

HERRINGS © David Selzer 2005

The audience enters. There is a sofa in front of the window. A closed, wooden Venetian blind hangs in the window. Next to the sofa is a lit standard lamp. In front of that is a small switched off TV set. To the other side of the sofa is an occasional table on which there is a telephone, a bottle of malt whisky, Laphroaig,, a half full whisky glass and an unused glass. On the sofa, feet up, back reclining against one of the arms, is Mr. H. Griffiths. H. Griffiths, though immaculately dressed in a man's lightweight suit and sporting a false pencil moustache, is obviously a woman. She is reading a book and occasionally stopping to sip from the whisky glass. When the audience has settled, H. Griffiths puts the book down on the table, moves her feet to the floor and sits up straight. She speaks (with a Midwest WASP accent) directly to the audience.

H. GRIFFITHS

I am H. Griffiths, the celebrated writer of novels of romantic, unrequited love. What you are about to see took place in the bridal suite of a 5 star hotel on Sunset Boulevard. It was during the afternoon of July 21st 1969 - the day mankind first walked on the moon:

(grandiloquently)

that unpeopled place,

(a beat)

that cheese of green dreams.

She takes a sip of whisky.

H. GRIFFITHS (CONT'D)

I was in LA to sign a contract, which would see my latest blockbuster novel turned into yet another blockbuster movie by the Hollywood mogul, David B. Zelesnik.

She takes another sip of whisky and holds up the glass to the light.

H. GRIFFITHS (CONT'D)

Usquebae. Gaelic for 'The water of life'. Until 7/21 1969, along with double entry book keeping, mankind's greatest achievement.

A beat.

H. GRIFFITHS (CONT'D)

And in this particular malt whisky there is the smoky taste of peat. What, I sometimes wonder, would be the implications for the future of the world if all the methane in all of the peat bogs were suddenly to be released.

A pause. She puts the glass down.

H. GRIFFITHS (CONT'D)

I had just reached the penultimate paragraph of *The Great Gatsby* - certainly before I wrote my first book the superlative American novel of unrequited love.

She quotes the sentence directly to the audience.

H. GRIFFITHS (CONT'D)

'The dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night. Gatsby believed in the green light at the end of the dock, the orgasmic future that year by year recedes before us, It eluded us then, but that's no matter - tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning...

She puts her feet back on the sofa and reclines her head on an arm. Suddenly, her relaxation is interrupted by a muffled, accentless, ageless, genderless shout from somewhere outside the hotel.

VOICE OFF

Rissole!

H. Griffiths gets up quickly, peeks through the Venetian blind but sees nothing. She readjusts the blind.

VOICE OFF (CONT'D))

Rissole!

Again, she looks through the blind and sees nothing. She readjusts the blind, picks up the phone and dials a number.

H. GRIFFITHS (CONT'D)

Reception? There's someone shouting outside the hotel.

(a beat)

Yes, I do expect you to do something about it.

She rings off and replaces the phone forcefully on the cradle. There is a knock on the door.

H. GRIFFITHS (CONT'D)

Enter!

Miss M. Bogush enters, and, though wearing a plain, inexpensive cotton dress, is obviously a man. He speaks with a New York Jewish accent.

M. BOGUSH

I'm M. Bogush, the house detective, sir. A graduate, so to speak, of NYPD Homicide. How can I be of help today?

VOICE OFF

Rissole!

H. GRIFFITHS

(pointing to the blind)

I want that -

M. BOGUSH

(looking closely at H. Griffiths)

Say, ain't you the famous writer?

H. GRIFFITHS

Of course, but -

M. BOGUSH

Greatest fan. Greatest fan. Say, have I got some stories you could use.

H. GRIFFITHS

(pointing to blind)

But -

M. BOGUSH

On his long journey from the old country, my grandfather went to many places and had many adventures - with only the clothes he stood up in and a modest bundle under his arm.

(a beat)

In the port of Hamburg, Germany, he bought a ticket for America and the ship set sail. But he had been duped. The boat went only to London.

(a beat)

He arrived late at night in what the Brits call a pea souper - fog so thick you wouldn't know your own face .

