

HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE

BY PAULA VOGEL



Revised Edition



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



HOW I
LEARNED

TO  PAUL 

★ Revised Edition



★
DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.



All Rights Reserved

CAUTION: Professionals and amateurs are hereby warned that performance of HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE is subject to payment of a royalty. It is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright Union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth), and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention, the Berne Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. All rights, including without limitation professional/amateur stage rights, motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound recording, all other forms of mechanical, electronic and digital reproduction, transmission and distribution, such as CD, DVD, the Internet, private and file-sharing networks, information storage and retrieval systems, photocopying, and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved. Particular emphasis is placed upon the matter of readings, permission for which must be secured from the Author's agent in writing.

The English language stock and amateur stage performance rights in the United States, its territories, possessions, and Canada for HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE are controlled exclusively by DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC., 440 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. No professional or nonprofessional performance of the Play may be given without obtaining in advance the written permission of DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC., and paying the requisite fee.

Inquiries concerning all other rights should be addressed to William Morris Endeavor Entertainment, LLC, 1325 Avenue of the Americas, 15th Floor, New York, NY 10019. Attn: Val Day.

SPECIAL NOTE

Anyone receiving permission to produce HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE is required to give credit to the Author as sole and exclusive Author of the Play on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play and in all instances in which the title of the Play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the Play and/or a production thereof. The name of the Author must appear on a separate line, in which no other name appears, immediately beneath the title and in size of type equal to 50% of the size of the largest, most prominent letter used for the title of the Play. No person, firm or entity may receive credit larger or more prominent than that accorded the Author. The following acknowledgments must appear on the title page in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play:

HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE received its world premiere at the
Vineyard Theatre, New York City.

Off-Broadway production produced by the Vineyard Theatre
in association with Daryl Roth and Roy Gaby.

This play was made possible by generous support from the
Pew Charitable Trust and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

It was written and developed at the Perseverance Theatre,
Juneau, Alaska, Molly Smith, Artistic Director.

SPECIAL NOTE ON SONGS AND RECORDINGS

For performances of copyrighted songs, arrangements or recordings mentioned in this Play, the permission of the copyright owner(s) must be obtained. Other songs, arrangements or recordings may be substituted provided permission from the copyright owner(s) of such songs, arrangements or recordings is obtained; or songs, arrangements or recordings in the public domain may be substituted.

This play is dedicated to Peter Franklin.

HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE was produced by Vineyard Theatre (Douglas Aibel, Artistic Director; Jon Nakagawa, Managing Director) in New York City in February, 1997. It was directed by Mark Brokaw; the set design was by Narelle Sissons; the costume design was by Jess Goldstein; the lighting design was by Mark McCullough; the original sound design was by David van Tieghem; and the production stage manager was Thea Bradshaw Gillies. The cast was as follows:

LI'L BITMary-Louise Parker
PECK.....David Morse
MALE GREEK CHORUSMichael Showalter
FEMALE GREEK CHORUSJohanna Day
TEENAGE GREEK CHORUSKerry O'Malley

The Vineyard Theatre production, in association with Daryl Roth and Roy Gabay, moved to the Century Theatre, in New York City, in April, 1997. MALE GREEK CHORUS was played by Christopher Duva.

This play was made possible by generous support from the Pew Charitable Trust and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. It was written and developed at the Perseverance Theatre, Juneau, Alaska; Molly Smith, Artistic Director.

CHARACTERS

LI'L BIT — A woman who ages forty-something to eleven years old. (See Notes on the New York Production.)

PECK — Attractive man in his forties. Despite a few problems, he should be played by an actor one might cast in the role of Atticus in *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

THE GREEK CHORUS If possible, these three members should be able to sing three-part harmony.

MALE GREEK CHORUS — Plays Grandfather, Waiter, High School Boys. Thirties-forties. (See Notes on the New York Production.)

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS — Plays Mother, Aunt Mary, High School Girls. Thirty-fifty. (See Notes on the New York Production.)

