

HOLIER THAN THOU

a one-act by DANIEL CURZON

CHARACTERS: (4)

TOBIAS, a judge, dressed in early 17th Century American Puritan attire, age 35-70

TABITHA, on the sidelines but very much a judge, also dressed in Puritan attire, same age as Tobias

ACCUSED #1, #3, #5, male, any age, played by the same person in different clothes

ACCUSED #2, #4, female, any age, played by the same person in different clothes

SETTING: An American Puritan courtroom, 1638, with an elevated table, chairs, angled stage right. The time advances as the play proceeds, but the Puritan costumes don't.

LIGHTS UP

TOBIAS: (banging gavel) The court will come to order! To order! I say order!

TABITHA: (on the side, loudly) Order!

(Everyone is quiet.)

TOBIAS: Did I say order?

TABITHA: (standing) Give me that gavel. I'll make sure there's order.

TOBIAS: You know you're not permitted to sit on the court, Tabitha Goody Perkins.

TABITHA: I know that, but you're not doing it right, Elder Tobias.

TOBIAS: (to woman) I say order to you, Tabitha Goody Perkins. (Bangs the gavel.)

(She grumpily consents and sits down.)

TOBIAS: What a mouth! Now to business. This court has been convened because of violations of the colony's rules, religious and social. Today will begin with two of the offenders who have been accused. (Looks at court papers.) Simpson and Wallace. Are the accused here?

TABITHA: They're just outside.

TOBIAS: Are they prepared for trial?

TABITHA: They indeed are.

TOBIAS: Then bring in the guilty!

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TABITHA: They're not proven guilty -- yet.

TOBIAS: All in good time. All in good time.

TABITHA: Just following the rules.

TOBIAS: Oh, I'm sure you know the rules, Tabitha Wilson.

TABITHA: You can bet your fat rump I do!

TOBIAS: Watch your language!

(Tabitha grumbles.)

TOBIAS: So send in the first accused, say I.

(A door opens and Accused #1 (Simpson) is shoved into courtroom. His head and hands are in the stocks, but he can walk around.)

TOBIAS: Are you the accused, Total Depravity Simpson?

SIMPSON: Who me? No, I was just walking by, and somebody threw me in here.

TOBIAS: A likely story! If you're not Simpson, then why are you in those stocks?

SIMPSON: I thought I was presumed innocent until proven guilty.

(Tobias and Tabitha burst into laughter.)

TABITHA: That's a good one!

TOBIAS: Presumed innocent? Are you making mirth?

SIMPSON: I *am* innocent.

TOBIAS: Oh? Are you a human being?

SIMPSON: The last time I looked.

TABITHA: Then you're not innocent! If I have ever seen Total Depravity – and I've seen a lot of it in this town – you're it!

SIMPSON: Total Depravity?! Come on! That's just my name.

TOBIAS: You come on! According to the Holy Scriptures, as you well know, all men are born with deadly Original Sin on their souls. Have you been baptized to rid yourself of sin?

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SIMPSON: I'm not sure.

(Tobias and Tabitha recoil in horror.)

TOBIAS: What do you mean – you're not sure?

SIMPSON: I don't think my parents had me baptized.

(The two recoil in horror again.)

TABITHA: Why in the name of God not?!

SIMPSON: I think they were planning to, but they caught a plague and died before they were able to.

TOBIAS: And you consider that's an excuse?!

SIMPSON: (lame) Well, it's sort of an excuse.

TABITHA: Where were your other relatives? Why did they not have you baptized?

ACCUSED #1: They also died of a plague. A different plague.

TABITHA: Then why didn't you baptize yourself, Total Depravity Simpson?! Explain that, if you can! To judge from your name, your parents obviously had your number.

SIMPSON: I tried to, I swear, but . . . but . . .

TOBIAS: But you didn't, did ya?!

SIMPSON: I crawled to the baptismal pool, which was about a mile and half from my home. I was only three months old, remember.

