pretty little pictures and the only way I'm going to find out what the hell that is, is to do it! And what if I can't make a living out of it? Well, we don't know if we don't try, now do we, missy?

She turns back to face the canvass and then approaches it. She starts to tear down the pictures, building in momentum, tearing, ripping, and throwing as she goes.

No sense in having ghosts around. Time to start over. From scratch. Out, out, out, with the old and in with the new!

She starts formulating a plan, pacing about the space.

I'll use the barest materials—charcoal and paper—black and white—black and white until I can't say what I want to say without using color. Like learning to walk again. But they are going to be my steps. Mine. Me! And it was!

Or was it Stieglitz?

She becomes aware of the audience. That she has somehow willed them here dawns on her. She realizes she is wearing her apron and that there is a bit of a mess around her. Buying time, she takes off apron and hangs it on hall tree. She comes Center, and addresses the audience.

Hello. I am Georgia O'Keeffe. I am a painter. I am an American. I am dead. I am here because I've a bit of a puzzle to solve. Some questions to answer. There seems to be a sort of confusion in the world—and not just the art world—over who is responsible for my success.

I recently heard a woman remark—a regular everyday sort of woman—perhaps it was one of you. "Georgia O'Keeffe? Why she's only famous because her husband took those naked pictures of her!" Well. You can imagine that sort of talk might irritate one. Especially if one were dead and couldn't easily do something about it. And so peace eludes me now with that insistent question. Oh, you know the peace I'm talking about—that eternal peace. That peace they always talk about when someone kicks the bucket; "Oh, she's at peace now!" Horse shit.

You see, when I gave myself that little exhibit back in 1915,

Indicates the torn drawings on the floor.

I was consumed with a feeling that there was something more, that I had not touched that part of me that wanted and needed to come out. I know that some of you know what I'm talking about or else why would you be here?

And so I started over with my art. Started finding my own voice. And then I met him and things got confused. Fuzzy and. . . You all know who I am, don't you? Well, for pete's sake if you don't you should. Your modern art knowledge is a might dim. Trot yourself over to the nearest museum. They should have something of mine. A good reproduction anyway, oh and don't you know they're all over the place; books, calendars, biographies. What a mess.

Painting was my life and I lived a long time—some 98 years—and a lot of work to show for it. I deserve everything I got in life because I worked hard for it. You can have anything you want, you know. Just a matter of choice. Might have to give up a thing or two but for myself I have no regrets. None. I refuse to regret anything.

She notices the torn paper on the floor and as a means of escape, clears them up.

Choice. It's all a matter of choice. One must choose. Alfred or my art. Alfred or New Mexico. Alfred or my sanity. . .

Alfred Stieglitz, her lover for eight years and then husband is telling her to leave, to go on out to New Mexico.

Oh? You want me to go? You're sure? Well now I'll stay if you want me to. . .

You're sure you'll be alright? Okay. This means a lot to me Alfred. . . Oh, I know you know that. You know I couldn't go, couldn't decide to go until you had decided. I feel like you've given me this great gift of myself. No, I'll bet that I write you first, you Old Crow you. . . I love you too.

His vision evaporates and she realizes where she is. There are people waiting for her.

She takes trash to basket beside desk.

In my lifetime I didn't let many people in. Even less after Alfred died. That was my choice. But perhaps that is why now I find myself in front of an audience. Perhaps I need you. Isn't that funny? Perhaps I need an objective view. I don't know. Personally the idea of my life on a stage is a pretty strange thing, but I guess it's all part of this death business, do you think?

Feeding On Mulberry Leaves, script

Feeding On Mulberry Leaves premiered at Barter Theatre, Abingdon, Virginia, 2005, directed by Richard Rose. Winner of Barter's 2004 Appalachian Festival of Plays and Playwrights. Finalist in the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre Playwright's Festival, 2003, recipient of the 1997 Delauney Prize in Playwriting .

Synopsis: Winky Flint is looking forward to his son Jeb taking over the register at his convenience store near Natural Bridge, Virginia. But 17-year-old Jeb is busy trying to get into the Fashion Institute of Technology in NYC. As the two wrestle over Jeb's direction in life, Jeb's mother is preoccupied with finishing her G.E.D., his sister Wanda is just trying to get Winky's attention, and his brother Kenny is doing his best to avoid detection as he sells pot out at the air pump. With some colorful locals and wacky tourists thrown into the mix, there's never a dull moment in this lively look at a Southern family finding its joy
McDermott, L. (2006). *Feeding on mulberry leaves*. New York: Playscripts.

