

DON'T OPEN THIS BOX WHATEVER YOU DO

[Performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival by the California Travel Troupe, 2001.]

CHARACTERS: (2)

NARRATOR, mature, male or female, dignified, with a large storybook

SON (or DAUGHTER), twenty-one, good at mime, good at doing another, more sinister voice

(The NARRATOR not only “reads” from the book, he interacts with the other character throughout the play.)

NARRATOR (with an oversized book, from which he reads from time to time) Once upon a time a man died and left a small box in the attic of his house.

(Lights up on the small box on a table.)

The man had pasted a large sticker on the lid, a sticker which said: “Do Not Open This Box Whatever You Do.”

(Shows the sticker to the audience but does not touch the box.)

He had left the house to his only son. Since the son lived with his mother far away, and the mother rented out the house, it wasn't until the son was twenty-one years old that he discovered that it was *he* who owned the house, not his mother, and that everything in it belonged to him. Since he had quarreled with his mother by this time, as young men will, and had set off on his own, he decided, when he learned that it was free of tenants, to visit the house his father had left him.

(The SON enters, as if looking for the house.)

He wrote to his mother and asked for the key. Reluctantly she sent it to the post office box he named although she did not want her son to visit his father's house.

(The SON takes the key out of his pocket, excitedly.)

The son was a strapping lad, big-bodied, as tall as an oak — a young oak.

(The SON shows off his body.)

He had proud eyes and strong arms. And his whole life lay before him. But he didn't quite know what he wanted to do with his life.

(The SON looks thoughtful.)

His father, he'd heard, had been a teacher, in the Humanities. The son had not seen his father very many times, for there was some mystery about the young man's birth that he had never quite gotten clear in his mind.

(The SON looks somewhat puzzled but heads to an imaginary door.)

When he got inside his father's house, he found it . . .

(The SON enters the imaginary doorway and goes into "the house.")

. . . musty and dank. It sat in a city but seemed very still inside. The young man felt exhilarated, as if he were in an old movie. He expected a decrepit butler to appear and offer him tea and crumpets.

(The SON accepts the imaginary offer from the imaginary butler.)

It was a large house with many rooms. The young man first examined the downstairs. He imagined his father in the study, bent over his desk.

(Lights up on a desk.)

Apparently his father had not only been a teacher but a writer of sorts. But so far as the young man knew, his father had never published anything. He looked through the drawers of the desk . . .

(The SON does so.)

. . . hoping to find some of his father's writings. Now that the man was dead, it might be interesting to see what his manuscripts said, give some clues about what the man was like.

(The SON comes up empty-handed.)

But there was nothing in the desk drawers. And eventually the young man went upstairs to the attic . . .

(The SON moves to the imaginary attic.)

. . . where he saw weatherproofing hanging from the walls, scattered storage boxes, a jumble of odds and ends that the tenants had evidently shoved up there and forgotten. As he was examining some of the items . . .

(The SON sees the mysterious box.)

. . . he noticed a box with "Do Not Open This Box Whatever You Do" on it. The young man was somewhat taken aback. Who would leave such a message on a box? He looked more closely.

(The SON does.)

Why, the box wasn't even locked. Why hadn't somebody else opened it? Had the previous tenants not seen it? Had they simply ignored the warning? Were they afraid?

(The SON pulls away from the box, a bit afraid.)

Maybe there was nothing inside the box. Maybe it was just some trick to make the one who opened it look foolish.

(The SON decides that he will not be intimidated by the box.)

The young man picked up the box. It was about _____ long and _____ inches deep. Should he put it back? What was it — a booby-trap?

(The SON puts it back hurriedly.)

Ah, maybe there was money inside!

(The SON picks up the box again.)

Maybe there was a memento of his late father there, meant only for his son!

(The SON peeks inside.)

. . . The young man opened the box.

(The SON opens the lid completely.)

Inside was a puppet — a hand puppet.

(The SON picks up the puppet., preferably one with a black beard and mustache and arched black eyebrows — devilish without being the devil literally.)

Pinned to the front of the puppet was another note. It said:

SON (reading) “You’ve ignored my first warning. Don’t ignore my second. Don’t use this puppet.”

NARRATOR The young man laughed.

(The SON smirks.)

He didn’t want to use the puppet anyway! He was too old for puppets, he knew that. He looked to see if there was anything else in the box . . .

(The SON does.)

But there was not. He started to close the lid, when the eyes of the puppet caught his attention. The eyes were merely painted, but they gave off a strange glitter. They seemed to catch his and hold them.

