

Arches, Balance and Light

Mary Spletter





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ArtAge Publications
Bonnie L. Vorenberg, President
PO Box 19955
Portland OR 97280
503-246-3000 or 800-858-4998
bonniev@seniortheatre.com
www.seniortheatre.com

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ARCHES, BALANCE AND LIGHT

By Mary Spletter

CAST

JULIA MORGAN: San Francisco Bay Area architect, designer of Hearst Castle and more than 700 buildings, mostly throughout the Bay Area but also in Honolulu, Utah, and Illinois. Also plays SALESPERSON.

YOUNG JULIA: Everything seems against this young woman who only wants a degree in architecture from the best school in the world.

MARGUERITE (DUVAL) BLANCHET: Possible daughter of Julia Morgan.

VICTOR DUVAL: Fictitious Assistant Director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

CEDRIC RICHARD: Fictitious Director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, archrival of Victor. Man or woman dressed as man may play role. Also plays PORTER at boat harbor.

CHORUS: Actors 1-4 in script. May be double cast from main actors or cast separately as chorus.

Place:

Julia Morgan's private home in San Francisco that she rarely leaves in her retirement years.

Time:

1940s during an up-until-now quiet day in October.

This historical fiction play was inspired by the life of Julia Morgan.

PROLOGUE

Setting: *Small well-organized Victorian apartment in San Francisco. Includes: couch, table set with pot of tea, sandwiches and chocolates, mirror on wall. Three windows are on one side of room, a design she often used.*

At Rise: *Older JULIA MORGAN enters room with care as she has mobility problems. She passes vase, stops, examines flowers in vase. She rearranges two stems to meet her design standards. CHORUS of four actors take place in room.*

JULIA: There, now it's perfect. (*she addresses audience*) My name is Julia Morgan. Perhaps you've heard of me.

ACTOR ONE: The first woman to receive a license to practice architecture in California.

ACTOR TWO: The designer of Hearst Castle.

ACTOR THREE: And, every architect's dream,

ACTOR FOUR: Winner of the prestigious Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects.

JULIA: Interesting that mine was one of the few to be awarded posthumously--57 years after my death. Was it really that hard to understand my contributions? With each honor I was called the:

ACTORS IN CHORUS: "First Woman."

JULIA: I always seemed to end up in a category by myself, a very lonely place to be. I'm not bragging or complaining, at least not much, just stating the facts. But in my view, history has misunderstood me. Some biographers have called me:

ACTOR ONE: "Shy,"

ACTOR TWO: "Reclusive,"

ACTOR THREE: "A spinster."

ACTOR FOUR: She never married. She had no children, at least that we know of.

JULIA: Let me ask: how could any shy and reclusive woman have survived and thrived in a man's world? I was just highly selective about what I did with my time and very discreet about what I chose to tell.

JULIA: Shy indeed! Still, any time my name is mentioned, the question of my lifestyle comes up.

ACTOR ONE: Did she have a lover?

ACTOR TWO: A family?

ACTOR THREE: A husband?

ACTOR FOUR: Was she a lesbian?

JULIA: Can you imagine! What happened to privacy? As if I could have been a better architect if only I could check one of those boxes.

CHORUS OF ACTORS: In recent years:

ACTOR ONE: Her reputation dimmed.

ACTOR TWO: The ornamental designs she loved fell out of vogue.

ACTOR THREE: She found the new modern styles distasteful, ugly, lacking charm.

JULIA: Today, a dear, dear friend and client, Mr. William Randolph Hearst, is reported to be gravely ill. I thought he was indestructible. If anyone could buy life, it would have been Willie. He has made me reflect on my one life. I ask myself so many questions.

ACTOR ONE: Did I make the right choices?

ACTOR TWO: What if I had followed my maternal instinct instead of my intellectual calling? Did I even have a maternal instinct?

ACTOR THREE: Did I give up too much? What did I miss with no children?

JULIA: Tonight I'm traveling into my imagination to ask what a different life might have been like. Perhaps a more traditional path.

You're invited to join me. Now I'm meeting a special guest, I suspect that she will have her own questions about my choices in life. (*JULIA looks at watch*) And she's late!

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Setting: *JULIA MORGAN's apartment, San Francisco, 1947.*

JULIA: (*a knock on door*) At last. (*she looks in mirror, pats hair, and opens door*)

MARGUERITE enters dressed well in understated Parisian fashion. The two women greet each other as JULIA extends hand and MARGUERITE attempts to kiss her on the cheek, the French greeting.

MARGUERITE: Ah, Miss Morgan. You have no idea how important this meeting is to me.

JULIA: Kind of you to say so. I thought time had forgotten me. I'm not on many tour stops these days.

MARGUERITE: Perhaps not. But your buildings. They're everywhere. You must be so proud of them. How many have you designed? 710?