From Act Two, scene v

KATHY

After you left, I called him. He had just finished guard duty. Said he was dying to be with me. Then when he drove up he saw the dress and . . . I never see it coming until a second before. His nostrils flair and his mouth kind of flat lines. . . Guess he thought the dress was a little too phenomenal.

JEB

Grabbing for dress.
He didn't hurt it, did he?

KATHY

What?

The following four lines overlap.

ROBERT

Jeb/

WANDA

Oh man, Jeb/

JEB

Shit. . .

KATHY

Your damn dress is fine!

During the following, BENJAMIN, without the others seeing, grabs the dress and his shoulder bag, and exits into the storage room
You are a real piece of work, Jeb Stuart Flint, you know that? It's all about you, isn't it?

Everybody has to put their life aside for the sensitive artist, the angry young man—we all want to make sure "Jebbies okay"—Look! You even get strangers to help you out! What the hell would you do if you didn't have everyone following behind to make your life happen, huh?

JEB

I don't know.

KATHY

Oh yeah, that's right. Go into yourself now. Crawl into that little cocoon where no one can enter because no one can possibly understand, right?

JEB

I thought you did.

KATHY

I don't know who the hell you are. I thought I did. . . but after last night. What was that? Huh? What the hell was that, Jeb? You went over the edge this time baby! And it wasn't a kiss—it was a kiss! A really good kiss. One of the best I've ever had. And God knows. . .

JEB

. . .you've had 'em all.

KATHY

. . . I've had 'em all.

KATHY dives at JEB, knocking him on the floor. She sits on him, hitting him and punching. JEB doesn't fight back, he tries to block himself by curling into a ball.

ROBERT

Oh, good God.

He takes WANDA'S cue in trying to break up the fight. It's not easy.

KATHY

Fight back, damnit, fight back you little. . . Fight!

JEB

I can't!

KATHY

What's wrong, little Mr. Esthetic, Mr. Child Prodigy, Mr. He's So Friggin' Talented. Can't fight back because you're so damn artistic?

JEB

No.

KATHY

“I love you!” Bull! You loved me in the dress! You loved your creation! Come on!

JEB

No!

KATHY

Why not? Can't hurt those hands? “I love you”!

JEB

Is that what a man is to you? Someone who'll beat the crap out of you?

KATHY breaks away from ROBERT, runs and lands a hard slap on JEB's face. He breaks away from her and she follows.

KATHY

You stupid. . . stupid. . .

ROBERT grabs her again, WANDA follows JEB in case.
God! You little—

JEB

Say it!

WANDA holds him back.

Look at you, you're dying to say it so say it! For Christ's sake say it!

KATHY

Queer!

JEB

Whore!

KATHY

Fag!

JEB

Fag hag!

Several beats. They've destroyed each other.

KATHY

Yes. My point exactly.

They impulsively giggle. The giggle grows into a hysterical release of teen hormonal stress.

ROBERT

Well.

WANDA

Yeah. It's exhausting, ain't it?

JEB

I'm sorry, honey. Forgive me?

KATHY

I'll think about it.

Blog post for Virginia Economic Bridge, Inc (non-profit organization not out of business) Newsletter, 4-4-08
Lucinda McDermott Piro © 2008

Can you smell it?

That daffodil and clean, raw dirt smell with just a hint of bird song attached. Yes! Spring is finally here! Even though on this particular day it's hiding behind a gray cloud, I know it's here. The forsythia is fairly bursting. Long, wispy arms of yellow crazy and unkempt gesture, "We're Alive!" My neighbors and I are so grateful to see some kind of bloomin' color that we are hesitant to trim back any wild growth.

Let's be honest—it was a long winter. We can't complain about the rain because, hopefully, we're coming out of the draught that has wreaked havoc on our farmers. It's all good. Bright green baby leaves are starting to reveal themselves. The red shoots of my peonies have broken the surface as have my silver nancies. Sword like iris leaves are promising purple, white, and yellow blooms. My green thumbs are itching. Gardening was one of the things I truly missed when I lived in the city. Nothing calms or centers me more than a few hours prepping my beds, getting my fingers in the earth, and figuring out what little surprises I'm going to plant for myself.

Come on home to Southwest Virginia and make your own personal garden.

MAMA

From the play *In Your Face* by Lucinda McDermott

IMAGES of older woman at vanity.