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS — Plays Grandmother, High School Girls, and the voice of eleven-year-old Li'l Bit. Note on the casting of this actor: I would strongly recommend casting a young woman who is "of legal age," that is, twenty-one to twenty-five years old who can look as close to eleven as possible. The contrast with the other cast members will help. If the actor is too young, the audience may feel uncomfortable. (See Notes on the New York Production.)

PRODUCTION NOTES

I urge directors to use the Greek Chorus in staging as environment and, well, part of the family — with the exception of the Teenage Greek Chorus member who, after the last time she appears onstage, should perhaps disappear.

As for music: please have fun. I wrote sections of the play listening to music like Roy Orbison's "Dream Baby"* and the Mamas and the Papa's "Dedicated to the One I Love."* The vaudeville sections go well to Tijuana Brass* or any music that sounds like a *Laugh-In* soundtrack.* Other sixties music is rife with pedophilish (?) reference: The Beach Boys "Little Surfer Girl,"* the "You're Sixteen" genre hits; "Come Back When You Grow Up, Girl"* Gary Pickett and the Union Gap's "This Girl Is a Woman Now,"* etc.

Don't forget that all rights must be obtained before using specific music in your production.

And whenever possible, please feel free to punctuate the action with traffic signs: "No Passing," "Slow Children," "Dangerous Curves," "One Way," and the visual signs for children, deer crossings, hills, school buses, etc. (see Notes on the New York Production).

ON TITLES

Throughout the script there are bold-faced titles. In production these should be spoken in a neutral voice (the type of voice that driver education films employ). In the New York production these titles were assigned to various members of the Greek Chorus and were done live.

* See Special Note on Songs and Recordings on copyright page.

NOTES ON THE NEW YORK PRODUCTION

The role of Li'l Bit was originally written as a character who is forty-something. When we cast Mary-Louise Parker in the role of Li'l Bit, we cast the Greek Chorus members with younger actors as the Female Greek and the Male Greek, and cast the Teenage Greek with an older (that is, mid-twenties) actor as well. There is a great deal of flexibility in age. Directors should change the age in the last monologue for Li'l Bit ("And before you know it, I'll be thirty-five") to reflect the actor's age who is playing Li'l Bit.

This script uses the notion of slides and projections, which were not used in the New York production of the play.

HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE

As the house lights dim, a Voice announces:

Safety first — You and Driver Education.

Then the sound of a key turning the ignition of a car. Li'l Bit steps into a spotlight on the stage; "well-endowed," she is a softer-looking woman in the present time than she was at seventeen.

LI'L BIT. Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson. We're going to start our lesson tonight on an early, warm summer evening.

In a parking lot overlooking the Beltsville Agricultural Farms in suburban Maryland.

Less than a mile away, the crumbling concrete of U.S. One wends its way past one-room revival churches, the porno drive-in, and boarded up motels with For Sale signs tumbling down.

Like I said, it's a warm summer evening.

Here on the land the Department of Agriculture owns, the smell of sleeping farm animal is thick on the air. The smells of clover and hay mix in with the smells of the leather dashboard. You can still imagine how Maryland used to be, before the malls took over. This countryside was once dotted with farmhouses — from their porches you could have witnessed the Civil War raging in the front fields.

Oh yes. There's a moon over Maryland tonight, that spills into the car where I sit beside a man old enough to be — did I mention how still the night is? Damp soil and tranquil air. It's the kind of night that makes a middle-aged man with a mortgage feel like a country boy again.

It's 1969. And I am very old, very cynical of the world, and I know it all. In short, I am seventeen years old, parking off a dark lane with a married man on an early summer night.

(Lights up on two chairs facing front — or a Buick Riviera, if you will. Waiting patiently, with a smile on his face, Peck sits sniffing the night air. Li'l Bit climbs in beside him, seventeen years old and tense. Throughout the following, the two sit facing directly front. They do not touch. Their bodies remain passive. Only their facial expressions emote.)

