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Annie's Party

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Annie's Party
A play for actors and singers by John Steven Paul
Adapted from a homily by David H. Kehret
Developed in workshop by Soul Purpose,
The liturgical drama troupe of the Valparaiso University Theatre

Cast

Narrator

Gretchen, *a college student, 20 years old*

Mom, *her mother, 45 years old*

Tom, *her cousin, 19 years old*

Annie, *her great-grandmother, 88 years old*

THE WALL

There are many, many pictures of Annie's family and her friends on the wall of her room. Many of the people in the pictures have lines in the play. In this edition, those lines are divided among five actors. A much better way to stage the play is to put an adult choir and a youth choir in the front of the church, on risers, and to distribute the lines spoken by "The Wall" to members of the choirs. The choirs then sing the hymns at Annie's funeral. Choir members may be given picture mats that look like frames, to hold in front of their faces at appropriate times. An even more adventurous approach is to distribute the lines to members of the congregation who may deliver the lines from their places in the pews. They, too, should have mats to hold in front of their faces.

If the play is done with the minimum number of actors making up the wall, the roles should be distributed as follows:

Wall #1: Gretchen's father and Tom's uncle

Wall #2: Gretchen's uncle

Wall #3: Gene's wife and Tom's mother

Wall #4: Harvey, an elderly cousin

Wall #5: Gretchen's little sister

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE: In this dramatic adaptation of David H. Kehret's story, "Annie's Party," I have tried to retain much of the narrative quality of the original. For much of the play, the audience should feel as though they are having a story told to them and then, gradually, that they become part of the story. The enveloping of the audience can be accomplished by moving the NARRATOR out of the "picture frame" into and circulating around the audience. There are actually three time frames in the play: 1) the NARRATOR'S time is the ever-unfolding present, 2) the period of preparation just prior to ANNIE'S ninetieth birthday, and 3) the time of GRETCHEN'S first visit to ANNIE two years before when ANNIE is 88 years old and GRETCHEN is 18. Some theatrical effort should be made to clarify the second time frame from the third.

Annie's Party is about many things, but one thing that it shouldn't be about is how saddened we are by the loss of a loved one to death. Annie's death is a "good death." She dies in the Lord. In some ways, her death is inconsequential; she goes on praying for her

family after death in the same way she prayed for them when she was a resident of Lakeview Nursing Home. Since, however, this play is about the last years and the death of a wonderful great-grandmother, there is great potential for sentimentality and emotionalism. The actors should endeavor to avoid reinforcing the inherent sentimentality in the story by playing the characters and action *without adding excessive emotion*.

I

NARRATOR

It all started out small at least with a phone call from Gretchen to Tom. Not long distance or even across town, it was barely across campus.

GRETCHEN

(into the telephone)

Tom? Gretchen. You haven't forgotten I'm riding back with you after mid-term break, have you? Good, I just had an idea... No, I'm not going to try binging back a sofa on top of your car again... And I'm not going to run away with you and get married, not now or ever! Will you stop making wise cracks and listen to me? I want to be serious. That day when we come back, you know, is Annie's birthday. So let's go through Sheboygan. It's barely out of the way. She'll be 90 years old. I don't think anyone else has remembered, so let's just the two of us stop off and wish her happy birthday. We'll make it a surprise.

NARRATOR

So it began like that with only Gretchen and Tom. That it should have begun with them at all is somewhat odd since they were a whole three generations removed from Annie and only some sort of distant cousins to each other.

TOM

And Gretchen herself had really known Annie for only about two years.

MOM

Our branch of the family moved out to the West Coast in the '50's. That's where Gretchen was born and grew up. I used to talk to her about our vacations back to the Midwest and how Annie played with her when she was a little girl.

GRETCHEN

There were pictures of me sitting in Annie's lap but I didn't remember those times very well. I sure looked happy in those pictures...

NARRATOR

Then a couple of years ago Gretchen came back to the Midwest to attend the university.

GRETCHEN

My first semester on campus, it was too far to run home for the extra-long mid-term break, since my folks still lived out west. So my roommate invited me home with her for the weekend.

NARRATOR

And that was in Sheboygan.

MOM

When I heard about the weekend plans I told her she had to look up Annie.