(a beat)

He wandered the streets with his modest bundle - in which by the way was a picture of his mother, Hannah. In the pocket of his only shirt was a picture of his sweetheart, Rachel.

H. Griffiths shows interest. A beat.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

He was searching anxiously this way and that for signs in Yiddish. Somewhere to eat maybe, a boarding house. Suddenly, he hears a whistle and running feet -

H. Griffiths shows more interest.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

and, a moment later, is struck unconscious. When he comes round, he's in a police station. They think he's Jack the Ripper.

A pause.

H. GRIFFITHS

Yes? Yes?

M. BOGUSH

They let him go.

H. GRIFFITHS

What?

M. BOGUSH

When they knew he wasn't Jack the Ripper.

H. GRIFFITHS

Now look here -

VOICE OFF

Rissole!

H. GRIFFITHS

I want you to deal with that and not waste my time with inconsequential nonsense.

M. BOGUSH

This is my family we're talking here.

A pause.

M. BOGUSH

Ok. We'll try again.

A beat.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

My grandfather was the eldest of thirteen. The Tzar was an anti-Semite. When they got to be eighteen, the first born sons of Jewish families had to serve twenty years in the army. When he got to seventeen, my grandfather decided to escape to America. He couldn't tell his mother or his sweetheart even -

H. Griffiths shows interest.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

or any of his twelve brothers.

(a beat)

So, early one morning, he crept from the house with his modest bundle and made his way to the station. There was only one other passenger in the compartment, a sea captain.

(a beat)

My grandfather slept. He was woken suddenly. The captain, a goy but a mensch nevertheless, told him the border was near and the guards would search each carriage for Yiddisher fellas. When the train slowed, he should jump and run.

(a beat)

And that's what he did. But the guards saw him and fired. A bullet straight through his cap, missing his head by a strand of hair. He travelled only by night, walking all the way, until he got to the port of Hamburg. Germany.

M. Bogush looks expectantly at H. Griffiths. Silence.

H. GRIFFITHS

Well?

M. BOGUSH

What'd yer mean, 'well?'?

H. GRIFFITHS

What happens?

VOICE OFF

Rissole!

H. GRIFFITHS

(looking in the direction of the voice)

I really think -

M. BOGUSH

What more d'yer want? It's got an end, a middle, a beginning.

A beat.

H. GRIFFITHS

Are you familiar with Aristotle's Poetics?

M. BOGUSH

(menacing)

We spoke of little else in Homicide.

Silence.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

Say, what sort of name is Griffiths? Sounds unAmerican to me.

H. GRIFFITHS

My ancestors were Welsh -

M. Bogush pronounces the next word to rhyme with 'squelch'.

M. BOGUSH

Welch?

H. GRIFFITHS

No - Welsh! We came from Wales. We sailed to Boston.

(a beat)

And then we joined the 'fortyniners and crossed the endless seas of the ceaseless prairie and settled in Missouri, the 'Show Me!' State.

A beat. M. Bogush looks even more closely at H. Griffiths.

M. BOGUSH

Are you some sort of prevert?

H. GRIFFITHS

Privet?! I will have you know that my family has been in these United States of America for more than one hundred and twenty years!

VOICE OFF

Rissole!

M. BOGUSH

Ok. One last chance. A riddle.

(off her reaction)

About herrings.

(off her further reaction)

Because you can do almost anything with a herring.

As M. Bogush tells the riddle, using different voices for Schmartsnik and Abutinsky (pronounced a-but-in-ski), he becomes increasingly aggressive and H. Griffiths increasingly cowed.

M. BOGUSH

There were these two fellas. Schmartsnik and Abutinsky. Right?

M. Bogush leans in a little - H. Griffiths a little back. H. Griffiths nods.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

Schmartsnik says to Abutinsky. 'Vot's red, hangs on a vall and vistles?'

M. Bogush leans in a little further - H. Griffiths a little further back. H. Griffiths nods. A beat.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

Abutinsky says, 'I dunno. Vot's red, hangs on a vall and vistles?'

(a beat)

Schmartsnik says, 'A herring.'

M. Bogush leans in a little further - H. Griffiths a little further back. H. Griffiths nods. A beat.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

'But a herring ain't red,.' say Abutinsky

(a beat)

'So, you can paint it red.'

