

BETSY ROSS LIES!

BY ED VALENTINE

*Winner of The Kennedy Center / American College Theater Festival's
Best Full-Length Play Award, Region II*

Draft for Jan. 2007 KCACTF Staged Reading

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Characters in *BETSY ROSS LIES!* by Ed Valentine

- PUMPKIN PYE** 16 year old girl. Dynamite seamstress, pure, raw creativity – though an outcast in society because of an affliction that makes her curse and bark uncontrollably, except when she has a needle in her hand.
- BETSY ROSS** 20's or 30's. Beautiful, seemingly sweet - but dangerous, and too often underestimated. Betsy's looks and manner belie her steely determination, a passion for marketing, and a burning ambition to make her name famous across the American colonies, even at the expense of those she cares about.
- GENERAL GEORGE** (General George *Washington*, that is.) 30's or 40's. Handsome, commanding Southern gentleman – but a little weak for women, and distracted by his preoccupation with the War. Above all, Truth is of paramount importance to General George.
- WILLIAM CANBY** Grandson of Betsy Ross. Bombastic; a Blowhard and revisionist historian.

3 OTHER GIRLS IN BETSY'S EMPLOY:

- VIRGINIA** The alpha girl: hunchbacked, but desperate for status.
GERMANIA Follower: Club-Footed, yet sexually provocative.
NOVA SCOTIA Seemingly loopy, but probably merely Narcoleptic.

OTHER CHARACTERS:

- “PLAYER BETSY,” “PLAYER WASHINGTON” Masked Actors
PHILLY FISH 2 Prostitutes
BEN FRANKLIN Famous Philadelphian; Skirt-Chaser
THE BARBER Mean
THE MINISTER Lecherous
3 GIRLS IN BETSY'S EMPLOY:
TORY AND PATRIOT LADIES Two customers at Betsy's shop
THE REVOLUTIONARY DEAD Three Ghosts: Disheveled

DOUBLE- AND TRIPLE-CASTING:

The number of actors needed is SIX. Here's the idea:

	<u>PRIMARY ROLE...</u>	<u>ALSO PLAYS...</u>
1.	PUMPKIN PYE	[optional: Fourth Dead Soldier for "I Would Live"]
2.	BETSY ROSS	Granny Pye,
3.	GENERAL GEORGE	-
4.	VIRGINIA	Canby, First Philly Fish, Dead Soldier
5.	GERMANIA	Ben Franklin, The Minister, Dead Soldier
6.	NOVA SCOTIA	Second Philly Fish, The Barber, Tory Lady, Patriot Lady, Dead Soldier

NOTE TO THE ACTRESS PLAYING PUMPKIN PYE:

The character is afflicted with two separate disorders. One is what we now recognize as Tourette's Syndrome. The other is epilepsy.

Re: Tourette's Syndrome: The Tourette's causes Pumpkin Pye's "cussing" and "twitching." The former is reflected in the dialogue. The latter - a random series of facial twists, spasms, jerks, shakes, etc., never really cease, except when Pumpkin Pye is sewing. So even if Pumpkin is VERBALLY quiet, i.e., not "cussing", her body is anything but still. She is always obviously apart with those around her because of her disorder.

NOTE ON SONGS:

There are three songs in the text, but this is NOT a musical. The songs are used in a similar way to how they were used by Brecht or Shakespeare: they're woven in to punctuate or underscore the action, to change the scene

The lyrics are set to folk tunes and should be performed by the actors as simply as possible: say, with tin drum, spoons, jaw harp, and tin flute. The goal is to create a sound that could have been made by penniless colonial soldiers in 1776.

ACT ONE

SCENE: Bare white stage, with a door in the plain white upstage wall.

LIGHTS UP: A red or blue curtain covers the stage, and a sign reads: WELCOME, PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, SUMMER MEETING, 1870. A man dressed as "Uncle Sam" stands behind a podium, in front of the curtain. He has an absurdly great sheaf of papers: an oration. This is WILLIAM CANBY: bombastic.

CANBY

Huzzah! Hurrah! And bless my eye -
Here's fireworks for the Fourth of July!
Now, though I have no sparklers bright,
no cherry bombs to fire the night,
I still can shine illumination
on a mystery that touches our dear nation.
Oh, Philadelphia Historical Society,
I come before you in deepest piety
with a truth about this stunning cloth...