SON What if I just slip my hand inside the puppet for a moment?

NARRATOR — the young man thought. No use being afraid.

SON Now that I’m off on my own, I can’t be frightened to do things, can I?

NARRATOR So in went his hand. It was a fairly tight fit, since the puppet was meant for a child, and the young man was . . . well, a big, strapping young man.

(The SON manages to get the puppet on his hand.)

He brought the puppet up to his face and looked at it. It had a sinister sneer on the lips. The eyes looked flat and yet somehow in the dim light of the attic they seemed . . .

SON (as himself) And what's your name, friend?

NARRATOR — the young man joked.

SON (as the puppet) What's *yours*?

SON (as himself) You can *talk*?

SON (as the puppet) Of course. Your father left me for you.

SON (as himself) He did?

SON (as the puppet) Aren't you Jimmy?

SON (as himself) Yes, I am — Jim.

NARRATOR (as the puppet) Put your ear a little closer to my mouth. I want to whisper something to you — Jim. (as NARRATOR) But the young man hesitated.

SON (as himself) Isn't this close enough?

SON (as the puppet) Your father wanted me to tell you something. Put me a little closer to your ear.

NARRATOR (as the puppet) You're not *afraid*, are you? (as the NARRATOR) The young man moved the puppet a bit closer.

SON (as himself) How's this?

SON (as the puppet, sinister) Closer.

SON (as himself) Are you going to bite me?

NARRATOR (as the puppet) You've seen too many horror films — Jim. I just want to share something from your father with you, Jimmy.

SON (as himself) And what's that?

NARRATOR (as the puppet) Your father died unhappy, do you know that?

SON (as himself) But he had a good life before he went.

SON (as the puppet) Oh, he did. He was a teacher and he wrote things. He had lovers. He traveled. He was even famous, for a time.

SON (as himself) He was?

NARRATOR (as the puppet) But all that was a long time ago.

SON (as himself) And just what is it my father wanted you to tell me?

NARRATOR The young man pressed!

SON (as the puppet) Put me right next to your ear

NARRATOR (as the puppet) Or I won't say a word.

SON (as himself) I don't want to!

SON (as the puppet) Don't you want to know some secrets?

NARRATOR. (as the puppet) Now that you're setting out in life.

SON (as the puppet) They will help you.

NARRATOR The young man was intrigued, but he didn't reply.

SON (as the puppet) Ask me some questions. Your father wanted you to know the answers.

(Pause.)

SON All right, I *will*!

SON (taking over from the NARRATOR) — the young man said defiantly.

NARRATOR (as the puppet) Be sure to ask things that will help you the most.

NARRATOR The young man searched his mind.

SON (as himself) I'm twenty-one now. What should I do with my life?

SON (as the puppet, quietly) Nothing.

SON (as himself) Nothing?

SON (as the puppet) It doesn't matter what you do with your life.

SON (as himself) Of course it does. How am I going to live? Did my father leave me something besides this house? Money maybe?

NARRATOR (as the puppet) No, he didn't. You can live here with no rent, however, if you like.

SON (as himself) Well, then I'll be able to choose a profession that will really mean something.

NARRATOR (as the puppet) To whom?

SON (as himself) To me. To the world!

SON (as the puppet) Apparently you didn't hear me. You're going to be a nobody, like most people.

SON (as himself) I am not!

SON (as the puppet) Oh, but you *are*. Nevertheless, what are you thinking of doing?

SON (as himself) I don't know yet. Maybe engineering. Or maybe art. Or maybe — What did you mean jut then?

NARRATOR (as the puppet) It doesn't matter what you do, because, whatever it is, it won't change the world one centimeter.

NARRATOR The young man was quite upset.

(The SON is upset but holding his emotions in as best he can.)

SON (as the puppet) And even if you do become somebody, you'll just be somebody in this shithole you humans call the world.

SON (as himself) How can you say such things?

NARRATOR (as the puppet) The human race is just one of God's experiments. He tries different things, like the dinosaurs, and many more you've never heard of, and then when he's tired of the way they (pardon me) fuck up, he wipes them off the board and starts something else. Of course that fails as well. You see, God, himself is a (pardon me) fuck-up.

SON (as himself) I don't believe that!

(Pause.)

NARRATOR (as the puppet) It doesn't matter whether you believe it or not. People are a complete waste of energy. They and all their works and so-called achievements are unimportant and will be disposed of by time, every single one of them.

