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Breaking the Rules With A Smile: Four Women in Theater in the 1920s

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**Breaking the Rules With A Smile:
Four Women in Theater in the 1920s**

PERFORMANCE NOTE

This is a show with multiple characters meant to be performed by one actor. As such, costuming is suggested rather than fully realized – the actor wears a tight black base costume, which will double as the costume for the STAGE MANAGER, and onto which can be added costume pieces to help differentiate between characters. At no time should any character besides the STAGE MANAGER appear in only the base costume.

ACT I

Two flats are set roughly three feet apart upstage, forming a walled backstage area in which character changes can be accomplished as well as a doorway through which entrances and exits can be made. Entrances and exits can also be made around the ends of the flats. Stage left, there is a large roll-top desk set nearly side-on to the audience, and a rolling chair; center stage right, there is a baby grand piano; downstage right there is a dressing room vanity with no glass in the mirror and a stool tucked underneath it. Each of these three areas has a light trained on it that can be isolated for specific scenes, but as the show begins there is only central lighting on the open space in front of the doorway. Upstage of the desk is a wooden coat rack with an umbrella ring at the bottom.

(Wedding March plays. BEATRICE enters through the audience, dressed as Britannia.)

BEATRICE: *(turning to face the audience)* It's the name that's going to take the most getting used to, I think. Lady Peel. Imagine that on a marquee, won't you? I'll use it at home, of course, and in society – but Lillie looks better in lights. Beatrice Lillie. *(Exit)*

(Offstage, a slam is heard, like a door. DOROTHY storms in, a magazine in her hand.)

DOROTHY: *(waving it gaily)* Well, there goes that! Out on the street, though I don't think I care – Zeigfeld had his way, as mapped for him by Miss Billie. Vanity, yes, although Fair could be contested! Miss Dorothy Parker has received her last byline within these hallowed covers, ladies and gentlemen. *(She slings the magazine scornfully under the desk.)* I think this calls for a drink. *(Exit)*

(Light up on the piano. KAY enters, perfectly coiffed, and sits down at the piano.)

KAY: Do you ever get bored with the life you're living? *(strokes piano keys)* I give parties, go to the theater, the opera; I play the piano and amuse my friends and myself. I'm happy, but life lacks spice. Still, it's a good life. Jimmy, the children, security like I never had as a child. *(plays a few notes)* Well. Must speak to the cook. It's Jimmy's birthday, and the party must be perfect. One of Kay's parties, you know. *(gesturing to herself)* *(Exit)*

(Running is heard. JOSEPHINE puffs onstage, ragged and out of breath.)

JOSEPHINE: I got it! I lied to the director, told him I was older than I look, and I got it! I'm gonna be onstage! A dancer! Mama will kill me if she finds out, but I don't care. Someday, Josephine Baker is going to be a star! *(Exit)*

(The STAGE MANAGER enters. She wears a headset and carries a clipboard, clearly of a more modern time than the other women. Under her breath, she half-hums, half-sings "Fine and Dandy". She stands center stage and addresses the audience.)

STAGE MANAGER: Okay, rundown of the situation: You have just been introduced to our four leading ladies. Beatrice Lillie, Dorothy Parker, Kay Swift – well, at this point Warburg – and Josephine Baker. You met them in 1920, but we may encounter them at any point between that and 1930. I may give you pertinent dates when they're really necessary, but the dates aren't nearly as important as these women. That's the important thing here: These women happened. *(She listens to something over the headset.)* Okay, stand by for light change. *(Exit)*

("I'm Just Wild About Harry" plays. JOSEPHINE enters as if she has just run backstage after a number and sits down behind the vanity, addressing the audience through the mirror frame as she fixes her makeup.)

