

Don't Give Up Because

By
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STORY OF THE PLAY

Inspired by the screwball movie comedies of the 1930s and '40s, *Don't Give Up Because* tells the story of Faye Burntwhistle, a cocktail waitress who is determined to marry a wealthy man. Faye falls in love with the heir to an Italian family fortune, but because he fears that women only love him for his money, she concocts a fiction that she is also an heir to an enormous family fortune. She is surprised when she gets the news that he's coming to visit her "mansion" in Indianapolis and meet her well-to-do "family." So Faye recruits several members of the Dry Creek Civic Theatre to impersonate her family, and they are all convincing enough, at least at first. But as the evening progresses, and wine bottles are emptied, the improvisation goes off the rails. Suspicions arise and the conflict escalates but despite an unexpected twist, an improvised romance becomes the real thing in the end.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(7 m, 5 w)

FAYE BURNTWHISTLE: F, 22. Voluptuous, reckless cocktail waitress.

ELLIE HAGEN: (The Maid) F, 26. Pretty, skeptical law secretary.

MONROE POSEY: (The Father) M, 50. Flamboyant, stylish bachelor.

VIRGINIA DAY: (The Mother) F, 40s. Sarcastic owner of Meridian Art Gallery.

PIPER "PIP" STURGES: (The Sister) F, 19½. Energetic, bobby-soxer shop girl.

DUANE EDWARDS: Policeman, M, 22. Athletic, square policeman.

"WEBB" WEBSTER: (The Butler) M, 35. Bumbling, over-confident repair man.

PEARL WEBSTER: (The Cook) F, 35. Nurturing, always helpful seamstress.

JIM SULLIVAN: M, 30. Irreverent, handsome veteran.

NICCOLO FELLINI: M, 24. Debonaire, slight Italian accent. Also Nicky Novak.

FRED SAWICKI: M, 40. Avuncular, gregarious chaperone. Also Mugsy Sawicki.

"LEFTY" LAVERTY: M, 30. Policeman.

SETTING

Indianapolis. Summer, 1949. Drawing room of the Coalscuttle Mansion, built in 1870. USC an archway leads into the room from a hallway. A large vase adorns a hall table. Double doors at SL lead offstage to the dining room and kitchen. In the UL corner a wood-paneled stairwell leads up a few steps to a landing then exits off left. The drawing room is filled with antique furniture—armchairs, lounge chairs, loveseat, small tables, lamps. A wood bar with two stools is in the UR corner. A collection of ceramics—Chinese, Greek, Roman, Pre-Columbian—is displayed on the more modern wooden shelving on both sides of the room. A chandelier hangs at center. Three wooden shipping crates are stacked against a wall.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I

Scene 1: Saturday afternoon.

Scene 2: That evening.

ACT II

Scene 1: Thirty minutes later.

Scene 2: An hour later.

Scene 3: An hour later.

All scenes take place in the drawing room.

NOTE

The history of theatrical improvisation goes way back and is filled with references to Atellan Farce, Italian Commedia dell'Arte and Stanislavski. The “rules of improvisation” were codified by Viola Spolin in her 1963 book “Improvisation for the Theatre.” So, the idea that our characters would know and use those rules in 1949 is, like everything else in this play, a complete fib.

Act I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: A shadowy room, furniture draped with dust covers. A bucket containing cleaning supplies is on the floor. ELLIE HAGEN, 26, sensible, pretty, wearing loafers, a plaid skirt and pastel blouse, is sweeping a Persian rug with a manual sweeper and a flashlight. Ellie will spend most the first scene cleaning, dusting and straightening. SFX: The doorbell rings.)

FAYE: *(Offstage.)* Ellie, where are you?

ELLIE: Down the hall, to the right.

FAYE: *(Offstage.)* What hall? I can't see a thing.

ELLIE: The power's off. Don't break anything.

(FAYE BURNTWHISTLE, 22, attractive, brash, enters, wearing a tight blouse, wide-leg pants and wedge heels. She struggles with two tinkling boxes. One is filled with wine bottles and the other glassware.)

FAYE: Flynn said I could have any wine that was open, so we opened a few extra last night.

(FAYE bumps the hall table as she enters the room, the vase rocks improbably.)

ELLIE: Hey! Oh, no—!

(ELLIE runs to stop the vase from rocking. FAYE puts the boxes on a table.)

ELLIE: *(Cont'd.)* We're already breaking and entering. Let's not add criminal damage to the charges.

