

# WHAT I LEARNED AT THE MOVIES

*A full-length play in one act*

**By Michael Rychlewski**

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**The Time**  
**2000**

*The epilogue takes place in 2015.*

**The Characters**

*DENNIS, 50: a car salesman and movie buff*

*ERIN, 17: DENNIS'S daughter, on her way to college*

*MOLLY, 45: DENNIS'S ex -wife, a waitress*

*HELEN: DENNIS'S mother*

*CHARLES: DENNIS'S father*

*PATRICK: DENNIS'S best friend from grade school in Denver*

*JIM: DENNIS'S best friend from high-school in Chicago*

*ERIN at 34 in 2015*

*The people in DENNIS'S life should be played by the actors.*

*The actors in the movies should be played by DENNIS.*

**The Setting**

*DENNIS'S living room, decorated in early divorce: a small comfortable couch with an end-table, a coffee table, a phone and a lamp. A bookcase up-stage filled with VHS cassettes and DVDs. Three framed 8 X 10 photos on the bookcase: DENNIS'S mother at a picnic when she was a little girl, DENNIS'S mother and her cousin LEO in front of his plane, DENNIS'S father at a bar when he was in the army during WW II. These photos may be projected as DENNIS holds them out to the audience. Two movie-house seats down-left. A living room window down-right. A door to the street up-right. An unseen TV up-center. A bottle of unopened Jack Daniels and rock glass on the bookcase.*

*The play might have additional visual elements: photos of now-vanished Chicago movie houses, head-shots of movie stars, stills of famous films, sheet-music covers. Any and/or all can be projected on the walls and/or swirl around DENNIS in his moments of euphoria, nostalgia and despair.*

*Three '78 recordings are available and could be used: "Always," "To Each His Own," and "Wabash Blues."*

*NOTE: PATRICK and JIM can be played by the same actor.*

*AT RISE*

*DENNIS is carefully wrapping a VHS on the coffee table. After a time he sees the audience, acknowledges them, gestures that he won't be long.*

DENNIS

When I was a kid I loved ripping open presents. You could wreak havoc and nobody could say anything. Now my daughter is different. She'll very carefully cut the bow, smooth out the paper. Like my mother...who always wanted to save things. A reflex from The Depression I imagine.

*HELEN enters with a dust cloth.*

HELEN

You never know when you can use it, Dennis.

*HELEN dusts off the photos, paying particular attention to the LEO photo in the center.*

DENNIS

That's right, Ma.

HELEN

You always tore everything to shreds.

DENNIS

I was an intense kid, huh?

HELEN

Well, you had a lot of energy, that's for sure.

*HELEN exits. DENNIS finishes wrapping and puts a bow on it. He regards the gift with pride and tenderness. He puts it down at the center of the coffee table and rubs his palms together in anticipation.*

Okay! Where to being!?! At the beginning! (*a breathless litany*) The Paramount Theater downtown Denver the day after Christmas 1960 we had just moved back from Chicago Aunt Ruth took me and my cousin Susie to see *Swiss Family Robinson* it was the first time I'd ever been to the movies!

*DENNIS sits down in a movie-house chair, transfixed.*

The house lights dim. The velvet curtain opens. A castle! At purple sunset! Sprinkled with pixie dust! ...They lived in a tree house! Was there anything cooler!?! All night I fantasized about that tree house. I'd run away from home! Join Swiss Family Robinson! Grow blond hair! Fight against the pirates! And live in that tree house!

*CHARLES enters with some sheet music, humming "To Each His Own."*

CHARLES

Where you goin', Dennis?

DENNIS

*(tying his shoes)* Expedition, Dad.

CHARLES

Expedition!? To where?

DENNIS

To find the perfect tree.

CHARLES

The perfect tree!? I dunno. Aren't there better ways to spend a Saturday morning? Practicing the piano, for instance?

DENNIS

I'll practice this afternoon, Dad.

*CHARLES exits, sighing.*

I didn't. Instead I walked all over hell and creation. All Saturday and all Sunday. Never found my tree. When I told the story to the ex, she couldn't believe it.

*MOLLY enters carrying a People magazine.*

MOLLY

You wanted to live in a tree house?!

DENNIS

Yeah! Don't you think that would be cool?

MOLLY

In winter!?

DENNIS

Why not?

MOLLY

You're so ridiculous, Dennis. I swear.