JOSEPHINE: Too dark for the chorus, am I? Look at me now! I knew they'd put me in the show eventually, it was only a matter of time before one of the girls dropped out – I just had to be patient. I told them, I'll work as a dresser, it doesn't matter to me, just let me come to New York and be a part of the show. Months later, one of the girls on the chorus line was sick, and I'd been practicing every step of every dance they do onstage. *(Coming out from behind the vanity, she begins to dance comically, making faces.)* Of course, I'm so little, all angles and no fat – it made sense to be the funny girl. The other girls hated it at first, actually I'm sure they still do, but the people in the seats love me. Last girl in the chorus –

the reviews started to notice me, the little dark girl in *Shuffle Along*, the girl with the faces who bumbled through and then *(she does a complicated step and ends in a pose)* out-danced them all. Now I'm the highest-paid chorus girl on Broadway. Still, this is only one show – I know better than to bank on this. Shows close. I won't be the last girl forever. *(She sits back down and begins to powder her face.)* A lady came to the show the other night and offered me a contract – she wants me to be part of her *Chocolate Revue*. She intends to take the show to Paris. Paris, France! Can you imagine? I thought it was far coming to New York from Saint Louis. I think I'll take it. You have to take your chances, don't you? And if they don't show up for you to take, you have to make them yourself. *(A bell sounds offstage. She hurriedly checks her makeup one last time and exits.)*

(DOROTHY enters, weaving and obviously upset, a martini in her hand. She makes her way to the desk and slumps down on it, ignoring the chair.)

DOROTHY: Men. You'd think they'd have gotten tired by now, all the screwing they've given me. Perhaps it's Charlies. Parker first *(she waves the drink)* who left me for a fifth of whiskey and a bad memory, and now MacArthur. Oh Charlie, Charlie – thirty dollars? Judas making a refund. Unsatisfied Jew! Only who can tell, the Rothschild's gone. The Rothschild's gone, although his name isn't Roth, it's Charles MacArthur, and I wish I didn't love him like this. *(She knocks back the drink.)* Still, it looks like he doesn't love me – what can you do? *(She sits for a moment, gathering herself, then acts on an idea and rummages through the top drawer of the desk, emerging with a razor. Beginning to cry, she exits.)*

(STAGE MANAGER enters.)

STAGE MANAGER: 1923, we've jumped a few years. Dorothy Parker, after aborting Charles MacArthur's child, tries to kill herself in her apartment but is found and rushed to the hospital. *(She walks to the desk and pulls on white bandage "cuffs" with blue bows on them, waiting to pull off the headset until this transition is complete.)* This is the first in what will eventually be four suicide attempts, all similarly unsuccessful. *(Pulls off headset, sits down.)*

DOROTHY: I planned to be gone, but why would I do you that favor? You want me dead, hire an assassin, I'm broke and I can't afford any more razors. It's been awful. But I've surprisingly been able to write. Usually it is so like pulling teeth from a reluctant hippopotamus that I avoid my typewriter at all costs, but there are hospital bills to pay and alcohol to buy. They aren't very good, but I've written some poems – if I need the money, I'm told I could make a book of them. I'm sure people would buy it, books are cheaper than firewood. The project I'm really excited for, though, is this play with the ever-exasperated Elmer Rice. Poor fellow, he's too starchy for me and I just can't seem to buy into his group mentality. But I've really buckled down now, no more missed deadlines or late scenes. It may not be great literature, but it can't be worse than the drivel we've seen onstage recently! That's what really drove me to it, in the end *(shakes her wrists)* and I've decided to do what I can to save others from the same fate. *(Stands up.)* Well, I must be off, the siren song of pain pills calls to me, and they refuse to leave me alone with them. I can't imagine why. *(Exit, taking the STAGE MANAGER's headset with her)*

(BEATRICE enters and crosses to the vanity, no longer costumed.)

