

YOURS EVER

An excerpt of a full-length play by Michele Clarke

Setting

The 19th century is coming to a close and the competition is fierce to bring the first Botticelli to America. At odds are the venerable Smithsonian Institute, Boston's newly founded Museum of Fine Arts, and the already-scandalous Isabella Stewart Gardner. It's a contest of wills and cunning. And its conclusion reshapes the art world forever.

Cast of Characters

JOHN LOWELL GARDNER JR. / JACK (ages 28 to 49). Played by Seton Brown.
The scion of three Boston Brahmin families.

DOCTOR HENRY JACOB BIGELOW (early 40s). Played by Art Devine.
The most revered surgeon in Boston.

ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER / BELLE (ages 25 to 48). Played by Chelsey Jo Brown.
Vivacious, free-spirited and mischievous.

BUTLER (ages early 30s-early 50s). Played by Jim Pettibone.
Exceptionally talented. Principled. Sees everything.

JOHN SINGER SARGENT (ages 30 to 32). Played by Ian Hamilton. In professional exile after intense ridicule for his sexually charged portrait, Madame X.

HENRY JAMES (43). Played by Anthony Teixeira.
Successful novelist and longtime friend of Belle.

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ACT I, SCENE 1: 1865, THE GARDNER HOME IN BOSTON

AT RISE: Bright sunshine pours into the nursery of a wealthy young couple's 1860s Back Bay townhome. BELLE stands over a crib, trying to get her 18-month-old son to sleep.

BELLE

I know, sweetheart... I could play with you all day too... We'll play again later, I promise ... There, there now.

JACK enters.

JACK

And how are my two favorite people in the world?

BELLE

Darling! I'm not having much luck getting Jackie to sleep.

JACK

Well, if you were my mother, I wouldn't want to miss a thing either.

JACK reaches into the crib and plays with the child. BELLE adores the scene.

How is he doing?

BELLE

Much better. The fever is gone. And both new teeth are finally in.

JACK

Wonderful. *(beat)* And how was your day? You look like you went out.

BELLE

I did. I had a lovely lunch with Julia -- I think she and I will become great friends. But the ladies' meeting to plan the next Assembly Ball was a disaster.

JACK

Oh. What happened?

BELLE

Every suggestion I made was ignored.

JACK

What? No one has a better sense of fun than you.

BELLE

It's like they won't listen to anyone who doesn't trace their family to the original boat.

She reaches into the crib.

Shhh shh sh. Time to sleep sweetheart... there you go.

She motions for JACK to join her away from the crib. As they move, she picks up a toy from the floor.

JACK

Everyone is on edge. Boston doesn't like change. And things seem to shift daily. There was another labor protest at Faneuil Hall today. And the Reconstruction debates are raging... Yet the Brahmins think if they cling to their traditions, it will somehow stop the march of time.

BELLE

It all feels so futile... trying to please these women is exhausting.

He takes her hand.

JACK

Your problem is that you have more life in your little finger than most of them do in their whole lives. *(pause)* I hope that never changes.

BELLE

Even New York society isn't this rigid.

JACK wraps his arms around her.

JACK

I know. Just give them time, darling. I'm sure they'll come to love you as much as I do.

BELLE exits. JACK walks into next scene.

SHIFT to evening, two years later, in an interior study. The light is somber. JACK paces. A DOCTOR enters, puts a last instrument in his medical bag and closes it.

DOCTOR

It's good that you sent for me.

JACK

Please tell me. Why is this getting worse?

DOCTOR

She is experiencing profound grief. She cannot escape it.

JACK

What more can I do? We've dismantled the nursery--

DOCTOR

Mr. Gardner, she has reminders everywhere here. And at Green Hill. Maybe in all of Boston...

JACK

(struggles with the weight of this news)

Are you absolutely sure of this diagnosis?

DOCTOR

Yes.

JACK

There must be new treatments.

DOCTOR

I'm afraid not in this situation.

JACK

A surgery. Medicines...

DOCTOR

No.

JACK

We just need the chance to try again. *(long-ish pause)* I don't understand. She's already delivered a child.

DOCTOR

Her body can't bear another pregnancy. It would risk her own life. *(long-ish pause)* I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do.

JACK

She slips further away each day. First the still birth. Then Jackie's death. The two miscarriages... She's dying before my eyes.

DOCTOR

(a moment) It may be time to move on, Mr. Gardner.

JACK

No.

DOCTOR

In these circumstan---

JACK

I can't lose them both.