GRETCHEN

Right! Just the way a sophisticated eighteen-year-old college woman wants to spend her precious mid-term break – with a feeble, senile, eighty-eight-year-old grandmother, embarrassingly and with difficulty trying to make conversation.

MOM

But I insisted.

NARRATOR

So it was on that mid-fall Saturday afternoon that Gretchen reluctantly found Lakeview Nursing home, got an aide to lead her to Annie's room, and walked into a series of surprises.

II

(ANNIE'S room at the Lakeview Nursing Home. The room is created entirely by a wheelchair and the family tree on the wall. The first surprise is Annie herself, though in a wheelchair,¹ she is a bright, lively-faced, mentally alert woman, neatly dressed and with a gorgeous head of silver-

¹ Playwright's Note: It may well work better to have ANNIE using a walker, especially if the performance space is small. Lines may be changed accordingly. It is important that it be clear that ANNIE does need help to get around.

white hair. THE WALL stands behind ANNIE. MOM and TOM have taken positions “on the wall.”)

GRETCHEN

(Surprised that ANNIE’s not feeble at all and fumbling for something to say.)

You have the most beautiful hair I’ve ever seen! *(she recovers)* Oh, excuse me, I’m –

ANNIE

--You must be Gretchen. Come in. Come in.

GRETCHEN

Yes, but how did you know my – Oh, I’ll bet Mom wrote you that I was coming, didn’t she.

NARRATOR

Then Gretchen saw Annie’s wall.

WALL #1

Known around Lakeview Nursing Home as “The Wall.”

(On cue, the people who make up the wall, who have been holding their picture frames below their waists, now raise them into position around their heads.)

GRETCHEN

There’s my senior picture. That’s how you knew me. *(she looks again)* I can’t believe that was only a year ago.

NARRATOR

To have a nursing home wall pasted full of pictures in the shape of a huge family tree is quite a thing in itself!

The actors playing THE WALL now become a contentious BOARD OF DIRECTORS and mime a very animated meeting.

The Lakeview Board of Directors spent six monthly meetings in a row discussing such use of their precious wall, before they finally gave in to Annie’s persistence.

WALL #1

If we let her do it, then *everybody* will want to do it.

ANNIE

I knew they would. That's why I wheeled (*if ANNIE is using a walker, "wheeled" should be changed to "traipsed"*) around Lakeview encouraging everybody else to do it. And walls have caught on. Now most everybody has a family tree of some size on their wall. It makes them feel *connected*.

WALL, TOM & MOM

But no one has a family tree quite like Annie's.

ANNIE

(*to GRETCHEN*)

Look over here. (*She makes her way to the other end of the wall.*) Know him? You should. He's your cousin of sorts. Tom's his name. Dunlap branch. Tom Dunlap. You're the same age, and you go to the same university. Be sure to look him up when you get back.

NARRATOR

There was a chair for Gretchen. She sat down and they, or Annie mostly, began to talk.

WALL #3

First they talked about Gretchen's family.

MOM

Annie wanted to know what we were all up to.

GRETCHEN

I never knew that! (*she laughs*)

WALL #5

She even filled Gretchen in on a couple of things about her mom and dad Gretchen hadn't heard before.

WALL #1

Then they talked about favorite colors.

WALL #2

They talked about clothes.

WALL #3

They talked about the view from Annie's window.

ANNIE

It changes with the seasons.

WALL #4

They talked about Gretchen and what courses she was taking...

GRETCHEN

Cultural anthropology, weight training, flute...

WALL #5

They talked about what a neat person Gretchen was –

ANNIE

--what wonderful talents you have –

TOM

--and how it was essential to the well-being of the whole universe that she make the most of herself as a young woman.

NARRATOR

Well, such conversation goes rather rapidly.

GRETCHEN

(reluctantly)

Annie, my ride will be waiting for me. But I'll be back again soon, somehow, I promise. *(About to leave, then sees the calendar.)* Hey, what are all those names on your calendar?²

NARRATOR

It was quite a large calendar, and each date was jammed full of the names of people.

ANNIE

Oh, those are all the members of the family: children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and two great-great-grandchildren now, and all their husbands and wives, and some of my friends.

GRETCHEN

You mean those are their birthdays?