FAYE: It's not breaking and entering if we have the key.

ELLIE: I stole the key.

FAYE: I'm going to need electricity, Ellie. It's 1949, people expect it nowadays.

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ELLIE: I called yesterday, they said they'd turn it on by two. You're in the drawing room. Dining room, pantry, and kitchen are through there if you want to take a gander.

FAYE: By myself?

ELLIE: I've seen it. Take the flashlight. Don't break anything.

FAYE: (*Shines the flashlight on the walls.*) Oh, honey, this isn't a mansion, it's a murder scene waiting for a victim.

ELLIE: I think it's wonderful. Just a little old-fashioned.

FAYE: A little? What happened to the owner, burned at the stake?

ELLIE: Retired to Arizona. They didn't want to sell so they asked Huxley, Hawks, Harrington, and Powell to look after it.

FAYE: What's with all the flowerpots?

ELLIE: It's art. That means expensive. Don't touch.

(FAYE hesitantly exits through the SL archway.)

FAYE: (*Offstage.*) Oh, good grief. I didn't know you could even buy black wallpaper. More flowerpots? I think we've had about enough of that—

(SFX: Offstage, the sound of breaking glass.)

ELLIE: If that was a vase, you'll have to get a second job.

FAYE: (*Enters.*) Be careful in there, someone broke an ashtray. Ugh, it's all so dark and gloomy. If they're so rich you'd think they could afford a couple gallons of pastel yellow.

ELLIE: Stop complaining or find your own mansion.

FAYE: Oh, you know I'm not serious. It's a miracle you came up with this place on short notice. If this works, it'll all be thanks to you.

ELLIE: If Huxley, Hawks, Harrington, or Powell ever find out we used this house, you can send my thank you card to the county jail.

(ELLIE pulls a dust cover from a chair. FAYE sits in it and uses the flashlight to check her to-do list.)

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FAYE: Wine, glassware. Forget dishes, they've got more than Carter has liver pills. Hair at two-thirty. Pick up food at four. What time is it? They should be here anytime.

ELLIE: They, meaning your actors?

FAYE: My former theatrical family from the Dry Creek Civic. I worked there for a couple years but I gave it up. Acting is so hard. Did you know they make you memorize all those words?

ELLIE: Well, that's just mean.

FAYE: I know. Plus, you have to talk and walk, often at the same time.

ELLIE: Torture. I'd rather work in a coal mine.

FAYE: That's what I thought.

ELLIE: I can't believe you talked them into taking part in this fiasco. You did tell them what you were up to? (*Beat.*) Faye?

FAYE: Not exactly.

ELLIE: Why not?

FAYE: Because they might not do it.

ELLIE: If you're going to ask people to help you, they have to know why. You should tell them the truth.

FAYE: You're helping. I lie to you all the time.

(A somewhat menacing silhouette of a MAN appears in the hallway.)

ELLIE: Faye?

(FAYE aims the flashlight at the MAN. He smiles. MONROE POSEY, 50, owner of Posey's Flowers, wearing checked trousers, a silk tie and two-tone wingtips, performs a brief soft shoe.)

MONROE: You have no idea how long I've waited to sneak a peek at this historic *maison de maitre*. And now I'm here and it's marvelous. Regrettably underlit, but still marvelous.

FAYE: Ellie, this is Monroe Posey, artistic director of the Dry Creek Civic and without a doubt the best director in the city. Monroe, this is my friend Ellie.

ELLIE: Nice to meet you, Mr. Posey.

MONROE: Thank you, my dear. Please, call me Monroe.

FAYE: Bad news. No power. We don't have any lights yet.

MONROE: What? Oh, my. *(Thinks.)* I wish we had light.

(The LIGHTS immediately illuminate for the first time.)

ELLIE: Say, he is a good director.

FAYE: Oh, thank God.

MONROE: I wish I had a million dollars. *(Pause.)* No? *(Chuckles as he enters the room and is immediately entranced by the design of the room.)* Coalscuttle Mansion, just as I imagined. Gothic revival woodwork, heavy and masculine. The shelving is not period, she's had that constructed. And there they are— Nettie Sullivan's fabled antiques. Of course, being a florist, I can't help but think something is missing in those vases.

ELLIE: Monroe, Faye wants to explain a bit more about tonight.

FAYE: No, I don't. It's nothing. It's just that I may not have fully explained the purpose of tonight's improvisation.

MONROE: You just said it was a practical joke.