DOCTOR

With a new marriage, you'll have the opportunity for an heir---

JACK

I am not committing my wife to an institution.

DOCTOR

(pause) We now understand that trauma can permanently change personality. This miscarriage is her fourth setback in two years—

JACK

I don't want to hear this.

DOCTOR

Her trauma is both physical and emotion---

JACK

Get out.

DOCTOR

(a moment, shifts gears) Then is there a place that holds only good memories for her? Where she might have a chance to recuperate. She'll need a complete change of scenery.

JACK

She was happy in Europe. At school in Paris. Traveling with her parents. And then after our wedding.

DOCTOR

She'll need to stay for quite some--

JACK

I don't care.

BELLE appears in a doorway. She is in night clothes and shows the physical effects of deep depression. She doesn't acknowledge either man. A BUTLER appears. He's following her and appears very concerned.

JACK

Darling, do you need something?

BUTLER

(evenly)

What can we get you, Madam?

BELLE moves through the room without engaging and exits.

DOCTOR

Get her away.

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 2: 20 YEARS LATER, AN ARTIST'S STUDIO, LONDON

LIGHTS UP on an interior vestibule in an early 1800s London row house. Of three doors, one opens to a studio that is unlit for now. HENRY JAMES enters with a recovered, vibrant and confident BELLE.

JAMES

Here we are.

BELLE

He's taken Whistler's old studio?

JAMES

Yes. I hope it brings him luck. He only agreed to come to London after all hope was lost for commissions on the continent.

BELLE

Two years since the portrait. And those parochial husbands still won't leave him with their wives and daughters... He's lucky to have your support, Henry.

JAMES

I'm not sure it does much good. I had high hopes for my piece on his behalf in *Picture and Text*. Another appeal fallen on deaf ears. *(beat)* I take a *great* interest in him, Belle. I like him so much, I don't attempt too much to judge him!

BELLE

How rare for you! *(they laugh)* Don't give up. Sometimes one's protégé needs extra... *encouragement*.

JAMES

And I'm always glad to have yours, Mrs. Gardner. *(beat)* I must say, I'll miss having you so close -- you've spoiled me these last few weeks. You two must've done the whole of Europe on this trip?

BELLE

(cheerfully)

There will be at least two travel albums to put together. And we need to come back to do Spain... Europe is still such a comfort. For now though, Boston. I'm eager to assemble our new collection. And did I tell you? I'm planning a Venetian garden for Green Hill.

JAMES

But when will you have time to spend with me in Venice? I've found the perfect spot. John's uncle has acquired a neglected estate on the Grand Canal. *Il Palazzo Barbaro*.

BELLE

On the canal? Now that's interesting.

JAMES

There's something about this house, Belle. A haunted stillness. Its beauty and interest sink ever more deeply into your spirit. *(short pause)* Let's go for the summer.

BELLE

I don't know, Henry. Summer is the best time for collecting. I adore filling days with the thrill of the hunt -- I couldn't possibly stay in one place for an entire season.

HENRY

With these family estates finally changing hands? There's plenty to hunt in Venice, Belle.

BELLE

I *am* now hopelessly in love with Italian Renaissance after this trip. But the pictures are all locked away in private collections -- no one will part with them.

HENRY

A week then. They'll rent an entire floor to us.

BELLE

(amused)

Alright a week. This September. *If* you find someone to introduce me to the best galleries and dealers. *(beat)* I'd love to be the first in America with a Botticelli.

HENRY

Done. I'll write them tomorrow.

Jack enters, checking his watch.

JACK

Darling, this late addition is taking longer than we thought. I'm concerned we'll miss our steamer.

BELLE

We'll only stay a moment, I promise. I need to see this picture, darling. And I want to be sure I can work with him.

JAMES

Thank you both for fitting this in before your return. Sincere interest is exactly what John needs right now.

JAMES knocks. A voice answers from inside.

SARGENT

One moment.

LIGHTS UP on a high-ceilinged studio. JOHN SINGER SARGENT is painting. His Madame X portrait leans prominently against a wall, freshly unpacked. He finishes a stroke, puts on a jacket, and opens the door.

SARGENT

Henry!

JAMES

John. You're looking fit.

SARGENT

Come in. Come in. You're among my first visitors. Please excuse the clutter. I'm still getting settled.

They enter. BELLE spots Madame X, moves straight to it and takes it in. Sargent notices.

JAMES

John Sargent, please meet Jack and Isabella Gardner, of Boston.

JACK and SARGENT shake hands.

BELLE

It's flawless.

