

# TELL-TALE

*A full-length play  
by Rebecca Gorman O'Neill*

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## **DEDICATION**

*For Tim O'Leary and Peter Tucker*

## **STORY OF THE PLAY**

TELL-TALE is loosely based on the life and death of Edgar Allan Poe. It is, in essence, Poe's last confession. It takes place in the Baltimore hospital where he lies in a delirium before his death. Poe is forced to look at his life, his mistakes, his outrageous behaviors, and, in the end, he must try to find peace. This peace in death comes by way of the only peace he had in life -- telling a story. Poe starts his story by casting himself as the dashing, tragic hero, but as the play progresses, his own memories slip from his control, turning on him and forcing him to face his life as it was, and not how he wishes it had been. Facing his life honestly, at last, Poe can find peace and resolution in death. This play, in free verse, runs 90 minutes not including intermission.

## **PREMIERE PERFORMANCE**

Forest Roberts Theatre; November, 2006; Marquette, Michigan;  
Cast and crew from Northern Michigan University.

## **AWARDS**

Winner of the Mildred and Albert Panowski  
Playwriting Competition

*Beware the temptation to love an artist. For you will never tempt  
him away from his first love – his art, himself.*

## CHARACTERS

*With doubling 5 m, 8 f.*

*Without doubling as many as 13 m, 21 f.*

- \*(Older) Edgar Allan Poe:** The writer, now sick and dying, 40s
- \*(Younger) Edgar Allan Poe:** The writer, ages from 20s - 40s
- Virginia Clemm Poe:** His cousin, later his wife, from child - 20s
- Maria (Muddy) Clemm:** Poe's aunt, Virginia's mother, 60s
- Ghost (Eliza Poe):** Poe's mother, 25
- Fanny Osgood:** Poe's friend and fellow writer, 35
- Robert Merrill:** Poe's friend and business partner, 35
- Nurse:** For Older Poe, early 30s
- Ensemble:** 3 men and 3 women for crowds, passers-by, and all other roles.

### **Doubling as follows:**

Double Fanny, the Ghost, Girl, and Prim Woman  
Double Thief, Beggar, Merrill, Conductor, and Doctor  
Man 1: Drunk Man, Reviewer 1, Pritchard, Train Man 1  
Man 2: Drunk Man, Reviewer 2, Boy, Train Man 2  
Man 3: Well-Dressed Man, Joseph, Prim Man, Reviewer 3  
Woman 1: Fishwife, Fawning Woman 2 & 4, Knitting Woman  
Woman 2: Lady, Fawning Woman 1 & 3, Elmira, Measure Woman  
Woman 3: Wife, Well-Dressed Old Lady, Helen, Cutting Woman

**\*Note:** *Directors can choose to use just one actor for both Poe roles. If so, the older Poe rises from his hospital bed, slowly gaining youth and strength. When the Nurse speaks to Older Poe, she addresses the empty bed.*

## SETTING

A street scene, then a hospital room in Baltimore, 1849. Through Poe's memories, we travel to his home in Fordham, New York; auditoriums in Manhattan and Richmond, Virginia; and a train en route to Baltimore. The changes in setting may be abstract and dreamlike, and no matter where the setting in Poe's mind, the props and furniture may be those found in the hospital.

**ACT I**  
**Scene 1**

*(AT RISE: A street in Baltimore, 1849. OLDER POE lies prostrate at the mouth of an alley. He is dirty, beaten, and wearing mismatched clothes. PEDESTRIANS pass him, taking no notice. A spitting rain falls.)*

**PEDESTRIANS:** *(Words muttered under.)* Move, fast, go, pass, hurry... *(Additional words listed at end of script.)*

*(A THIEF approaches POE. The Thief rolls Poe onto his back and goes through his pockets. Finding nothing, he moves on. Poe stirs. A PAIR OF MEN stagger on, singing.)*

**PAIR OF MEN:** *(A drinking song.)* Drown me in the whiskey  
And the gin and the rum,  
Drown me in the river when the drinkin's done!  
Don't take me home if my wife's still up,  
I'd rather face the riverbed--  
Or at least another cup!

*(THEY stumble off. A WELL-DRESSED MAN and WIFE enter.)*

**WELL-DRESSED MAN:** Look at these disgusting men-  
The dregs of humanity,  
How dare they walk the earth?  
*(Shaking off a BEGGAR.)*  
No, I DON'T have a penny for you!