A battered American flag descends from the flies.

...in this year, 1870, on this July Fourth.
Till today no one could know
the name of the person who did sew
the very first Star-Spangled Banner.
Who did this thing? What cause? What manner?
In ninety-four years since 'twas fabricated
its maker was ne'er yet celebrated.
A light upon dark years I'll toss:
The Mother of the Flag was... BETSY ROSS!

The flag flies out. CANBY draws open the curtain to reveal a stark white stage. PLAYER BETSY sits in a rocking chair, sewing. She wears a beautiful white dress and bonnet and a paper mask and paper wig.

A daughter of our beloved city,
pious, gentle, meek and pretty!
(This is not she. She is long dead.
An actress 'personates her instead.)

WILLIAM CANBY (cont'd)

Now, you may ask, "How do YOU know?"
I say, "My Grandma told me so!"
Oh, dear, dear friends: I'm William Canby,
And Betsy Ross was once: My Granny.
She told me on her deathbed, if you please,
how she of all the women in the colonies
was requested (as her skill was great!)
the American flag to on her own create.
(though not a cent nor half-cent she'd be paid).

*PLAYER WASHINGTON marches in and salutes.
He also wears a paper mask and paper wig. He is
dressed in a splendid blue waistcoat and breeches.*

And this historical request was made
by one General George (who did through her window peek
when a flag to unite the Colonies he did seek).
The American Flag did General George request;

PLAYER WASHINGTON bows low.

And when Washington requested, Betsy Ross said "YES."

*PLAYER BETSY stands. PLAYER WASHINGTON
reverently kisses her hand. Tableaux. The title
Betsy Ross LIVES! descends from the flies.*

Thus will you hear in my Oration,
my Sermon, Discourse, and Declamation,
Stirringly titled thus: "Betsy Ross LIVES!" –
though in this Vale of Tears she no more thrives.
Not on this earth, not in these lower parts -
but always, Betsy Ross lives in our hearts.
Can you hear me clear? Do I enunciate?
Oh, our History is clear and clean and straight!
The puzzle pieces, when arrayed contiguous,
create a picture unambiguous.
And not a piece is ever lost!

*On the word "lost," an impossibly elderly WOMAN
dressed in a crazy patchwork dress of red, white
and blue rags - and a cap of similar material –
starts shuffling up an aisle towards the stage. (This
old woman is PUMPKIN PYE.)*

WILLIAM CANBY (cont'd)

So elevate the name of Betsy Ross!
Question it not! Ever she spake true.
She told me this. I tell it now to you –

OLD PUMPKIN PYE reaches the stage. CANBY, PLAYER BETSY and PLAYER WASHINGTON see her but don't quite know what to do.

Excuse me. I'm speaking here.

OLD PUMPKIN PYE

Lies! Lies! LIES!

She attacks PLAYER BETSY and takes her wig... then chases out CANBY and the PLAYERS. They rush out carrying the lectern and chair. The Betsy Ross LIVES! sign flies out. Bare stage, except for the American flag, which OLD PUMPKIN PYE regards.

Red for the streams of blood
White for the pale of face
that pale pale face that let the blood flow
Blue for the brains all broke and battered.
Stars 'cause you see them when your life gets shattered.
Stars bars and stripes
that's that that mattered
there's them that mattered.

Folks call me Punkin Pye. *Howdy Do?* On account of that which my Granny pushed my face into after one Thanksgiving Dinner. *D-D-D*. Scuse me. Not my real name. Gonna keep that one to myself because I feel like it. *D-D-D*. So you can call me Punkin, pleased to meetcha, *Howdy Do? D-D-D*. Sorry. *D-D-IGGITY DOG! DIGGITY DOG!*

Ooops. Scuse my Frog. I got a Frog in my mouth, makes me speak French, sometimes. Scuse me. And scuse me for bursting like I done, but I can't sit STILL. That's a problem. Never could. Would if I could. Can't stop bursting no more'n I can stop FIDGETING. Back in days not quite so advanced we thought there was DEMONS up my pants. Or so my Granny said. Or demons in my head. I were twelve when it begun. It weren't bad, at first.