ANNIE

Heavens no. I can never keep their birthdays straight. Couldn't afford to send them all cards anyway. No, those names are there so I remember to pray for them.

GRETCHEN

You mean once in a while you pray, "God bless everyone in the family"?

ANNIE

No, that's too impersonal – like *church*. I pray in specifics. If it's the first of the month I pray for everybody whose name begins with 'A.' On the second I pray for the B's. Like that.

GRETCHEN

But how do you ever know if your prayers are answered?

² Perhaps the across in *THE WALL* now pull out a theatrically oversized calendar (at least 40" by 30") and stretch it across the front of the wall.

MOM

(aside)

As a college freshman, Gretchen was beginning to develop a few critical thinking skills.

ANNIE

Well, my prayers are always answered!

GRETCHEN

Yes, but how do you really know? Like if you pray for a new car for Jim or a job for Mary or a new house for Bill and Jane, and you never see these people, how do you know if your prayers are ever answered?

ANNIE

Well, I don't pray for frivolous things like that. If I did, I *wouldn't* ever know if my prayers were answered.

GRETCHEN

Then what do you pray for?

ANNIE

I look at each name on the calendar for that day and I think about that person for a while, and then I pray. I pray that God would keep them.

NARRATOR

When Gretchen's time with Annie was up and she couldn't delay leaving any longer, she bent over the wheel chair (*or* "Annie set aside her walker") and the two women embraced for the longest time.

MOM

Annie hugged Gretchen like she was her own daughter just home from college. Gretchen felt suddenly like the little girl who had once thrown herself into her great-grandmother's arms and had now grown up and forgotten about it.

WALL #1

But while Gretchen was still bending over ("standing there") with her arms around Annie, she opened one eye.

WALL #3

She carefully counted the letters of the alphabet up to “G,” until she was looking directly at October 7th.

NARRATOR

There it was.

WALL #2

First “Gene.”

GRETCHEN

That must be Uncle Gene.

WALL #3

Then “Gloria.”

GRETCHEN

I never heard of her.

NARRATOR

... and then...

GRETCHEN

“Gretchen!”

NARRATOR

From that moment on, the seventh day of every month was a special day for Gretchen.

III

The stage is now divided into two parts with GRETCHEN and TOM's university on stage left, and ANNIE's mom, with the WALL behind her, on stage right. The NARRATOR might take a place equidistant³.

NARRATOR

Back at the university Gretchen did look up Tom, as Annie had told her to do.

TOM

Once we finally met, it was amazing how often we bumped into each other.

NARRATOR

Over the months they became friends.

GRETCHEN

(to TOM)

On the seventh of each month I know someone very special is thinking about me and praying for me.

ANNIE

Not praying for her to get an "A" on a paper or to do well on a test or even find the right young man; I'm praying that God will keep her.

GRETCHEN

(to TOM)

I think, by the way, that this lady may have an "in" with God!

NARRATOR

Just before Thanksgiving vacation, which Gretchen was also going to spend in Sheboygan with her roommate, she went to the university bookstore and got the biggest calendar with the biggest spaces she could find.

³ *In the fall of 2007 the staging was changed quite radically. The members of the family Chorus is now spread around the church, while ANNIE remains at the front alone. She seems to be trying to hold her family together through prayer. The CHORUS members sit until they are needed for the action.*

ANNIE

Those calendar makers are getting skimpy with paper these days. They make the squares too small to write the names big enough for my poor old eyes.

GRETCHEN

(to TOM)

I've wrapped it up as a Christmas present and I'm going to hand-deliver it to Annie on the day after Thanksgiving. And I'm sure she'll use it, though I'm not sure what she'll think of the hunk-of-the-month part. Probably just turn it over underneath where it can't be seen. *(She walks across stage and does exactly that.)*

WALL #1

Annie of course insisted that she be allowed to unwrap the gift right on the spot and assured Gretchen that it would be her calendar to use the whole next year. *(ANNIE obviously loves the hunk-of-the-month part.)*

MOM

When we moved back to the Midwest, to Wisconsin, Gretchen and Tom Dunlap started car-pooling together back and forth to the university.

TOM

All because of Annie's wall.

GRETCHEN

And maybe Annie's calendar.