SARGENT joins BELLE at the painting. He stands close behind her. She feels his presence. They're both looking at the portrait.

BELLE

And the right strap... it originally fell off her shoulder?

SARGENT

It did. *(a pause)* It's a pleasure to meet someone who understands her. *(another pause)* May I kiss your hand?

BELLE turns and extends her hand.

SARGENT

Enchanté, mademoiselle.

He kisses it softly. She's amused by the intentionally incorrect greeting.

JAMES

You see, John? I told you my friends will appreciate your work.

SARGENT

Yes. Henry assures me I'll get a better reception here in England... though that seems to be off to a bit of a slow start.

JAMES

The Royal Academy will eat its words, John. You'll see... The nerve to call *The Misses Vickers* the worst picture of 1886. The rest of that exhibition was drivel.

BELLE

You know, Mister Sargent, there can be great joy in unnerving the old guard. I wouldn't let the Academy faze you.

She turns her attention back to the portrait.

Tell me, how would you portray me?

SARGENT

Well first we would need to know each other a bit. And then, come to an agreement on the scene. The context. Imagery. Which of your things you'd like to feature... And what you would wear.

BELLE

I see.

SARGENT

A great portrait is a collaboration between the patron and her artist. Are you ready to collaborate, Mrs. Gardner?

BELLE

I believe I am, Mister Sargent.

JAMES

Splendid! *(beat)* Until then, I hope the copy of my new *Bostonians* entertains you both on the trip home. A fair warning, Belle. You may recognize one or two of your exploits in its pages.

BELLE

Really? I trust you haven't trained that acid tongue on *me*, Henry...

JACK

(looks at his watch, then gently)

Now I'm afraid I must insist Belle. We will most certainly miss our boat if we don't leave right now.

BELLE

Yes, of course darling.

JACK exits. BELLE starts to follow him.

BELLE

Might we see you in Boston, Mister Sargent?

SARGENT

I begin a commission there for the new Public Library in 16 months. Until then, perhaps we can stay in touch?

BELLE

(calls back from the vestibule, nearly off)

Henry has the address!

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 3: TWO YEARS LATER, THE GARDNER HOME, BOSTON

LIGHTS UP on a well-appointed sitting room with a large window and full-length floor mirror. Dresses, wraps and jewelry are draped over chairs and a settee. BELLE stands in front of the mirror in the black evening dress she will wear in the painting. SARGENT stands behind her, fastening a pearl choker with a small ruby heart around her neck. SARGENT and BELLE look at her reflection.

BELLE

I think this could be it.

SARGENT

Yes. With the right draping. And if we can get more definition for the waist. *(beat)* Don't move.

SARGENT finds a swag of black fabric. He ties it carefully around BELLE's waist, adjusting it as he moves. They look at her reflection. Both are pleased. Their eyes meet in the mirror.

SARGENT

Breathe in.

BELLE breathes in slowly and deeply. SARGENT looks down and cinches the fabric at her waist. BELLE catches her breath and stands up a little straighter. SARGENT adjusts the fabric so it rounds off her hips, creating a perfect hourglass. His hands linger. They again look at her reflection.

SARGENT

There.

BELLE

Yes.

SARGENT

Can you breathe?

BELLE

As long as I don't sit down.

(They smile.) SARGENT moves to a chair and selects a jewelry fastener and a long string of pearls with a slightly larger ruby heart hanging at its midpoint.

BELLE

But we decided on the choker.

SARGENT

These are for your waist.

He doubles the strand and drapes the pearls at her waist from behind, adjusting them via the mirror. One string hugs high around her thinnest width. The other hangs just below it. He holds the pearls in place on the small of her back.

SARGENT

Clasp your hands for me.

She does.

SARGENT

Look straight into the mirror.

She does.

SARGENT

Purse your lips a bit.

She does.

SARGENT

No, that's--- Part them slightly. As if you're taking a breath to speak.

She does.

SARGENT

There. That's it. That's our picture.

SARGENT fastens the pearls and makes a few final adjustments to fabric. He moves to BELLE's front, raising his hands toward her neckline. He pauses. Their eyes meet.

SARGENT

May I?

BELLE

Yes.

SARGENT opens the neckline at her décolletage. His hands linger. Their eyes meet. BELLE takes a slow breath in. The BUTLER enters, stopping some distance away. SARGENT sees him, removes his hands and returns to his easel in what seems like one fluid motion. He picks up a sketch pencil and starts to work. BELLE turns to the BUTLER, unflustered.

BELLE

Yes?