*MOLLY exits.*

DENNIS

I love Molly. Even if we've never really been in the same movie. I learned my first lesson that week-end. Realty can never measure up to the movies. (*salutes*) Here's looking at you, Reality. Good luck! ...I know. I know. It wasn't the greatest epiphany. But you gotta start somewhere.

*DENNIS glances at his watch.*

Hey! Anybody here seen *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*? I caught it last week at the multiplex. The cinematography was a bit "look-how-clever-I-am." But fun to watch. I asked Erin if she wanted to see it. She said yeah. Then she didn't show up. I was wondering if she was still irritated by our *Birth of a Nation* "debate" a few weeks ago.

*ERIN enters, sits on the couch, gestures to the TV.*

ERIN

Jesus, Dad! White people in black face!?

DENNIS

It's a landmark film, Erin!

ERIN

Year. Right.

DENNIS

Do you know what President Wilson said after he saw it?

ERIN

One star?

DENNIS

No! He said, "It was like writing history with lightening." There were a few Sunday nights I had to kinda shove it down her throat. How else you gonna make fois gras? ... You'll say thanks in twenty years, Erin.

ERIN

To who, the Grand Wizard?

*ERIN exits.*

DENNIS

Teen-agers! Don't you love'm? (*mock "can-you-keep-a-secret?"*) This whole thing is really about "domain knowledge." You gotta have it. You can't go to some party in college and someone says, (*does Brando*) "I coulda been somebody. I coulda been a contender." And everyone laughs and you stand there like a slack-jawed idiot with your thumb up your ass! It's like the car business. You know the car inside out or you don't walk up to a customer. You don't read the specs. You know it's

an overhead camshaft carbureted 1.3-liter B3 engine with a five-speed manual--three-speed automatic optional for the five-door...or...you don't open your mouth. Right? ...She'll find herself. ...But *Swiss Family Robinson!*? Oh man! I was hooked! Every Saturday I'd go over to the Ogden Theater with my new buddy, Patrick Talty. Our family moved back a forth a lot between The Mile High City and Chi-town so I didn't get to build many lasting friendships.

***PATRICK enters and they sit in the movie-house seats.***

PATRICK

Did you get the Good'n Plentys?

DENNIS

Yep.

PATRICK

What's first?

DENNIS

*The Bride of Frankenstein.* Then *The Pit and the Pendulum* and then...

DENNIS AND PATRICK

***(Dracula accent) Dracula!***

DENNIS

***(Dracula accent)*** Calling all the pretty girls in their nightgowns out into the balcony!

PATRICK

***(Dracula accent)*** Vere I vil...

PATRICK and DENNIS

***(Dracula accent)*** ...suck your blood!

***They laugh. PATRICK exits.***

DENNIS

Oh Man! Those night-gowns! Easter-egg blue! Butter-cup yellow! Right out of Doris Day. I was starting to go to confession more frequently.

***FATHER BRENNAN enters. They imitate a confessional in the movie-house seats.***

FATHER BRENNAN

***(Irish accent)*** Is that all, my son?

DENNIS

Yes, Father.

FATHER BRENNAN

Evil thoughts invite the Devil, Dennis.

DENNIS

I know Father.

FATHER BRENNAN

You have to invite the Devil for him to come in.

DENNIS

I know, Father. I don't want him to come in, Father.

FATHER BRENNAN

Three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys.

*Light fades on FATHER BRENNAN.*

DENNIS

That was his going-rate. Two impure thoughts? Three Our Fathers three Hail Marys. Ax murdered your entire family? Three Our Fathers three Hail Marys. He was very popular on the confessional circuit. Despite his admonitions, I went to those Saturday horror films like clockwork. And I still enjoy the genre. Molly was never much into it. But she'd give it the old college try now and then..

*MOLLY enters, sits in the movie-house seats. DENNIS joins her.*

MOLLY

*(rolls her eyeballs)* This is your surprise?!

DENNIS

It's Christopher Lee, Molly! Nobody does Drac like he does. Nobody! He's the king! C'mon. You're gonna love it. Check out his teeth! Like tombstones in the old part of the graveyard.

MOLLY

*What?*

DENNIS

Molly wasn't big on metaphors. She had a more literal view of things. But she had a great bod. And she laughed at my jokes...half the time. Sometimes we'd get sexy after a movie. What are you doing in the forest, little girl?

*MOLLY*

*(little girl voice)* I'm lost! Can you help me?