TOBIAS: So?

SIMPSON: I got inside the church and made it to the pool of water.

TABITHA: As would have any right-thinking child of God!

SIMPSON: But I was afraid I'd drown if I plunged in.

TOBIAS: What a sissy! You'd risk your black, evil, sin-encrusted soul because you were afraid of drowning?

SIMPSON: I don't think I was that bad. I had not had that much time to sin.

TOBIAS: Three months! That sounds like time enough to me.

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TABITHA: Hear! Hear! And never baptized to solve the problem!

TOBIAS: Guilty! Take him away and hang him!

SIMPSON: That's it?

TABITHA: Outside! And send in the next accused.

SIMPSON: Jesus!

TOBIAS: And make the noose especially tight for taking the name of the Lord in vain.

(The door opens and Simpson leaves.)

(Accused #2 enters, in shackles. The door shuts.)

TOBIAS: Name?

WALLACE: Predestination Wallace.

TABITHA: What a lovely name. Too bad you didn't live up to it.

WALLACE: But I did! Everybody said I was selected from birth by God to go to Heaven.

TOBIAS: Well, it looks like people were wrong, doesn't it?

TABITHA: Of course, even if we hang her, she could still go to Heaven.

TOBIAS: Verily?

TABITHA: Are you sure you're qualified to be a judge, Tobias Fear of God Wilson?

TOBIAS: Of course I am!

TABITHA: You don't seem that sharp on Calvinist theology, buster.

TOBIAS: I'll bet I know more Calvinist theology than you do, Tabitha Goody Perkins. The Elected of God cannot veer toward evil. This woman here has obviously veered toward it. What are you accused of, woman?

WALLACE: I tried to vote in the village election.

(Both Tabitha and Tobias recoil in horror.)

TOBIAS: Are you or are you not elected by God, the only election that really counts? What say you?

WALLACE: I thought I was. But maybe I was wrong?

TOBIAS: Well, you can act all holy and elected, but only God Himself will recognize you when you get to the Pearly Gates and He lets you in. (Bangs gavel.) Or not! . . . Next!

WALLACE: What's the verdict? I'm confused.

TOBIAS: Once you're hanged, you'll know where you stand. Be sure to send us a message from the next world. I'm curious.

TABITHA: Yes, let us know what happens, dear.

WALLACE: That's it?

TOBIAS: They're waiting for you outside. Go to God! And close the door behind you.

(In her shackles, Predestination waddles out the door.)

TABITHA: I sort of liked her.

TOBIAS: You would!

TABITHA: What is that supposed to mean?

TOBIAS: Sometimes I have doubts about your orthodoxy, Tabitha.

TABITHA: Don't you threaten me. I know where your yards and yards of old lace are buried.

TOBIAS: My old lace?

TABITHA: I think you know my meaning, Tobias the pious.

TOBIAS: You'd better watch yourself, lady, or you might find yourself before this court.

TABITHA: I dare you! Okay, bring in the next Accused.

LIGHTS DIM to indicate time passing.

LIGHTS UP.

(Now Tabitha is the judge with the gavel. Tobias is on the sidelines.)

(Enter the same actor who played Accused #1, in different clothes.)

SNELL: I guess that's me.

TOBIAS: You look familiar.

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SNELL: That's right. You just found me innocent. So I'll be leaving. (Starts to exit.)

TOBIAS: Oh, no you don't! Who do you think you're fooling?

TABITHA: What's your name, Accused #3?

SNELL: Accused #3.

TABITHA: That's your name?

SNELL: Accused #3 Snell.

TOBIAS: What are you accused of?

SNELL: Sexual harassment.

TABITHA: Guilty! Next!

TOBIAS: Isn't that a bit of a rush to judgment?

TABITHA: No! He's a man, isn't he?

TOBIAS: It's just an accusation. (to Snell) Who did you sexually harass?