BEATRICE: Married life – I don't know what I expected, but I suppose I thought it would make more of a difference. It isn't like Robert forced me to stop performing, because we need the money if nothing else. The poor dear wants so much to be able to do something, but he's failed at everything he's tried. As for me, I'm as I was – Beatrice Lillie, beginning to make a name for André Charlot's revues, queen bee of British musical comedy. I don't think Robert really likes it, to be honest, having a famous wife. It's undignified in a member of the aristocracy, to have a wife that provides better income than your family's estates. Still – I wish I gave more of a fig what Robert thought.

André is thinking of taking his next revue to New York. At first I didn't want to go – leaving Bobby to go to the theater every night is very different from leaving him with his father while I gallivant off to America – but now I'm not sure it isn't a good idea. I need to travel. Robert will likely be relieved – it's easier to avoid me when I'm not here to avoid. (*She stands and exits.*)

JOSEPHINE: (*Offstage*) Paris! 1924! (*She saunters onstage, not exuberant as before but still bursting with enthusiasm, her physical energy now channeled into sensuality. She drapes herself in the vanity chair.*) The *Chocolate Revue* has opened, and I have never been in a place that feels so much like heaven. I'm just like anyone else here – at first people stared at us, but that was the French shock at Americans with our brash ways. I can go where I please, see who I will, eat where I like, and I am treated like the fairest-skinned white girl back in Saint Louis. I knew it! I always knew, even as a child, that there was nothing to this race divider, this disdain. Black people, white people, people from all

over the world – we are not so different, not with eyes closed. In America, I was comedy, a little black girl pulling faces in an all-black show who could just as easily have been scrubbing their floors, completely ignored. Here, though – here in Paris, I can be anything I want to be. There is a new revue being put together, *La Revue Nègre*, and I've been asked to dance for them. Not just as a chorus girl, but with my own songs, a featured part. Things are moving, I can feel it – I'm on my way. *(Exit)*

(BEATRICE enters, dressed as Britannia. She stands center as music to "March With Me" begins to play. She sings, performing as if onstage as part of a show, then takes her bows and "exits" to the vanity)

BEATRICE: America! *(She kisses a small picture of her son pinned to the mirror's frame.)* We've been here a month, and I love it already – it's so close to home in Canada, but still so different. There's so much life here, and the audiences and critics alike have been kind to our show. I've been singled out as one of the highlights. Unsurprising, I was one of Andre's stars in the first place, but still gratifying – I was worried they wouldn't like me. *(Takes off her headdress, looks at it.)* They say Americans and Brits have such a different sense of humor, but they all seem to like me fine. *(Continues changing out of her costume and into a robe hanging on the upstage side of the vanity.)* And in some ways it's heaven just to be on my own and in a show again! It reminds me of the good old days, before I was a star, when Gertie Lawrence and I were the occasional comic turns and would cut up to make each other laugh. We still do, as a matter of fact, only now we're the headliners and everyone notices our crazy antics, on- and off-stage alike. Oh,

the times we've had here already! Stories for me to bring home to Bobby of what Mum got up to across the pond.

One thing that does bother me, though, is this ridiculous elitism. It's almost as bad as it was in England, and here there isn't even an aristocracy! I was snubbed by the wife of a pork baron for being a "chorus girl". Sweet of her to think me a girl in any way, but I still went high and mighty on her. I'm ashamed to say I played the Lady Peel card. For little old me from Toronto, I sometimes put on the most ridiculous airs, but I like to think I've earned them as one of the few breadwinners of the Peel baronetcy. *(Pause)* Perhaps that's harsh. But I'm working damned hard at what I do, and I will not be denigrated because some hopped-up society woman has never been able to appreciate the theater in her entire life. I enjoy the theater. We both deserve a little respect. *(Exit, taking her costume with her.)*

(KAY enters. She does not go to the piano, but skirts around it and ends up downstage left.)