*She lets out a strange whine. Twitches once.
Pause.*

OLD PUMPKIN PYE (cont'd)

Then it got worse.

Her noise grows into a series of groans and moans and inhuman howls. Then, she begins to twitch in the throes of a seizure.

In the course of the seizure, she divests herself of the old woman's patchwork clothing and becomes a thin girl of sixteen or so: PUMPKIN PYE. Someone throws her a rucksack from offstage.

PUMPKIN PYE

Besieged Boston! Boston besieged. It was The War you know.

Sound of cannonfire alternates back and forth with a sober hymn tune.

Granny sent me from my home in Boston town and I was to make my living, howsoever now I could. To Philadelphia I found my way, where they don't so mind the odd.

New sound: a raucous city – Philadelphia . Horses, dragging of wheels over cobblestones, sloshing of chamberpots into the street. Drinking, catcalls. Two sober-looking QUAKERS enter with a well-dressed man holding a kite: BEN FRANKLIN.

Hey, hey! Am I in Philadelphia yet?

The TRIO whips out instruments that would have been used by penniless colonials: spoons, tin flute, tin drum, jaw harp. They sing and perform the following song.

TRIO

(Singing:)

CITY OF BROTHERLY, BROTHERLY LOVE, LOOKED ON BY HEAVEN, BY HEAVEN ABOVE

SHOW US WHAT HEAVENLY STUFF YOU'RE MADE OF...

PHILADELPHIA! PHILADELPHIA! PHIL-A-DEL-PHI-AHH!

The woman take off their cloaks and show themselves to be PROSTITUTES. They cavort with BEN FRANKLIN.

FRANKLIN and PHILLY FISH (WHORES) (cont'd)
WELCOME DOWN TO HELL TOWN, DEAR, COME IN AND HAVE A DRINK.
YOU'LL WANT TO STAY FOREVER IF YOU CAN SURVIVE THE STINK.
WE'VE ALE AS STALE AS BARLEY AND THERE'S STEW IN EVERY POT
WE SPECIALIZE IN FLESH TRADE AND WE DEAL IN MORAL ROT.

OH, AS HE REAPS (AS HE REAPS!), SO HE SEWS! (BANG, BANG!)
LIFE IS CHEAP (LIFE IS CHEAP!), ANYTHING GOES!
OH, LUST AND GREED AND SLOTH ARE NOWHERE HEALTHIER,
THAN IN FILTHY, FILTHY, FILTHY PHIL-A-DEL-PHI-A!

IF YOU CAME FOR FREEDOM, DEAR, YOU'VE SURELY GOT YOUR WISH,
SWIM ON DOWN TO HELL TOWN AND COME SWIM WITH PHILLY FISH.
NOT ALL THE WIGGLING SILVER FISH ARE SWIMMING IN THE SEA:
THESE FISH WILL COST SOME MONEY, BUT YOU'LL GET YOUR CRABS FOR FREE!

OH, AS HE REAPS (AS HE REAPS!), SO HE SEWS! (BANG, BANG!)
LIFE IS CHEAP (LIFE IS CHEAP!), ANYTHING GOES!
OH, LUST AND GREED AND SLOTH ARE NOWHERE HEALTHIER,
THAN IN FILTHY, FILTHY, FILTHY PHIL-A-DEL-PHI-A!
OH, LUST AND GREED AND SLOTH ARE NOWHERE HEALTHIER,
THAN IN ACRID STEAMING FREEZING STINKING
PUTRID ROTTING BAWDY NAUGHTY
PUKE-STAINED BLOODY LOWDOWN DIRTY
LUSTY DUSTY FLOPHOUSE FLAMING
FILTHY, FILTHY, FILTHY PHIL-A-DEL-PHI-
CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE! – AH!

FIRST PHILLY FISH

We're here if you need anything...

SECOND PHILLY FISH

(As they exit with BEN FRANKLIN:)

Anything at all...

PUMPKIN PYE

Oddity Oddity! I would not be that. I do fear to be that. Not for all the money in the world. I ain't in Boston anymore. Boston is besieged. Besieged myself, I consulted with the foremost medical authority in all Philadelphia.

Enter the BARBER, with scissors, combs, and a glass jar of leeches.

BARBER

I have two amputations and the Mayor's hair to pomade all before noon, so what seems to be the trouble?