WOMAN enters in silhouette with stool and sits stage center.

WOMAN

The arms around my shoulders linger. I breath in, shut my eyes and live in that perfect smell, that smell that has never changed and always brings me home. I let my breath out and relax into the familiar feel. I pat the arms around me. The skin is cold. Its texture is like raw oatmeal.

"Mama! Your skin is so—dry."

What I almost said was; "Your skin is so old!"

I scuttle to the bathroom to get some lotion, thinking how every time I see her these days, she looks older than the last time I saw her. And now—this visit, she seems especially fragile. How annoying. How dare she not look like the mother of my childhood. I always expect Mama to look like she did when she was forty-nine. Jet black hair with the Elsa Lanchester silver streak in the middle. Did I pick up the wrong lady at the station? Whose granny is this on my sofa bed? I look in the mirror and note the smile line Mama so willingly pointed out today.

"Gosh", she said, "I never noticed that before. Have you had it for long?"

I thanked her for pointing it out to me and ordered us both another bourbon and water.

Mama's waiting. I reach for the Triple Lanolin, on permanent sale at CVS, but detour and grab the more expensive Dewberry Lotion from The Body Shop. It should soak in better, and I won't feel so guilty for thinking of her as an old hag. I return to the living room, cuddle up next to her, and begin massaging the ointment into her arms.

In the soothing shiny smear, I see the mother of my memory at her dressing table. The table as high as my eye. Light from her make-up mirror glowing through the small and many bottles and flasks, casting coloured shadows and scents like candles on an altar.

Mama picks up a jar and blindly spins the lid off while she examines her face in the mirror. I wait to see what she is going to do next. She lightly dabs the tips of her fingers into the lotion and just as delicately dabs the pink balm onto her face. With both hands she spreads it into her skin until there is no pink left. Then she picks up a small beige coloured bottle. I stand at her table, my fingers not even gripping the edge, and watch these movements of hers. Steady.

Deliberate. Her eyes in the make-up mirror very serious and focused. I feel I have to be silent like in church. I'm afraid to make any noise—to breath.

She picks up her brush and does a dance with her hair. In some choreographed order the hair is teased and sprayed and brushed and before I know it there is my Mother. Sitting on her borrowed piano stool in her white slip—perfect. Smiling at herself, pleased with her work. In the mirror she sees me looking at her. Her smile breaks into an open-mouthed grin and she turns to me,

leaving her reflection for the moment. Her smooth, creamy arms reach down to me. She picks me up and sits me on her lap, squeezing me close.

She smells so good! A song of creams and perfumes and powders that forever sing Mama.

She looks at both of us in the mirror.

"Who's that pretty girl? Hmmm? Who's that pretty girl in the mirror? Why, I think that pretty girl must belong to me. Do you think so? Do you think that pretty girl belongs to me?"

Her arms around me are warm and smooth and soft. Safe. Her face is warm and smooth and soft. Still holding me, she picks a lipstick out from the treasures twinkling before us. She plucks the lid off, then top then bottom spreads valentine red in a perfect heart outline of her mouth. I watch enthralled. She is so perfect. So perfectly beautiful.

Mama lies in bed enjoying my attention. I laughed at her today. She was telling me her lipstick woes.

"I can't even find my lips now, and when I do they have these little creeks that the lipstick wants to flow into!"

Her skin is not soft. It is not smooth. She has a bad blood bruise from wearing her watch. I'm careful not to rub too hard. Her face is lined and her nose seems sharper than I remember. Her lips are thin and I see the little creeks she was talking about. The blue vein just under her temple is too visible. Her hair is white. She doesn't tease it anymore.

I finish putting the lotion on her arms and lean down to kiss her good-night. My cheek against hers, and my nose on her ear is home. The arms around my shoulders linger.

I breath in, shut my eyes, and live in that perfect smell.

Mmmmm.

Home.

Mama.

[SLOW FADE TO BLACK OUT]

The woods behind my house
Are enchanted with the
Soft breath of sleeping cows
 in summer heat

Black cedars screen the asphalt
And needles shush my feet

Been a while since I've been back
Trees are being cut
Some mornings the saw buzz
 vrooms through my breakfast

But I walked back there
To account for damages

Tire tracks dented the leaf strewn ground
Trees, gnawed at their base
Lay butchered on the ruined earth
Sawdust hills dotted the battlefield
And the cows
Stayed down in the lower pasture