Annie and her wall now leave the stage. ANNIE will not return until the end of the play. THE WALL now becomes a series of individual members of the family.

IV

NARRATOR

So anyway, that's how the whole thing first got started⁴, with Gretchen's call to Tom.

⁴ *Playwright's Note: "So anyway..." the NARRATOR must convey the sense that this is where he or she started to tell the story with the very first line of the play.*

GRETCHEN

(this is the same phone call as the one at the beginning of the play)

So it's all set, okay? We'll go through Sheboygan and stop and see her? Great, I've got to go, Tom. Got to call Mom and Dad and tell them the plans. Talk to you later.

NARRATOR

They thought it was a great idea.

MOM

On the phone.

Tell you what, we'll drive you down to Sheboygan, and you can meet Tom there. That way we can see Annie too, and we'll bring a cake along.

NARRATOR

Later that week Tom was writing home –

TOM

--for money –

NARRATOR

And mentioned the plans to his folks. They called Gretchen's folks.

WALL #2: GENE

We're planning to drive down to Sheboygan too. We'll take two cars so Tom and Gretchen can go on from there. And we'll pack a picnic lunch. Let's all meet at the nursing home at noon and we can eat in a corner of the dining hall or maybe picnic on the lawn.

MOM

On the phone to GENE.

Well, we planned to bring Grandpa along. Had you thought of picking up your mom? Just was wondering if maybe we should contact all their brothers and sisters. Annie could have a reunion with all her kids, well except for Uncle Carl.

WALL #2

So we contacted all our aunts and uncles.

MOM

Who then told their own kids about it.

WALL #1

Then all the cousins started calling.

WALL #3

Wonderful idea this family reunion.

WALL #5

Don't you think you should have some committees to plan food, and to get out the invitations so nobody is left out, and a site committee?

NARRATOR

Then Harvey called:

WALL #4

This is too *big* for the Lakeview Home.

WALL #1

We could move it to a city park.

MOM

What if it rains?

WALL #3

Another phone call.

We were just talking about where to have the reunion. You know, Elmer's with the Moose and they had a Moose Exchange Day last summer in Sheboygan and he says we could get the hall there for \$2 per person. We can use the kitchen and the bathrooms and they have picnic tables outside and if it rains we can go inside.

NARRATOR

So it would be held at the Moose lodge hall.

MOM

Invitations went out to all the family. Then Harvey called again:

WALL #4

We wouldn't want Annie's friends to feel left out. Why don't you call the director of the nursing home and I'll call her pastor so we know who to invite.

MOM

More invitations went out.

GRETCHEN exits as the day recedes into her memory.

NARRATOR

When the day finally came, absolutely everybody was there.⁵

WALL #1

Everybody who said they couldn't come...

WALL #1 and #2

When it came right down to it could...

WALL #1, #2 and #3

And they did.

MOM

People came out of the woodwork.

MOM and WALL #4

From the nursing home,

⁵ *Playwright's Note: the members of the family know now that ANNIE has died, but it's very important that the audience does NOT know this fact until later.*

MOM, WALL #1, #2 and #4

From Annie's old neighborhood,

MOM, WALL #4, #5 and TOM

All ages.

(Greetings and family reunion talk, ad lib)

The actors now arrange themselves around a long, imaginary, rectangular table. Annie's party has begun in earnest now!

MOM

And everybody brought food.

WALL #4

I estimate that never has so much fried chicken been together in one place in Wisconsin, ever.

TOM

There were 20 different kinds of Jell-O.

MOM

Look everyone, Mildred's⁶, brought...

NARRATOR

(now joining the feast)

Crepes and a quiche!

WALL #1, #2, #3, #4, #5 and TOM

Oh.

NARRATOR

Everyone ate and they talked and they laughed like never before and sometimes they cried.⁷ And they sang.

⁶ If the NARRATOR is played by a male, the character's name becomes "Merle."

GRETCHEN re-enters on the side. She now becomes the narrator.

GRETCHEN

They sang all of Annie's favorite songs, which were mostly hymns.

NARRATOR

And late in the afternoon⁸ somebody proposed a toast and they sang:

WALL #4

(raising his drink for a toast)

To Annie! Ain't she sweet!