BUTLER

Madam, Cook would like to know if you're having lunch here or if you still plan to call on Mrs. Howe.

BELLE

Oh, thank you for the reminder. I'll be finished here shortly. Could you please have my carriage brought around?

BUTLER

Right away, Madam.

BELLE

Thank you.

The BUTLER exits. BELLE joins SARGENT at the easel.

SARGENT

Now for the background... Your parlor? With a cherished object from your collection?

BELLE

Bigger. Something sumptuous. I want nothing subtle about this.

SARGENT

Silk then. A substantial weave. With gold yarns.

BELLE

And crimson... the color of power.

SARGENT

-- and of the East... a western woman framed by her iconic Eastern travel...

BELLE

Yes. Let's show them a world so much bigger than their Beacon Hill. (*SARGENT reacts*) What?

SARGENT

Is that what this is about?

BELLE

This will be a clear statement of who I am. If they take it as a confrontation, that's their choice.

SARGENT

Mrs. Gardner, remind me never to fall out of your favor. (*BELLE smiles, beat*) I wish I'd brought a brocade from my studio.

BELLE

I may have something.

She finds a gold and crimson brocade-like fabric on a chair and holds it up. SARGENT joins her and studies the piece.

SARGENT

Yes... I can work with this. (*short pause*) This wreath almost suggests a halo. We could position it toward the top -- and place you within it. A patron saint of artists.

(BELLE likes where this is going)

SARGENT

And that coronet of leaves... a crown for the Queen of the Back Bay. (*BELLE laughs out loud*) That *is* what the papers call you...

BELLE

And for you, Mr. Sargent, a master work to ensure redemption. Its Botolph Club debut will be a triumph. *(beat)* They think they've defeated us both. This portrait will leave no doubt they have not.

SARGENT

You are a thrilling collaborator, Mrs. Gardner.

BELLE smiles, picks up a small scarf from the chair and moves to leave. He watches her. At the door, she turns back.

BELLE

And John... it's Belle.

She exits. LIGHT change in a way that suggests time passing. SWITCH TO night in the grand parlor of the Gardner townhome two months later. JACK storms in. He removes his coat and scarf and throws his hat down on a chair. BELLE arrives behind him. She stops just inside the doorway.

BELLE

You haven't said a word the entire ride home. What's wrong.

JACK

What's wrong? Are you kid---

The BUTLER enters, senses the mood and silently collects JACK and BELLE's things.

JACK

Well, that was a disaster.

BELLE

They're stuck in the past, darling. It's a modern portrait--

JACK

Were your ears even open tonight? Didn't you hear the gasps?

BELLE

We knew the pose and neckline -- and probably the crown and halo -- would offend some peo--

JACK

Oh yes, the neckline. *(imitating)* "Look! He's painted her all the way down to Crawford's Notch!"

BELLE

(taken aback)

Wha--

JACK

This entire city believes you were involved with Frank Crawford. And long before tonight they've whispered that you and John are having an affair.

BELLE

Darli---

JACK

And now. This portrait. It removes all doubt for them! Because you never. do. anything. to dissuade them.

BELLE

Right. Don't spoil a good story by telling the truth--

JACK

Did you and John mean to humiliate me tonight? Because that's what you did.

BELLE finally realizes what JACK is saying. She can't speak.

JACK

How much more do you expect me to take!

(BELLE can't find words)

JACK

(evenly)

I don't want that picture shown in public again while I'm alive.

BELLE

Darling, I'm so sorry.

JACK

I don't want your apologies. I want it to stop. *(a pause, he softens)* I love our adventures together, and the joy you get from your friends and pursuits. I want your life to be beautiful. I want you to be happy... I want *us* to be happy.

BELLE

Darling...

JACK

I give you the world Belle. When will it be enough... When will *I* be enough?

BELLE

I'll fix this.

JACK searches her face for reassurance. But he's been here before.

JACK

I'm going to bed. I have to be at the mill in the morning.

JACK exits. BELLE watches him. SARGENT enters. He's been in the hallway and heard everything.

SARGENT

Is he serious about not showing the picture again while he's alive?

BELLE still looks where Jack exited.

BELLE

I won't test him on it. He felt the full weight of his world tonight -- the Peabodys, Lowells *and* the Gardners. *(pause)* Public opinion is a burden for him in a way it isn't for us -- well, for me anyway. Sometimes I forget that.

SARGENT

Cara. How do *you* feel about the picture?

BELLE

(still looking off)

I think it's the best work you've ever done.

CURTAIN