FAYE: There's a little more to the story.

MONROE: I'm intrigued. Spill it, Faye.

FAYE: So you know Liz Grant—works with me at the Shamrock? We decided to treat ourselves to a weekend in Chicago. Rooms at the Drake, new dresses, the whole megillah. There was a hoity-toity society event in the Grand Ballroom. We were dressed to the nines and doused in liquid courage, so we crashed the party and was it deluxe—

ELLIE: Meanwhile, back at the ranch.

FAYE: I met a guy. Tall, handsome, wearing a tuxedo and a gold watch the size of a doorknob. He introduced himself. He smelled like Ivory soap and a baseball mitt. I fell like a sack of potatoes and was overwhelmed by passionate desire.

MONROE: My lord. It's like reading a gas station paperback.

FAYE: We've talked long-distance. I'm in love and I know he loves me. Just yesterday he told me he's coming down on the train tonight. I think he might propose.

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MONROE: Excellent. Congratulations. So why the charade?

FAYE: He's from a very well-to-do, very conservative Italian family. He's become very suspicious because there are girls out there who might pretend to love him just to get his money.

MONROE: You mean gold diggers.

FAYE: Yes. Gold diggers. So, I told him from the start that I was not a gold digger. And that he had nothing to worry about because I did not care one whit about money.

ELLIE: If only she would've stopped right there.

MONROE: You didn't stop right there?

FAYE: No. I said I didn't care about money because I'm an heiress to an enormous family fortune in Indianapolis.

MONROE: You're not an heiress.

FAYE: I am not. My grandma runs a third-hand store. It's like a secondhand store but not as fancy.

ELLIE: Not really a store. More like a ditch.

FAYE: I must convince Niccolo that I am a rich heiress. Thanks to Ellie I have a family mansion—

MONROE: So, you just need a family.

FAYE: Yes. So, he'll see that I don't need his money.

ELLIE: Then she'll get his money.

FAYE: If it works, I'll spend the rest of my life on his Italian estate, my family here a distant memory.

MONROE: It's morally questionable and destined to fail.

FAYE: But if anyone can help me make it work, it's the legendary Monroe Posey. Will you still help?

MONROE: There's no need to blow smoke up my skirt. Of course we will. Everyone suspected the truth was much worse than you let on.

FAYE: What do you mean?

MONROE: Because we all know you very well, we immediately assumed your story was phony. I guessed you were involved in an investment scheme. Webb suspects that you're a spy for the Soviet government—

(VIRGINIA DAY, 40s, brassy, attractive divorcee, enters the hallway.)

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VIRGINIA: I thought sure you were blackmailing someone.

MONROE: We were all wrong, Virginia. She's trying to convince a rich Italian to marry her.

VIRGINIA: That was my second guess. *(Puts on her glasses to inspect the large vase.)* Art Nouveau. France. Lovely. *(Enters the drawing room, immediately drawn to the collection of ceramics.)* Hello, Faye. Who's your friend?

ELLIE: I'm Ellie Hagen.

VIRGINIA: Walter Hagen made a million bucks playing golf. Any relation?

ELLIE: No. I come from circus people.

VIRGINIA: Virginia Day. I own a little art gallery on Meridian. *(SHE lifts a vase to inspect the mark on the bottom. Gasping, she puts it back then covers her mouth.)* I knew about Nettie's collection, but I'd never seen it. It should be in a museum. Faye, did I just see you driving a lovely blue Packard?

FAYE: It's not mine. "Numbers" Lundgren let me borrow it.

VIRGINIA: He let you borrow a brand-new Packard?

FAYE: Sure. How authentic would it look if my rich family didn't own a luxurious car?

MONROE: How does Numbers Lundgren get to work?

FAYE: He doesn't. He's a bookie. He just sits in the Shamrock all day, drinking. Really he's better off not driving. Nice guy though.

ELLIE: You think all men are nice.

FAYE: They are all nice. To me.

VIRGINIA: Men love a new car. Until next year's model comes out. Then they're off to the races while the old model rusts away in the garage, as forgotten as yesterday's news.

FAYE: You're not talking about cars.

VIRGINIA: I've been divorced three times. I'm just waiting on the wrecker to tow me to the scrapyards.

(ELLIE quickly exits into the dining room, trying not to show emotion.)

VIRGINIA: *(Cont'd.)* What'd I say?

FAYE: *(In Pig Latin.)* Ix-nay on the ee-voiced-day.

End of Freeview

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