

# Morisot Reclining

A new play by  
William C. Kovacsik

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## the characters

BERTHE MORISOT

EDOUARD MANET

EDGAR DEGAS

The actor playing DEGAS also portrays:  
CORNELIE MORISOT (all but one scene, see below)  
PIERRE PUVIS De CHAVANNES  
MONSIEUR GUICHARD  
MONSIEUR DeSALES  
EUGENE MANET

MARY CASSATT

The actress playing CASSATT also portrays:  
EDMA MORISOT  
VICTORINE MEURENT  
SUZANNE MANET  
CORNELIE MORISOT (in one scene)

## the setting

Various parts of France in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The stage should have a large platform upstage, used by DEGAS and CASSATT. This platform should contain two period chairs, and two period armoires, from which DEGAS and CASSATT remove various costume pieces as they portray different characters. Downstage of this platform is a large open space. The entire set is surrounded by easels of varying sizes, some of them quite impossibly huge.

LIGHTS RISE; EDGAR DEGAS paints a naked young woman as she poses, standing in a shallow bath tub. MARY CASSATT enters.

CASSATT

Degas.

DEGAS

Yes?

CASSATT

What are you doing?

DEGAS

You can see perfectly well what I'm doing. I'm working.

CASSATT

But you're dead.

DEGAS

I was dead. Now, I'm working. Consequently, I must either be back from the dead, or else being dead is no longer an impediment to my work. In either case, I'm happy to be painting a new canvas. If you're here, you must be in the same position. May I suggest that you take advantage of this opportunity and get to work yourself?

CASSATT

Degas.

DEGAS

*What?*

(CASSATT points, discreetly, at the audience.)

DEGAS

Who are these people?

CASSATT

I believe they're...an audience.

DEGAS

An...audience?

CASSATT

The lights make it very difficult to see, but I think we're in a theatre.

DEGAS

That seems very unlikely.

CASSATT

I agree, but...

DEGAS

Yes, it does look like a theatre. How extraordinary.

CASSATT

Degas.

DEGAS

Yes?

(CASSATT gestures to the naked model.)

Ah, yes.

(to the YOUNG WOMAN)

I'm sorry, my dear, it seems we've been interrupted. Perhaps you could come back later?

YOUNG WOMAN

Yes, monsieur.

(The YOUNG WOMAN exits)

DEGAS

Now what do we do?

CASSATT

I suppose we could introduce ourselves.

(DEGAS ponders this for a moment, then gathers himself up and steps forward)

DEGAS

I am Degas. You know me. You've seen the paintings – the race horses –

(one of DEGAS' paintings of a horse race is projected on the back wall)

the ballet dancers –

(one of DEGAS' paintings of the backstage of the ballet is projected)

the naked women bathing.

(Nothing on the wall. CASSATT nudges DEGAS, after which one of his paintings of a naked bather is projected)

I needn't tell you how good I was – if you have any taste, you already know. This is Cassatt.

CASSATT

Mary Cassatt.

DEGAS

You don't know her.

CASSATT

Some people might.

DEGAS

Art historians, perhaps. For the benefit of the majority, however, we should explain that you're a painter also.

CASSATT

How good a painter?

DEGAS

A very good painter indeed.

CASSATT

He would say that. I was his protégé.

DEGAS

She certainly was.

CASSATT

Not *that* kind of protégé. Get your mind out of the gutter.

DEGAS

But it's so much at home there.

CASSATT

Pervert.

DEGAS

We all revert to type, my dear. But let's not have the people guess. Let's show them how talented you were.

CASSATT

As you wish, monsieur.

DEGAS

She was good enough to have painted this...

(CASSATT's painting "The Boating Party" is projected on the walls)

And this...

(CASSATT's "Little Girl in a Blue Armchair" is projected)

And my personal favorite...

(CASSATT's "Woman with a Pearl Necklace in a Loge" is projected;

DEGAS looks out over the audience)

DEGAS (cont'd.)

So. That should remove any doubt about my estimation of her talent. If there's anyone who disagrees, let them leave now. I won't waste my time on you. Are there any idiots in the room...? No? Good. Where were we? Ah. She was my protégé.

CASSATT

We talked. About painting.

DEGAS

Sometimes about the weather.

CASSATT

Sometimes about the latest gossip in Paris.

DEGAS

I never gossip.

CASSATT

You're the most incurable gossip I've ever met.

DEGAS

Mostly we talked about painting.

CASSATT

Mostly.

DEGAS

And I would have said you were a very good painter even if you hadn't been my protégé.

(DEGAS speaks directly to the audience)

That's who we are. Now, who are you and what do you want?

CASSATT

Degas, there's no need to be rude.

DEGAS

I'm not being rude, I'm simply asking them –

CASSATT

You were brusque.

DEGAS

Well, they've called us back from the dead. Surely they must want *something*. Don't we have a right to know?

CASSATT

Look at this.

(CASSATT pulls out a playbill and hands it to DEGAS)

DEGAS

*Morisot Reclining*. That's the title? Of the...play, I presume?