PECK. Ummm. I love the smell of your hair.

LI'L BIT. Uh-huh.

PECK. Oh, Lord. Ummmm. *(Beat.)* A man could die happy like this.

LI'L BIT. Well, *don't*.

PECK. What shampoo is this?

LI'L BIT. Herbal Essence.

PECK. Herbal Essence. I'm gonna buy me some. Herbal Essence. And when I'm all alone in the house, I'm going to get into the bathtub, and uncap the bottle and —

LI'L BIT. — Be good.

PECK. What?

LI'L BIT. Stop being ... bad.

PECK. What did you think I was going to say? What do you think I'm going to do with the shampoo?

LI'L BIT. I don't want to know. I don't want to hear it.

PECK. I'm going to wash my hair. That's all.

LI'L BIT. Oh.

PECK. What did you think I was going to do?

LI'L BIT. Nothing ... I don't know. Something ... nasty.

PECK. With shampoo? Lord, gal — your mind!

LI'L BIT. And whose fault is it?

PECK. Not mine. I've got the mind of a boy scout.

LI'L BIT. Right. A horny boy scout.

PECK. Boy scouts are always horny. What do you think the first Merit Badge is for?

LI'L BIT. There. You're going to be nasty again.

PECK. Oh, no. I'm good. Very good.

LI'L BIT. It's getting late.

PECK. Don't change the subject. I was talking about how good I am. *(Beat.)* Are you ever gonna let me show you how good I am?

LI'L BIT. Don't go over the line now.

PECK. I won't. I'm not gonna do anything you don't want me to do.

LI'L BIT. That's right.

PECK. And I've been good all week.

LI'L BIT. You have?

PECK. Yes. All week. Not a single drink.

LI'L BIT. Good boy.

PECK. Do I get a reward? For not drinking?

LI'L BIT. A small one. It's getting late.

PECK. Just let me undo you. I'll do you back up.

LI'L BIT. All right. But be quick about it. (*Peck pantomimes undoing Li'l Bit's brassiere with one hand.*) You know, that's amazing. The way you can undo the hooks through my blouse with one hand.

PECK. Years of practice.

LI'L BIT. You would make an incredible brain surgeon with that dexterity.

PECK. I'll bet Clyde — what's the name of the boy taking you to the prom?

LI'L BIT. Claude Souders.

PECK. Claude Souders. I'll bet it takes him two hands, lights on, and you helping him on to get to first base.

LI'L BIT. Maybe. (*Beat.*)

PECK. Can I ... kiss them? Please?

LI'L BIT. I don't know.

PECK. Don't make a grown man beg.

LI'L BIT. Just one kiss.

PECK. I'm going to lift your blouse.

LI'L BIT. It's a little cold. (*Peck laughs gently.*)

PECK. That's not why you're shivering. (*They sit, perfectly still, for a long moment of silence. Peck makes gentle, concentric circles with his thumbs in the air in front of him.*) How does that feel? (*Li'l Bit closes her eyes, carefully keeps her voice calm.*)

LI'L BIT. It's ... okay. (*Sacred music, organ music or a boy's choir swells beneath the following.*)

PECK. I tell you, you can keep all the cathedrals of Europe. Just give me a second with these — these celestial orbs — (*Peck*

bows his head as if praying. But he is kissing her nipple. Li'l Bit, eyes still closed, rears back her head on the leather Buick car seat.)

LI'L BIT. Uncle Peck — we've got to go. I've got graduation rehearsal at school tomorrow morning. And you should get on home to Aunt Mary —

PECK. — All right, Li'l Bit.

LI'L BIT. — *Don't call me that no more. (Calmer.) Any more. I'm a big girl now, Uncle Peck. As you know. (Li'l Bit pantomimes refastening her bra behind her back.)*

PECK. That you are. Going on eighteen. Kittens will turn into cats. *(Sighs.)* I live all week long for these few minutes with you — you know that?

LI'L BIT. I'll drive.