KAY: I've been seized with the oddest feeling lately. I was trained on classical piano, the works of Brahms and Beethoven – that was how I met Jimmy, playing piano at a party on his parents' estate. I'll go to the theater sometimes, as one does, but the music has never inspired much respect in me. It's hack work, most of it, especially when compared to something like Mozart. However, I just heard a new composition by a Broadway composer, George Gershwin – it's called "Rhapsody In Blue", and it's like nothing I've ever heard before! Classical music with a jazz influence, and far from hack work. Ever since, I've been hunting down Gershwin music to test it out, see if he is consistently so

good. I try to play only when I'm alone in the house. I'm almost ashamed to be heard playing such music, but there you are – something about it grabbed me and hasn't let go. I'm sure it will pass. Hopefully it will pass soon. *(Exit)*

(DOROTHY enters, once more waving a magazine, but this time genuinely excited.)

DOROTHY: We've been and gone and done it now. You're looking at a member of the board of editors for New York's newest bastion of literary pretension and puerile wit – the *New Yorker*. Harold Ross, the cheeky bastard himself, asked myself and several other Algonquin regulars to make a board to allay fears on the part of his investors. All I can say is if his investors are comforted by a board of editors drawn from our vicious circle, I have a sparkling piece of waterfront property in the Sahara I'm looking to sell. *(She looks at the magazine.)* Still, those editors do have splendid taste – only the second issue, February 1925, and they already have a Dorothy Parker original in the contents. I may actually have to read this rag. *(Exit)*

(KAY enters, dressed for a party. She sits down at the vanity and begins to take off her jewelry.)

KAY: Another night, another party – it went off well, and the girls stayed up a bit late to perform for the guests. My sweet little girls. Jimmy is always so proud when they come out and do their turn.

Oh! *(She slaps her hands down on the vanity, leaning forward.)* We had a guest tonight! George Gershwin was at the party, I forget who he came with, but he went straight to the piano and stayed the whole night. I've never heard musical comedy songs played

with so much artistry, and classical pieces played with such pizzazz. I got a chance to talk to him – a charming man, and he does know his music. When I told him how much I liked his “Rhapsody in Blue” he perked up considerably and started to quiz me about classical music. We talked for hours, although I had to keep on leaving and coming back so I didn’t neglect my other guests. I made him promise that he’ll come again so we can play a duet at my next party, and he says he is determined to change my mind about the value of popular music. I hope to see a great deal more of him – he’s a fascinating man. *(She turns and looks back through the doorway, then back at the mirror.)* I should get to bed. Jimmy will wonder what’s keeping me. *(Humming the first few bars of “Rhapsody in Blue”, she lingers for a moment, then turns out the light and exits.)*

STAGE MANAGER: *(offstage)* Hold for scene change!

(The STAGE MANAGER enters as all of the lights are brought up. She spends a minute or so putting liquor bottles at varying stages of fullness on the desk, fixing a large spray of feathers onto the corner of the vanity mirror, and arranging a mass of heavily notated sheet music on the piano’s music stand. Without acknowledging the audience, she stands downstage center looking at the stage with a hand on her headset, listening. Then she turns and looks up at the booth, giving a thumbs-up.)

STAGE MANAGER: Scene change complete – entering the second half of the 1920s, October second, 1925. Opening night of *La Revue Nègre*, Paris. *(Exit)*

(Jazz music with a heavy beat and an exotic touch plays. JOSEPHINE bursts through the doorway, clad in a kimono over spangles and a pink flamingo feather, and collapses behind the vanity.)

JOSEPHINE: Well! That was more than I could ever have hoped it would be! You'd think they had never seen a black woman before – how they screamed and shouted when I came onstage, I almost couldn't hear my music. And when I began to dance it got even worse. Already they're describing me as a goddess, an idol. Which is lovely! *(Pause)* It makes you feel rather insignificant, though. I've seen goddesses – they're statues. Rich people pay stacks of money to put them in their houses and never look at them again. I came here to be a performer, not a dancing monkey. *(Holds open her robe, examines her costume in the mirror. Behind her on either flat are projected video clips of her dancing.)* Still, I could never have worn this in St. Louis – the old white biddies would have screamed the place down and fainted dead away!