ALL

"Ain't she sweet, just a-comin' down the street.
Now I ask you very confidentially, ain't she sweet."

(pause)

GRETCHEN

Early in the afternoon⁹ they had sung some of Annie's favorite hymns. The pastor had put some together. First, they sang...

ALL¹⁰

⁷ *Playwright's Note: from this point on, the director and the actors must play against the natural inclination toward sentimentality and emotionalism. This will be hard to do, but the plays' meaning will not be as effectively communicated in the middle of excessive crying, etc.*

⁸ *Playwright's Note: "And late in the afternoon..." in terms of the actual chronology of the story, the toasting action and "Ain't she sweet..." take place after the singing of the hymns that follow. Thus the words, "but later in the afternoon," must be articulated very clearly.*

⁹ *Playwright's Note: "Early in the afternoon..." again, following the pause, this phrase must be emphasized. From here to the end of the play, the actions proceeds chronologically.*

¹⁰ *The actual singers of these hymns varies. The singers might be only those people performing in the play; the performers might be joined by a choir, especially if a choir is being used to represent the members of the family whose pictures are on ANNIE's wall; when Soul Purpose performs the play in a church, the congregation is invited to sing the hymn with the church's own organist providing the accompaniment.*

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...” (etc., through the first verse)

MOM

And then we sang another of Annie’s favorites...

ALL

“Beautiful Savior, King of Creation...” (etc., through the first verse)

MOM

And finally we sang...

ALL

“Oh Lord, My God, When I in awesome wonder...” (etc., through the first verse from “How Great Thou Art”)

MOM

(continuing over the accompaniment)

We sang all four verses, each one louder than the one before until we got to the last verse –

WALL #2

Which we intended to be louder than the one before, but when we got into the words nearly everybody found it too hard to sing:

ALL

(Now, only the family sing and the singing becomes softer, until it finally fades to silence.)

*“When Christ shall come, with shouts of acclamation,
To take me home, what joy shall fill my heart...”*

ALL

(spoken as a matter of fact)

So many people came out that day that we could barely all fit in the church.

GRETCHEN

That's right, it had to be held in the church. Annie passed away four days before her ninetieth birthday.¹¹

MOM

It was just one of those things. There was no warning other than her age. Her heart just stopped in the middle of the afternoon on Wednesday.

GRETCHEN

They found her sitting in her wheelchair, turned to face the calendar on the wall. Now, some folks said,

WALL #4

God must have a mean streak to do something like that

GRETCHEN

But they didn't really understand God, or Annie.

MOM

Annie would have enjoyed seeing everyone, and she would have been so surprised.

GRETCHEN

But as it turned out... (*ANNIE re-enters embracing and greeting everyone and the scene is a vision of heaven*)... she was surprised and was so delighted with everyone she saw.

(*to TOM now*)

Once Annie told me...

ANNIE¹²

I'm not *clinging onto life* with some faint hope that somehow I'll have no chance to see many of them one more time. I *live with the faith* that someday I am going to see all of them again.

¹¹ *Playwright's Note: this is the first moment that the audience knows about ANNIE's death.*

¹² *Playwright's Note: ANNIE returns to the stage and the scene becomes a vision of Heaven. This should be accomplished simply by ANNIE's return without the help of a walker or wheelchair. She will want to greet her family warmly – embracing some of them – when she sees them.*

Meanwhile I'm in the gathering business, gathering and connecting and holding them close together with my prayers. And when I have the chance, getting them to hold on to each other. It's really too much for an old woman.¹³

But you know (*GRETCHEN joins ANNIE and they finish the speech together*) I think God is a mother just like that.

NARRATOR¹⁴

It was a hard day for Gretchen, as you can imagine. She went through the day with her eyes red and puffy and with a damp wad of Kleenex in her hand. And some folks wondered why it all affected her so. But whenever Gretchen thought of Annie, which was hard not to do on that day, she also thought of what Annie was up to right then.

TOM

Gretchen was certain she knew.

GRETCHEN

It is the seventh day of the month.

THE END

¹³ *Playwright's Note: in the next moment, GRETCHEN is on earth and ANNIE is in Heaven, though they stand next to one another to speak the line together.*

¹⁴ *Playwright's Note: once again, actors and audience are together in NARRATOR's time where the play began*