SON (as himself) That's not true! Even if our works don't last forever, some of us wind up with God —

NARRATOR (laughing at him)

SON (as himself) — in heaven or through reincarnation or are remembered by our friends or —

NARRATOR (as the puppet) Oh, *come on!*

SON (as the puppet) Those are things you tell yourselves because you haven't got the guts to face your own insignificance. And I don't mean just insignificance for eternity. I mean now, since what you do is worthless, just busywork, to keep you occupied while you're alive.

SON (as himself) Busywork?

SON (as the puppet) You know — building cities, inventing, space travel, collecting stamps. Writing plays!

SON (as himself) But there's got to be a reason we're here! A Supreme Being wants us to spend eternity with Him, and —

SON (as the puppet) If you were a Supreme Being with infinite intelligence and infinite variety in your ability to create and destroy *all* forms of life, would you spend more than two seconds with human beings?

SON (as himself) But He made us in His image!

SON (as the puppet) No doubt. A hole in the top and a hole in the bottom. God is psychotic.

NARRATOR (as the Son) God gave us intelligence. We've raised ourselves out of the slime!

SON (as the puppet) Just one of the lies you people tell yourself. There are so many I can barely keep them straight — that you're smart, that you improve the world, that you improve yourselves. When it obvious that all you do is trade one stupid idea for another, endlessly: 'Let's make the eldest boy the king and *that'll* solve things!' 'Let's let everybody vote, and *that'll* end the problems!' 'Let's share everything equally, and *that'll* surely work!' 'World peace!' Even though you're bored out of your minds when things *are* peaceful. Shall I go on with your delusions — that human life is *valuable*, that you have souls —

SON (as himself) My father didn't tell you to say these things!

NARRATOR — the young man cried.

SON (as himself, heartbroken, desperate) My father loved me!

(Pause.)

NARRATOR (as the puppet) The last thing he told me to tell you was . . . to kill yourself.

SON (as himself) He didn't say that! He didn't! He always encouraged me. He wrote me letters. He —

NARRATOR (as the puppet) Because he didn't have the courage to tell you these things when he was alive.

NARRATOR (as the puppet) Your father warned you. But, no, you had to open the box, had to slip me on your hand, didn't you? You're just like every other human being ever born, driven to your own destruction.

SON (as himself) But what kind of a sap would I have been if I hadn't even looked?

SON (as the puppet) True. Damned if you didn't. And damned if you do. But, believe me, you would have been much, much happier if you hadn't opened that box.

NARRATOR (as the puppet) Now you're going to throw me on the floor, aren't you? Because you can't stand what I've said.

SON (as himself) Yes, I am. I mean, no . . .

NARRATOR The young man stood staring at the puppet on his hand.

(The SON does.)

SON (as the puppet) Oh, go ahead.

NARRATOR The young man hesitated.

SON (as the puppet) Go ahead. Throw me! You must!

NARRATOR The young man threw the puppet to the ground.

(The SON does so.)

NARRATOR (as the puppet) Now stomp on me!

NARRATOR The young man raised his foot. (as the puppet) Stomp me good.

SON (as himself) Yes, yes!

NARRATOR (as puppet) Say "Bad puppet! Bad, bad puppet!"

SON (as himself) Bad, bad puppet! Wicked! Wicked! Wicked!

(The SON sinks down with exhaustion.)

NARRATOR (as the puppet) See, your father *did* love you.

SON (as himself) What do you mean? (picking up the puppet.) Why did my father leave that awful box at all if he *loved* me so much?

(The SON sobs, for real. He is drained, prostrate.)

NARRATOR Why? So that you would not be afraid to face the world's terrors, even the worst terrors of your own mind. If you can go on now, there will never be a lower point in your life than at this moment.

SON (as himself, wrung out) Oh, god . . . I can't . . . Can't. . . .

(The SON cries himself out. *Take the time.*)

NARRATOR: (finally, solicitously, as father) Can you go on now, my son? . . . Can you?

SON: (as himself, slowly) I don't know . . .

NARRATOR: Of course you can. Of course you will. (as the puppet) Now go *live* your life. Go!

SON (to NARRATOR) Father?

(The NARRATOR doesn't answer, closes the oversized book.)

SON (as himself to the puppet on the floor) Father?

(There is no response. The puppet lies unmoving.)

NARRATOR And the puppet said no more and lay still upon the attic floor. (Leaves.)

(The Son gathers himself and starts to walk off

SON (Stops looks back at the puppet.) Goodbye, father. And thanks. . . . I think

(The SON turns and walks off. . . . to adulthood.)

SLOW FADE
(to penlight on the puppet)

BLACKOUT

Copyright 1997