TABITHA: It doesn't matter. Guilty!

SNELL: That's crazy.

TABITHA: The accuser is always right.

SNELL: What about evidence?!

TABITHA: Do you have a penis?

SNELL: (thinks it over) Not really.

TABITHA: Do you have a penis or not, Accused #3?

SNELL: (ashamed) Yes. I'm sorry.

TABITHA: Guilty! Away with you! Be gone, penis-bearer!

(The door opens. Snell trudges out, deeply shamed.)

(The door shuts.)

TOBIAS: Rather arbitrary, Tabitha!

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TABITHA: Shut up, Tobias! Do you want to find yourself in front of this court?

TOBIAS: Please, please, not that!

TABITHA: I thought not. Next!

(The door opens and the same actress who played Accused #2 enters as Accused #4, in different clothes.)

TABITHA: Name?

MITCHELL: Salem Witch Mitchell.

TOBIAS: Haven't you been here before?

MITCHELL: Maybe. Why?

TOBIAS: A repeat offender.

TABITHA: I thought we hanged you three hundred years ago.

MITCHELL: Maybe you did, maybe you didn't. (Tries to hide something on her body.)

TABITHA: What's that you're trying to hide?

MITCHELL: (holding it behind her back) Nothing.

TOBIAS: Let's see it!

MITCHELL: No!

TABITHA: (bangs the gavel) Show it!

(Mitchell shows a cup with something stenciled on it.)

TOBIAS: What is that – a coffee cup?

MITCHELL: Maybe.

TABITHA: Read it out loud. For everyone to hear.

MITCHELL: Are you sure? You might find it . . .

TABITHA: I'm sure it is. Read it!

MITCHELL: (holds up the cup, reads) No coffee, no workee.

(Both Tabitha and Tobias recoil in horror, as before.)

TABITHA: Is that what I think it is?

MITCHELL: What do you think it is?

TABITHA: It's a racist coffee cup!

TOBIAS: God help us!

MITCHELL: It's not "racist." It's playing on the old "no tickee, no laundry."

TABITHA: Are you saying that a person of Asianess has an *accent*?! An accent?!

MITCHELL: They never have accents?

TABITHA: Of course they don't! What are you thinking?!

MITCHELL: Some have accents. They certainly used to.

TOBIAS: They never had accents. Ever! It's just your racist ears that are the problem.

MITCHELL: I think it's sort of cute to have an accent.

TOBIAS/TABITHA: (outraged) *Cute!*

TABITHA: I've heard enough. Take her away and hang her.

TOBIAS: And confiscate her business.

MITCHELL: You can't do that. I have free speech.

(Tobias and Tabitha scoff.)

TABITHA: Yeah, you have free speech, but not when it comes to *accents*! How dare you stereotype!

TOBIAS: What next? You think black people commit crimes!?

MITCHELL: Some black people commit crimes.

TABITHA: No black person has ever committed a crime. It's the system that has committed the crimes!

MITCHELL: Oh, for God's sake. You're nuts!

TOBIAS: We'll show you who's nuts. Take her away!

(The door opens. Accused #4 goes to the door.)

MITCHELL: I guess I had free speech – until I tried to use it. (Exits through door.)

LIGHTS dim, indicating time is passing.

LIGHTS UP

(Now Tabitha and Tobias, still in Puritan clothing, have an even larger gavel, which they have to wield together because it is so heavy.)

TOBIAS/TABITHA: (together, banging the gavel) Next!

(The door opens. The same actor who played Accused #1 and #3, now Accused #5, enters, dressed in different clothes.)

WINTHROP: Is it my turn?

TOBIAS: You betcha!

WINTHROP: I can wait.

TABITHA: Well, we can't! Get your guilty ass in here.

WINTHROP: I thought –

TOBIAS: Shut it!

TABITHA: What are you accused of?

WINTHROP: Don't you know?

TABITHA: Of course we know. But we want to hear you say it.