(A pre-recorded voice reads the next line offstage.)

STAGE MANAGER: Miss Baker, this is your five minute call for the finale.

JOSEPHINE: Thank you! *(She quickly finishes her makeup and stands up, hanging the kimono on the vanity.)* Well, time for this statue to re-appear and move like no statue they've ever seen before. And after all – I know I'm not a statue. Everyone else will come around. *(Exit. Videos fade out.)*

(DOROTHY enters and crosses to the desk, slumping down in the chair with her feet on the surface and propping a book on her stomach. She has kicked over one of the empty bottles but doesn't seem to notice or care. There is an excellent chance she is drunk.)

DOROTHY: Well, well, well. Little Dottie's off to the Continent! I never thought I'd be able to scrape up the money, I'm absolutely unable to hang onto it even when I do get it. I never thought anyone would want to read what I laughingly call poetry, for that matter. But here it is! *(Lifts the book slightly.) Enough Rope*, I decided to call it – because given enough rope, anyone's liable to hang themselves, and what a pretty picture that can make, providing it's the right people. *(Drags her feet off the desk, leans forward and finds a partially full bottle and a tumbler, pours herself a drink.)* At least I seem to be good at something – can't make a go of playwriting, can't force myself to write articles and stories, can't get my gumption to the sticking point for a novel, and I certainly can't hang onto a good man, but boy can I write a swell book of verse! *(Knocks back her drink.)* Time to pack. Maybe I'll run away and never come home. *(Exit.)*

(BEATRICE enters wheeling a trunk on a porter's cart. She is dressed for traveling.)

BEATRICE: To America once again! New York has apparently not had enough of us Brits – I saw one review last time that said the Charlot 1924 revue was better than anything of the sort being done by Americans at the time. My patriotic little heart swelled, and my Britannica costume didn't fit quite right through the chest for a week. I'm talking nonsense. I have my excuse, though! I'm giddy with the thought of showing Bobby New York, and of taking him up to Toronto to see his grandparents in their own

home. He's never been to America before, although Robert did take him here and there in Europe – mostly casinos and racetracks, I'm sure, but travel is travel. Still, I'll have my little boy all to myself the whole time we're here. I'm glad he won't be alone with Robert again. I can't always be with him if I'm in a show, and it worries me what Robert might be telling him, or worse, what the rest of the family might say. We've reached an arrangement, Robert and I, but the British aristocracy is an odd, spiteful beast at the best of times and I'd rather I took my bright boy away from it for a while. The air is fresher in America. I think he'll like it there.

(KAY enters and goes to the piano. She begins to play "Fine and Dandy", which is taken over by a recording as she turns to speak to the audience.)

KAY: I wrote that. *I wrote that.* I never could have imagined, sweating for a teaching certificate at the Institute of Musical Art, that I would get drawn into writing for Broadway. That was long before I met George, though. He's opened my eyes to so many things, things I never thought about music before – he wants to bring real artistry to musical comedy writing, and if anyone can, it's certainly George. The thing is though, he's gotten the bug into me now too. Why shouldn't there be really, truly good music in these revues and romances?

And people have told me my music is good. Not just George – Jimmy thinks so too. In fact, when I started writing songs, Jimmy pulled out some old books he used to write poetry in and said he was going to start writing lyrics for my music. We've been working together, Jimmy and I, and I think we might even try writing a show. If it doesn't work, it

doesn't work, but Jimmy seemed actually keen on the idea when I joked about it. Poor Jimmy. I know what this is, in some ways – he'd be a fool if he didn't know about George and me. We're careful, we're discreet, but when you're in love it's hard to hide it.