JULIA: Actually, 712.

MARGUERITE: Of course you would know the exact number. They tell me you don't get out much. I hear you almost never agree to meet friends, much less a perfect stranger.

JULIA: My travels are limited to these few rooms. But I couldn't refuse to meet the daughter of a dear friend from my days in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

MARGUERITE: Thank you. *(pause)* You're so much smaller and shorter than I thought you'd be. Oh, how impolite.

(JULIA laughs)

JULIA: Don't apologize. Most people think it, even if they don't say it. My energy is limited. I've set aside an hour for your interview. We should try to stick to your agenda.

MARGUERITE: I confess I'm intimidated by being here in your presence in your home.

JULIA: My housekeeper prepared some light sandwiches and tea. Or would you prefer chocolates? *(both sit as JULIA pours tea for them)*

MARGUERITE: Did you say chocolates?

JULIA: One of the few pleasures I have left in life.

MARGUERITE: Father never allowed it in the house. He must have felt chocolates were too extravagant.

(JULIA opens box of chocolates. MARGUERITE takes one piece.)

JULIA: *(laughs)* Have another.

(MARGUERITE takes a second piece of chocolate)

MARGUERITE: I love it, too.

(JULIA closes box to avoid MARGUERITE taking another piece)

JULIA: Your eyes.

MARGUERITE: My eyes?

JULIA: Exactly like your father's.

MARGUERITE: People tell me all the time how much I resemble father. I suspect that I take after my mother in character, *(pause)* especially in my willfulness and sense of humor.

JULIA: Willfulness. Now there's a trait I know something about. It can get you into trouble.

MARGUERITE: It doesn't seem to have caused problems for you.

JULIA: *(with a smile)* So you think.

MARGUERITE: Since his death, I'm learning so many new things about father. I thought I knew him so well. Now I'm not so sure.

JULIA: I don't understand.

MARGUERITE: You, for example. He never spoke about you. Yet I now know that you must have been quite close. Back in Paris, I tried to imagine you. You're not at all what I thought you would be like.

JULIA: There was a time when I could swing a sledgehammer with the best of them and climb the highest scaffolds.

MARGUERITE: I didn't mean your athletic abilities. I mean your relationship with him.

JULIA: I'm a little surprised that you're interested in anything about me or even that you wanted to see me. I certainly don't understand why my relationship with him would interest you.

MARGUERITE: Oh, you must have some idea.

JULIA: None. No, none at all.

MARGUERITE: Interesting.

JULIA: You wrote that you wanted to interview me about my portfolios on arches and rosettes—two of my specialties.

MARGUERITE: I needed a way to meet you. That's not the real reason I'm here.

JULIA: Tell me, why did you come?

MARGUERITE: I want to ask you something quite personal.

JULIA: Well? Ask! I'm afraid impatience is another of my traits.

(MARGUERITE inhales and blurts out)

MARGUERITE: Are you my mother?

(JULIA coughs and chokes on her tea)

JULIA: Did I hear you correctly?

MARGUERITE: Yes you did. Are you my mother? Please. I must know.

JULIA: I don't know whether to be honored or shocked that you could think such a thing?

MARGUERITE: I found the letters.

JULIA: Letters?

MARGUERITE: Two from you to father.

JULIA: Oh, my!

MARGUERITE: Along with clippings of your accomplishments and a faded picture of a woman. She looks somewhat like you.

(JULIA gets up, crosses stage)

JULIA: What an imagination.

MARGUERITE: He kept the mementoes in the family safe. It was opened for me only after he died. What were you to him? I brought the letters with me.

(MARGUERITE carefully removes letter from her purse)

MARGUERITE: "My Dear Victor, I haven't slept since I heard the awful news from clients that dear Marguerite is fighting the Spanish flu."

(JULIA continues reading) "I had to write despite the promise I made. The pain I suffer from being so far away gets worse each day that I cannot share this time of grief. Know that I am at your side in spirit and love."

(MARGUERITE continues reading) "With greatest affection, Julia."

MARGUERITE: Well?

JULIA: Well, what?

MARGUERITE: Can you explain it?

JULIA: Why should I explain a personal letter to a dear friend? I was worried because of the danger you were in. I tried to comfort Victor when he needed me most. I felt his grief.

MARGUERITE: Your letter confirmed my suspicion that my father had kept secrets from me. Secrets that may have involved you.

JULIA: What are you talking about?

MARGUERITE: I believe the two of you wanted to hide my real origins.

JULIA: How absurd! I have nothing to hide. Nothing.

MARGUERITE: How about abandoning father and me?

JULIA: Some things are best left undisturbed.

MARGUERITE: Not the identity of one's own mother.

JULIA: Please calm down.

MARGUERITE: I can't calm down. I feel like I need to yell and shout if that can help me find out who I really am.

JULIA: My dear.