*(THEY exit. A FISHWIFE enters.)*

**FISHWIFE:** Where is he, the bastard,  
Out drinking again--  
Just wait 'til I find him--  
He'll wish he were dead.

*(SHE exits. PEDESTRIANS' muttering continues under. POE has finally found his feet.)*

**POE:** Why are you hiding from he who loves you best?  
Don't be afraid now, my darling, my love,  
I can't hurt you now.  
Don't be afraid, come out, come out...  
Virginia!

*(HE grabs a passing LADY.)*

**LADY:** EEEEEEE!

*(SHE whacks HIM about the head with her umbrella until he falls down again. She runs away.)*

**PAIR OF MEN:** *(Lurching back on, singing.)*  
If the ocean were whiskey and I were a duck,  
I'd swim to the bottom and never come up.  
But the ocean ain't whiskey and I ain't a duck,  
So let's go to Shanghai and find a good—

**FISHWIFE:** *(Rushes toward them.)* Jonathan!!

**ONE OF THE MEN:** Uh-oh.

*(The FISHWIFE chases THEM off.)*

**FISHWIFE:** You're scum! You're filth! You're nothing!

**POE:** *(Standing again.)* I'm nothing. I hear you.

I've ruined everything. I know.

Oh Virginia, I've hurt you.

I'm so sorry...forgive me.

Where are you?

Virginia...

Virginia...

Let me show you.

I won't do it again.

*(HE attracts the attention of a gentleman, JOSEPH, and the GIRL on his arm.)*

**JOSEPH:** Good lord --

**GIRL:** Joseph, don't stop.

**JOSEPH:** Just a moment --

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**POE:** She left me. She left me alone.  
All alone.

**JOSEPH:** Mr. Poe?

**GIRL:** Joseph, I'm getting wet!

**JOSEPH:** Mr. Poe, is that you?

**POE:** Have you seen her?

**JOSEPH:** Are you all right, sir?

**POE:** We got split up, somehow.  
I got lost.

**JOSEPH:** It's all right.

**POE:** Who are you?

**JOSEPH:** Joseph Walker, sir, we spoke once, at a...lecture you  
gave.

**POE:** I'm sorry, I don't recall.

**JOSEPH:** I think we had better get you inside.

**GIRL:** Joseph, you can't take this filth --

**JOSEPH:** Quiet! Don't you know who this is?

**GIRL:** It's a filthy old beggar.

**JOSEPH:** This is Edgar Allan Poe.

*(MUTTERING stops.)*

**GIRL:** The poet? You're joking.

**POE:** Something's gone wrong and I lost my way.  
Something's gone horribly wrong.

**JOSEPH:** Come with me, sir. Just come with me.

*(THEY start to move off.)*

**GIRL:** What on earth happened to him?

**POE:** It was nothing so much of earth, my lady,  
Nothing so much of earth.

*(THEY move to...)*

**Scene 2**

*(Transition to the hospital. POE is moved to a bed, a NURSE enters turning down lamps, tidying, and preparing to leave for the night.)*

**POE:** *(Cont'd. In his sleep.)* They're coming.

**NURSE:** Shh...no one's coming.

**POE:** I can see them. They'll take me away--  
They hate me, they hate me...

Why?

**NURSE:** No one hates you.

**POE:** For all I've done, for all I said.

*(SHE hums a tune. HE calms and wakes.)*

**POE:** *(Cont'd.)* Who are you? Where am I?

I know you, I think.

**NURSE:** I should say that you know me,

You've shouted and clutched at me,

Struck me and called me

By so many names you would think

I was every woman you knew under the sun.

**POE:** Good god, what have I said?

**NURSE:** The fever was talking, not you.

**POE:** Forgive me. If I've insulted you—

**NURSE:** Hush now.

**POE:** Please forgive me.

**NURSE:** Nothing to forgive.

Such things come with the work.

**POE:** How long have I been asleep?

**NURSE:** A few days, now.

**POE:** Such dreams, such dreams...

"A demon in my view."

I never knew what that meant 'til now.

**NURSE:** It's late. You may as well go on sleeping.

**POE:** No, I can't. The dreams...

**NURSE:** Only dreams. Dreams can't harm you.

**POE:** My dreams can.

**NURSE:** Nonsense.

**POE:** Leave the light burning, will you?

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