It isn't that I've fallen out of love with Jimmy. But George – George makes me feel adventurous. He pushes me. He encourages me to be more than just Mrs. Warburg – he thinks I can be Kay Swift, composer, and I'm beginning to think it too. I'm beginning to know it in my gut. Jimmy and I, if we write that show, will write a damn good show – we are not amateurs, we are a composer-lyricist team the way George and Ira are. I'm glad we have that, at least. Hopefully it makes things easier. *(The song ends. She closes the piano and exits.)*

(JOSEPHINE enters carrying a small white envelope. She crosses to the vanity, opens it, and reads the card inside, beaming.)

JOSEPHINE: Oh, my sweet Pepito! Even when he is away from me only a short time, he remembers how he wooed me the first time. Letters on my dressing table, like clockwork every night – I cannot wait to read them. The night he said he was going to give up everything else and become my manager was the happiest of my life, and he has set my star even more firmly into the sky – he was the one who suggested I open my own nightclub instead of performing at other people's clubs every night, and he has been arranging a world tour. However, if he keeps me up to the mark, I keep him right there with me! If I am going to spread my wings, he is going to have to keep up. I'm glad to be expanding, though – I'm beginning to feel trapped. I am always the beautiful

savage, waving my hips and wearing bananas. I want to sing, I want to mean something to people! I have found such acceptance and peace in Paris – I want to start spreading that. Someday, there could be a little girl in St. Louis who will not have to cross an ocean just to get to a place where she can live as she pleases. (*Puts the letter back in the envelope and exits.*)

(*A recording offstage slowly rises – the sound of a large crowd of people on a march. DOROTHY enters to stand center stage with a large sign that reads “FREE THE INNOCENT”.*)

DOROTHY: (*leaning on the sign*) Here’s a new accessory for all the fine ladies of New York – last winter it was fur-lined gloves, and now it’s righteous placards. Half the Algonquin Round Table is joining in the march in Boston. I’m surprised we haven’t been assigned our own personal press corps and a professional minder. The trials of Sacco and Vanzetti were charades – what country tramples over people like that, people too uneducated to even know what was being said at their questioning? You know what I heard about most? How un-American they are, and how they have both expressed anarchist views. I say, who hasn’t wished for a little anarchy, something to break the monotony – if that’s a crime, then please, officer, (*holds out her wrists for handcuffs*) I’ve been dying to get a new pair of bracelets anyhow. (*Pause*) I’m not expected to believe in much. I am not kind without a reason, and am often unkind without one, and after living long enough with that reputation I know the expectations that come with it. But what kind of person does it make me if I don’t look for a better world wherever I think I can find one? That may make me a Socialist, which isn’t the most popular thing to be, but so be it. I’ve been

down and out before. Somehow, I always rise to the top. (*She shoulders her sign and exits.*)

(*BEATRICE enters, singing "A Room With A View" as she makes her way over to the desk. She takes out a sheet of paper and pencil and begins to write a list.*)

BEATRICE: I wonder sometimes why I don't just live in New York permanently. I'm off again, which means packing, and leaving Bobby... but he's away at school by now, it doesn't make much difference if I'm in England or New York, and this is an exciting show. Noël Coward wants me to play opposite him in the Broadway run of his newest show, *This Year of Grace*, and is composing songs especially for me. Me! It's happened before, but I'll never quite get used to it. I feel as though I haven't worked enough to get that kind of treatment. Then I remember all those years of touring Canada with Mother and Muriel, the struggle to find my first show in London, and the hours of rehearsal I go through to make sure I can make my audience laugh, and I remember there really was quite a lot of work involved in this whole acting lark. In which case, I certainly do deserve it! All of it! All sorts of songs, written to suit me. (*laughs*) Ah, now I'm just feeling drunk with power. But wouldn't you? I'm asking, seriously – wouldn't you? (*Smiles, slaps her list against her palm, and exits.*)

(*KAY runs on holding a playbill in her hand.*)