CASSATT

Yes. One of his portraits of her. Maybe they want to know more about her.

DEGAS

Maybe they want to know more about both of them.

CASSATT

Ah. Well, they came to the right people, didn't they?

DEGAS

Indeed they did.

(CASSATT speaks to the audience)

CASSATT

We should explain. We never faced any of the problems that arise when two friends become...entangled.

DEGAS

Our friend, however -- Another painter --

CASSATT

Another good painter --

DEGAS

Very good indeed.

CASSATT

Was not so lucky.

(BERTHE enters downstage, to one side)

CASSATT

Her name was --

DEGAS

Berthe Morisot.

(EDOUARD enters downstage, on the opposite side from BERTHE)

CASSATT

And the man: Edouard Manet.

DEGAS

The only painter of the age with a reputation that rivaled mine.

CASSATT

But to the point...where should we start?

DEGAS

Where the life of every artist begins. The moment when they decide to pick up a brush, put pen to paper –

CASSATT

Or step on a stage?

DEGAS

Just so...Shall we?

CASSATT

Yes, I suppose we shall.

DEGAS

After you.

CASSATT

One day, when she was still young, her mother called Berthe and her sister – how would we portray the mother, Madame Cornélie Morisot, if we were to put her image on canvas, Monsieur Degas?

DEGAS

We would make her solid, of course...

CASSATT

Respectable...

DEGAS

In a bourgeois manner, yes...

CASSATT

But also warm...

DEGAS

Oh, yes...

CASSATT

And her sister, Edma?

DEGAS

Slight of build...

CASSATT

Fragile.

DEGAS

I agree.

CASSATT

And perhaps just a little sad?

DEGAS

Definitely.

CASSATT

That sounds like me. Which means that you'll have to play the mother.

(CASSATT tosses a costume for CORNELIE to DEGAS)

DEGAS

But I'm not solid, respectable or warm.

CASSATT

True.

DEGAS

I'm also not a woman.

CASSATT

No. But I'm sure you'll manage to overcome the handicap of being a man.  
Berthe's mother called her and her sister, and announced –

(DEGAS hesitates)

Go ahead.

(CASSATT, as EDMA, goes downstage, and gestures to DEGAS to  
join her)

She announced:

DEGAS as CORNELIE

Your father's name-day is coming up. It might be nice if both of you were to draw a portrait of him.  
You're both to have art lessons. Apart from the pleasure it will give your father, it's time for you to  
acquire some knowledge of the arts. It's an adornment for a girl who would make a good match.

(DEGAS speaks to CASSATT)

Well, that was humiliating.

CASSATT

You're not finished yet.

DEGAS (to audience)

They met at the Louvre. He was already famous.

CASSATT

She was not.



DEGAS

She was copying the old masters.

CASSATT

Which we all did at one time or another. It was just slightly scandalous for a woman to paint at the Louvre, so she was chaperoned by her mother -- who passed the time by knitting.

(CASSATT points; DEGAS as CORNELIE sits on a stool to one side of the stage and knits as paintings of the old masters are projected on the back wall.)

DEGAS

They copied...

(DEGAS as CORNELIE has the beginnings of a scarf...more old masters are projected)

And copied...

(More old masters. DEGAS as CORNELIE has a scarf of modest length)

And when they grew tired of copying, one would remind the other –

CASSATT (as EDMA)

If it was good enough for Manet, it should be good enough for us.

BERTHE

Manet? Eduoard Manet?

CASSATT as EDMA

Exactly. Guichard says Manet spent months here, drinking in these paintings, then copying. He didn't think about doing anything of his own until he had absorbed everything this place has to offer. Neither should we. But I'm worried about maman...

DEGAS as CORNELIE

Don't concern yourself about me, I'll keep knitting.

(DEGAS as CORNELIE has a scarf of absurd length)

CASSATT (to audience)

And so they copied more...

(More old masters are projected...)

DEGAS

Until one day...Manet turned up.

(MANET crosses to BERTHE and EDMA)

EDOUARD

So these are the famous Morisot sisters.

EDMA

Famous, sir?

EDOUARD

Two sisters, both serious painters, with some real training. You are both rather rare birds, Mademoiselle. You must expect your fame to precede you. I've been watching you work.

BERTHE

Monsieur.

EDOUARD

You have gifts, Mademoiselle. Rather extensive gifts, I should say.

BERTHE

Monsieur is too kind.

EDOUARD

Whether I am kind at all is something I must leave to my friends – and perhaps to my enemies – to decide. One thing that both groups would undoubtedly agree on is that I have never been *too* kind. I am, however, an honest man – my one genuine virtue. And I can assure you that my estimate of your talent as a painter is colored by nothing other than the truth. If you would vouchsafe me the honor of seeing some of your own work, I would be most grateful.

BERTHE

My family entertains on Tuesday evenings, Monsieur. We would be honored by your presence.

EDOUARD

Thank you, Mademoiselle. You may count on my visit. It has been an uncommon pleasure to meet you.

(MANET exits)