M. Bogush leans in a little further - H. Griffiths a little further back. H. Griffiths nods. A beat.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

'But a herring don't hang on a vall.'

(a beat)

'So, you can nail it to a vall!.'

M. Bogush leans in a little further - H. Griffiths a little further back, H. Griffiths nods.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

'But a herring don't vistle.'

(a beat)

'So -

(a Jewish shrug)

it don't vistle.'

Silence. They look intently at each other. M. Bogush begins to cease to be aggressive and H. Griffiths to cease to cower. H. Griffiths pats the sofa.

H. GRIFFITHS

(timidly)

Please, come and sit by me.

M. Bogush does so.

H. GRIFFITHS (CONT'D)

(ingratiatingly)

Have a malt?

M. BOGUSH

A malted?

No, a whisky. Scotch.

H. GRIFFITHS

M. BOGUSH

(playfully)

Scosh?

H. Griffiths passes M. Bogush the bottle. The latter looks at the label on the bottle.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

La Frog? Sounds French.

H. GRIFFITHS

La-Froyg. It's Gaelic for 'beautiful hollow by the broad bay'.

M. BOGUSH

Those two simple words mean all that? What d'you know!

He passes the bottle back.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

Ok. I'll have a small one.

During the next exchange, H. Griffiths pours some whisky in the unused glass and hands it to M. Bogush.

H. GRIFFITHS

Please tell me another story.

M. BOGUSH

Well -

H. GRIFFITHS

Please.

M. BOGUSH

If you're sure. You're not just saying -

H. GRIFFITHS

No, really.

M. BOGUSH

Ok.

(a beat)

Lochaim.

He raises his glass. H. Griffiths follows suit.

H. GRIFFITHS

Chin-chin.

They drink.

M. BOGUSH

When my grandfather was an old man he was, of course, very rich.

H. GRIFFITHS

How had he made his money?

M. BOGUSH

Sausages.

(off her reaction)

You've never had a Bogush's Heimischer Wienie?

H. GRIFFITHS

No, I have not

A beat. M. Bogush looks quizzically at her.

M. BOGUSH

Welch?

H. GRIFFITHS

Welsh. Please continue.

M. BOGUSH

My grandfather's second wife -

(off H. Griffiths' reaction)

Younger than his daughters no less. A gold digger. Anyways, she took him to Italy to see the sights. They went to Milan - saw the cathedral, the lamp post where they hung Mussolini, and 'The Last Supper' by some guy called Dav-inchy.

(a beat)

So, while the guide is talking about the painting my grandfather goes right up close to it. When she finishes, he says, jerking his thumb at the picture, 'These are Jewish men?'. 'Kind of,' says the guide - but with an Italian accent, you know.

(a beat)

'So how come one of 'ems a broad'.

(a beat)

There was consternation.

(a beat)

But he swore to his dying day one of the guys round the table was a woman.

A pause. He looks at H. Griffiths.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

Not much of a story?

H. GRIFFITHS

Limited appeal. Now your grandfather's second marriage -

M. BOGUSH

You reckon?

H. GRIFFITHS

Couldn't fail.

A pause.

M. BOGUSH

Do you know what the 'M' stands for, you know, in M. Bogush?

H. Griffiths shakes her head.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

I've never told anybody this.

(a beat)

Milton.

H. GRIFFITHS

Why were you given that name?

M. BOGUSH

'They also serve who only stand and wait.'

H. GRIFFITHS

Of course.

M. BOGUSH

And 'H'?

H. GRIFFITHS

Absolutely no one knows this.

(a beat)

Hermaphroditee.

M. BOGUSH

Wow!

He looks admiringly at H. Griffiths and croons the next lines slowly.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

'Fly us to the moon/And let us play among the stars./Let us see what spring is like/On Jupiter and Mars/ In other words

A beat. He speaks the next words.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

hold my hand.

They hold hands. He turns the TV on. There is only static on the screen. They look at each other.

M. BOGUSH (CONT'D)

What a great country!

Along pause. H. Griffiths turns to the audience. He opens the book at its last page and reads aloud.

H. GRIFFITHS

'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly to the past.'

VOICE OFF

Rissole!

THE END