KAY: I've done it! Jimmy and I have done it! Look at that – opened at the Erlanger's Theatre last night. *Fine and Dandy* – lyrics by Paul James, music by Kay Swift. I have show running on Broadway. *Broadway!* Oh, Daddy would probably be rolling in his grave, but this is

exactly what I needed. I wondered all along if this would work, if I actually would be able to write a full score and make a good show, but if the reviews are anything to go by then I've succeeded as I only dared hope I would. Jimmy's lyrics do a great deal for it, of course, and the performance itself could have spoiled the whole thing – but in the end, that's my music up on that stage. Something I created myself. And I have never been so proud of anything in my entire life! (*Beaming, she exits. "Fine and Dandy" plays from backstage as the lights go down.*)

Rationale

While it is possible for a script to be analyzed as a text, whole in and of itself, the fact remains that a script's primary purpose is to be performed. Crucial elements of the writer's intent can be lost when a script is taken out of a performance context, resulting in miscommunication of key themes and ideas. Given that this script is being presented as my honors project without the benefit of a performance to round out and explain my intentions in writing, I present this rationale for some of the decisions made in the writing of the script, as well as providing some of the intended staging.

First I would like to address an issue that I wrestled with from the very beginning of the project: I am a Caucasian actress, writing a one-woman show for self-performance wherein one of the characters is black. At first I balked at trying to portray Josephine Baker myself, but after consulting work done by actors such as Anna Deavere Smith I decided that as long as I committed myself to performing Josephine Baker as an individual, showing a clear distinction between the woman she really was and the persona thrust upon her of the exotic, sensual savage, I could attempt a respectful performance of a race other than my own. In any future performance of this script, there will be no attempt to make myself look like Josephine Baker by altering my skin color with makeup, etc., but instead through physicality, vocal choices, and costume items I will be able to achieve the desired distinction. This is the same approach I am taking to the differences between myself and the other three women – Beatrice Lillie had an upper-class British accent, Dorothy Parker had a New York accent and was significantly shorter than I am, and Kay Swift had a similar New York accent. None of these are things that come naturally to me, and so naturally I will do the necessary research and spend time rehearsing so

that I am performing all four women as truly as possible rather than letting myself fall into stereotypical representations.

Another issue I am keen to avoid is any scent of whitewashing or making the unwitting point that all these women are somehow the same. My concept of the show necessitates that I wear a base costume for all the characters that can then have costume pieces or props added to it during the brief moments I spend offstage – likely a tight-fitting black top, or leotard, and leggings. However, this base costume is not meant to create some sort of status quo between the characters – the four women are of different social classes, races, religions, and even nationalities, and while they all stretched borders and faced challenges within theater and their personal lives, their experiences are too varied to do more than draw parallels. However, there is still a connection between their actions and the present day, and I have chosen to use the Stage Manager as the incarnation of that connection. Dressed in the base costume and a headset, she is the woman of the theater that resulted partially from the lives and influences of the other four women, and acts as a narrator who stands outside the action but is tied to all of it in her knowledge of what has gone before.

While I am focusing on these women because they were so central to the theater of their time, there are also broader issues that some of these women addressed that I have tried to highlight. Josephine Baker held a deep-seated belief that racism was not a natural human condition and could be overcome, and even at the very beginning of her career she expressed a desire to use her performances and her own life to begin breaking down barriers and spreading acceptance. Dorothy Parker declared her allegiance to the idea of socialism in 1927 after

attempting to appeal to the governor of Massachusetts in the infamous Sacco and Vanzetti case. She went on to become a Communist sympathizer, and left her literary estate to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to further his crusade for civil rights. These are aspects of these women that carry just as much weight as their theatrical careers, and I wanted to give them the attention they are due. These emphases also create an interesting split down the middle of the set I have created – on one side, there is the African-American fighter for equality and the Jewish woman who believed in a more equal world, while on the other are two white upper-class Protestant women who, while they did not lead objectionable or bigoted lives, certainly did not display the same fervor for controversial crusades. This juxtaposition would probably provide material for scads of other writing, and is not something I have focused on particularly in my script, but it was something I found interesting in my research.

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