PUMPKIN PYE

Nothing.

BARBER

If it's nothing, why are you here?

PUMPKIN PYE

Dunno. *ACK! PUKE-STOCKING!*

Again, she is overtaken by a seizure.

BARBER

Holy GOD. Here's some leeches. Put on two and come back in the morning.

He puts a leech on each of PUMPKIN PYE'S cheeks.

PUMPKIN PYE

Ow ow OW. I put 'em on all right. I had 'em on all night. I named 'em King and Queen. First they stung some. Then I got numb. Went back to the Barber next day.

BARBER

How's our little patient this morning?

PUMPKIN PYE

Feel fine, I guess.

BARBER

Done it again. You're cured!

PUMPKIN PYE

Thank you. Hrmmm.

BARBER

Did you say something?

PUMPKIN PYE

Nope. Hrghg.

BARBER

Sorry?

PUMPKIN PYE

Grsgh. Gurrsh. Feel - jes - FINE.

BARBER takes the leeches from her cheeks and drops them in the jar.

BARBER

Very well, then. Though I swear you said something before.

PUMPKIN PYE

Granny says Don't Swear. What do I owe?

BARBER

(Writing out a bill:)

That'll be three eggs. See my secretary. I'm glad you're feeling better.

PUMPKIN PYE

Me too. Thanks.

Pause. Then she falls to the floor and beats her head against the boards, screaming:

COPULATE! COPULATE! COPULATE!

She subsides.

Can I keep them leeches?

BARBER

Take the jar. You'd best go see the Minister.

PUMPKIN PYE

Aren't you a doctor? Can't you do nothing?

BARBER

How about a hairstyle makeover? A new look can work wonders!

The BARBER exits, leaving the leech jar.

PUMPKIN PYE

Went to the Minister then. Things went even worse.

PUMPKIN falls to the ground and has a violent seizure. MINISTER enters.

MINISTER

By the Grace of God, by the Power of Heaven, by all that's Holy - STOP YOUR FIDGETING!
Lord of Heaven, bring peace on your daughter.

PUMPKIN PYE

AAAAAACK!!! PAPIST!

The MINISTER shakes her. She subsides.

MINISTER

My work here is done.

PUMPKIN PYE

Oh, what's the matter with me?

MINISTER

Clearly, you're possessed.

PUMPKIN PYE

Cruddy butter, cruddy butter!

MINISTER

By demons, no doubt.

PUMPKIN PYE

Haggersnatch! Churching chummage!

MINISTER

Perhaps they clambered up your skirts and moved right on up into that pretty little belly.

PUMPKIN PYE

HANGING MARY, HANGING MARY - AWK!

MINISTER

You hold your tongue, Missy. You'd be best to find some honest employment. And NOT in a school, I pray. Go see my friend, Mr. Franklin. He has connections. Lord, does he ever have connections!

MINISTER exits.

PUMPKIN PYE

Honest Employment? *Honest Injun!* Good Lord knows I tried. But the way my hands twitch things didn't work out as a Shopgirl in Martha's Crystal Emporium...

A terrible crash of glass.

PUMPKIN PYE (cont'd)

...nor as a Serving Wench in Pipe Blower's Alehouse...

A monstrous crash of plates.

...And the butcher feared I'd carve live pigs to strips of bacon...

The sound of a frightened herd of pigs.

Aw, *Peggoty Piggoty!* Turns out, as I found out while one day mending my stocking –

Holds a needle, sews. Silence for a moment. Very calm and quiet

Only time I ever got calm was with a needle in my hand. The demons got real quiet then. Why? Who knows? Maybe some spirits scared by the point of a pin. Maybe one needle can pierce a lot of spirits at once and string them together like popper corn at Christmastide, and leave the spirits out to dry, dry rust, rustle crack like leaves. *Diggity DOG* I wish I knew. All I know for sure is that the only thing that keeps me from shaking and quaking is sewing. Something smoooooooooth and calm about it. Something soothe about it. Something good. And when I can't be sewing, like in company, I stick a needle in the heel of my hand and suffer.

She sticks a pin in her hand. Lights change.

OUCH, sh sh sh. QUIET. I suffer. A needle in my flesh keeps me quiet, quiet. And thus I sought employment in sewing.

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