TOBIAS: Say it!

TABITHA: And your name.

WINTHROP: My name is Can't Win Winthrop. I think the charge is yet to be levelled.

TOBIAS: Oh, right. You're our first Accused under our new laws. Say something.

WINTHROP: Say something?

TABITHA: So we can determine what your crime is.

WINTHROP: Isn't that a little backwards?

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TABITHA: Not anymore! Say something. Anything. We're listening!

WINTHROP: I'm not glad to be here.

TOBIAS/TABITHA: Oh?!

WINTHROP: I *am* glad to be here?

TOBIAS: What do you think the right answer is?

WINTHROP: I'm trying to figure that out.

TABITHA: Don't try to mess with us.

WINTHROP: What if I say I'm glad to be here?

TABITHA: Then you obviously don't fear the Law as you should.

WINTHROP: What if I say I'm not glad to be here?

TOBIAS: Then you infer that this court is somehow faulty.

WINTRHOP: No, I don't. . . . I may be *implying* it.

TOBIAS: Are you correcting my English?

WINTHROP: A little.

TOBIAS/TABITHA: (banging the gavel together) Guilty!

WINTHROP: What do you mean, guilty?!

TOBIAS: You elitist pig! You're *implying* that some ways of speaking are superior to others, are you not?

WINTHROP: Am I to infer they are not?

TABITHA: Of course they're not! What's wrong with you?!

WINTHROP: I have a Ph.D. in English Grammar.

(Tabitha and Tobias recoil in horror, as before.)

WINTHROP: Why are you recoiling in horror?

TOBIAS: You said the wrong word, mister.

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WINTHROP: I did?

TOBIAS: Grammar! (Shudders.)

WINTHROP: I know that's old fashioned. But –

TOBIAS: Grammar and spelling and punctuation and all the rest of that oppressive evil is now banished, as it should have been long, long ago.

WINTHROP: (correcting his subject/verb agreement) Are.

TOBIAS: What?

WINTHROP: Plural verb with plural subject: are.

TOBIAS: How dare you, Accused #5! How dare you!

TABITHA: I've heard enough to hang this lost soul twenty times.

TOBIAS: And so have I!

(Tobias and Tabitha bang the gavel on Accused #5's head, knocking him down.)

TOBIAS/TABITHA: Guilty!

WINTHROP: Ouch! Is that the punishment?

TOBIAS: Not on your life, Can't Win Winthrop! Stand for your sentence!

(Winthrop gets to his knees.)

WINTHROP: Do I have to?

TABITHA: A swift and fitting punishment it is, too.

WINTHROP: (standing) I guess I have no choice.

TOBIAS: Here is your sentence. Bow your head.

(Winthrop bows head.)

TOBIAS: And repeat after me.

TABITHA: After *us*.

TOBIAS: *Us*.

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TABITHA: I confess before this court . . .

WINTHROP: I confess before this court . . .

TOBIAS: That I have most grievously [*sic*] and mischievously [*sic*]

WINTHROP: (pronouncing the words correctly) Grievously and mischievously . . .

TABITHA: (saying them wrong) Grievously and michievously . . .

WINTHROP: But –

TOBIAS/TABITHA: (saying them wrong) I have, like, you know, pronounced words as if I knowed better.

WINTHROP: Like? You know? Knowed?

TOBIAS/TABITHA: Say it!

WINTHROP: I have, like, you know, pronounced words as if I knowed better.

TOBIAS: And I am, like, you know, heartily sorry.

WINTHROP: And I am . . .

TABITHA: Like . . . you know.

WINTHROP: Like . . . you know . . . heartily sorry.

(The lights begin to fade.)

WINTHROP: Am I punished now? Can I go?

TOBIAS: Oh, we've just started, my friend.

TABITHA: Just started! WINTHROP: Oh, please no! No! No more! No more!

(Tobias and Tabitha laugh manically.)

BLACKOUT

THE END