MARGUERITE: Please, don't call me that.

JULIA: Dear, you're much too old for a temper tantrum.

MARGUERITE: Don't call me "Dear!" The term implies an attachment, which doesn't exist.

JULIA: Marguerite then.

MARGUERITE: These letters turned my life upside down. Is my entire life based on lies? Father's lies and yours? I need to learn the truth.

JULIA: Oh, my dear.

MARGUERITE: If you want to see a temper tantrum, I'll show you one. I've heard that your buildings have fallen out of favor. I'm glad.

(JULIA slaps MARGUERITE's face)

MARGUERITE: Oh! Ouch!

JULIA: Oh, my!

(in unison with each other)

JULIA and MARGUERITE: I'm so sorry.

MARGUERITE: You didn't have to do that.

JULIA: Oh, yes, I did! Even the men on my work crews never talked to me like that. Thank god my buildings couldn't talk back to me.

MARGUERITE: I've held things in for so long. I couldn't help myself.

JULIA: Another outburst and I'll insist that you leave.

MARGUERITE: I grew up believing father had married an artist from America who died after my birth. Now I suspect that you may be that artist, and you simply deserted us. Worse, I may have been born out of wedlock--*une batarde*.

JULIA: You traveled this great distance to accuse me of being your mother?

MARGUERITE: I can't wait any longer. I need to know.

JULIA: Are you certain you want to know?

MARGUERITE: I thought I could live and die not having the answers. But the letters, father's refusal to discuss my mother . . . nothing made sense. I can't sleep at night. I see a mother and daughter walking hand-in-hand down the street and I burst into tears. My children deserve to know who their grandmother is. They ask me questions about our family history. I need to find answers for their curiosity and my sanity.

JULIA: Please stop. I'm sorry for your anguish. I will tell you about your father and me. I must warn you to be prepared for the consequences.

MARGUERITE: Please. Nothing is more important to me.

Scene 2

Setting: *Paris, outside the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, 1896.*

JULIA: It was a wonderful time in my life. I was 26, the year I met your father. I never could have foreseen how my life was about to change.

(Throughout the remaining play, the elder JULIA and MARGUERITE will watch and comment from the sidelines. From here on, Elder Julia will be referred to as JULIA, Younger Julia will always be called YOUNG JULIA.)

YOUNG JULIA: *(from offstage)* No. Not again! Don't you dare! *(sound of liquid splashing)* How could you! Paint! My best jacket, my only jacket *(she enters stage)* Monsters, all of you! Well, you won. I'm withdrawing my application. I hope that makes you happy. Ugh! And people say the French are charming. I'll be glad to be rid of them. *(YOUNG JULIA removes jacket, surveys the damage)* It's ruined. *(she reaches into satchel for towel, pulls out a snail, which she throws to the ground)* A snail! Disgusting!

(YOUNG JULIA tenderly examines her sketches and books, placing them on the ground to dry. VICTOR enters from the school, alarmed by the commotion.)

VICTOR: Mademoiselle. You, you are all wet. What happened? Did those ruffians from my school douse you with water or, oh no, with paint? They have no manners. Please, I must apologize for them. We will pay for your jacket.

(he picks up papers and books YOUNG JULIA has dropped)

VICTOR: These sketches! Quite Good! And these books. In French! Can you read them?

(no response from YOUNG JULIA)

YOUNG JULIA: I can speak, read and think in both French and English. The drawings? Mine. Now I have to listen to another Frenchman telling me what I don't know.

VICTOR: *(chuckles)* From your dress, I would guess you are not French. Ahem. Still no explanation. Am I doing something that is upsetting you?

YOUNG JULIA: Sir, I heard you. Young ladies do not talk to strangers.

VICTOR: You're right, of course, I'm so sorry. Let's begin again. I'm Professor Victor Duval, Associate Director for Architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

(VICTOR makes a formal bow)

YOUNG JULIA: It seems I can't even withdraw from the Ecole without creating a stir.

VICTOR: Ahha! You must be the young lady the entire school is buzzing about.

YOUNG JULIA: Not for long. You've all won.

VICTOR: Won what?

YOUNG JULIA: I'm withdrawing my application. I don't need a degree from this stuffy, elitist, antiquated school.

VICTOR: Young lady. I differ with you. I think a certificate from the most prestigious school of architecture in the world is just what any aspiring student of architecture would need.

YOUNG JULIA: But, I can't get in!

VICTOR: I know.

YOUNG JULIA: Back in Berkeley, my mentor told me that to be a great architect I would need a degree from the Ecole.

VICTOR: Good advice.

YOUNG JULIA: He left out one fact.

VICTOR: The school has never admitted a woman.

YOUNG JULIA: The first time I applied, the metric system confused me. The second time, a decision was made to ignore test scores of women.

END OF FREEVIEW

You'll want to read and perform this show!