(A Voice cuts in with:)

Idling in the Neutral Gear.

(Sound of car revving cuts off the sacred music; Li'l Bit, now an adult, rises out of the car and comes to us.)

LI'L BIT. In most families, relatives get names like "Junior," or "Brother," or "Bubba." In my family, if we call someone "Big Papa," it's not because he's tall. In my family, folks tend to get nicknamed for their genitalia. Uncle Peck, for example. My mama's adage was "the titless wonder," and my cousin Bobby got branded for life as "B.B." *(In unison with Greek Chorus:)*

LI'L BIT.

GREEK CHORUS.

For blue balls.

For blue balls.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. *(As Mother.)* And of course, we were so excited to have a baby girl that when the nurse brought you in and said, "It's a girl! It's a baby girl!" I just had to see for myself. So we whipped your diapers down and parted your chubby little legs — and right between your legs there was — *(Peck has come over during the above and chimes along:)*

PECK.

GREEK CHORUS.

Just a little bit.

Just a little bit.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. *(As Mother.)* And when you were born, you were so tiny that you fit in Uncle Peck's out-stretched hand. *(Peck stretches his hand out.)*

PECK. Now that's a fact. I held you, one day old, right in this

hand. (*A traffic signal is projected of a bicycle in a circle with a diagonal red slash.*)

LI'L BIT. Even with my family background, I was sixteen or so before I realized that pedophilia did not mean people who loved to bicycle ...

(*A Voice intrudes:*)

Driving in First Gear.

LI'L BIT. 1969. A typical family dinner.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Mother.*) Look, Grandma. Li'l Bit's getting to be as big in the bust as you are.

LI'L BIT. Mother! Could we please change the subject?

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandmother.*) Well, I hope you are buying her some decent bras. I never had a decent bra, growing up in the Depression, and now my shoulders are just crippled — crippled from the weight hanging on my shoulders — the dents from my bra straps are big enough to put your finger in. — Here, let me show you — (*As Grandmother starts to open her blouse:*)

LI'L BIT. Grandma! Please don't undress at the dinner table.

PECK. I thought the entertainment came *after* the dinner.

LI'L BIT. (*To the audience.*) This is how it always starts. My grandfather, Big Papa, will chime in next with —

MALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandfather.*) Yup. If Li'l Bit gets any bigger, we're gonna haveta buy her a wheelbarrow to carry in front of her —

LI'L BIT. — Damn it —

PECK. — How about those Redskins on Sunday, Big Papa?

LI'L BIT. (*To the audience.*) The only sport Big Papa followed was chasing Grandma around the house —

MALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandfather.*) — Or we could write to Kate Smith. Ask her for somma her used brassieres she don't want anymore — she could maybe give to Li'l Bit here —

LI'L BIT. — I can't stand it. I can't.

PECK. Now, honey, that's just their way —

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Mother.*) I tell you, Grandma, Li'l Bit's at that age. She's so sensitive, you can't say boo —

LI'L BIT. I'd like some privacy, that's all. Okay? Some god-damn privacy —

PECK. — Well, at least she didn't use the savior's name —
LI'L BIT. (*To the audience.*) And Big Papa wouldn't let a dead dog lie. No sirree.

MALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandfather.*) Well, she'd better stop being so sensitive. 'Cause five minutes before Li'l Bit turns the corner, her tits turn first —

LI'L BIT. (*Starting to rise from the table.*) — That's it. That's it.

PECK. Li'l Bit, you can't let him get to you. Then he wins.

LI'L BIT. I hate him. *Hate him.*

PECK. That's fine. But hate him and eat a good dinner at the same time. (*Li'l Bit calms down and sits with perfect dignity*)

LI'L BIT. The gumbo is really good, Grandma.

MALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandfather.*) A'course, Li'l Bit's got a big surprise coming for her when she goes to that fancy college this fall —

PECK. Big Papa — let it go.

MALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandfather.*) What does she need a college degree for? She's got all the credentials she'll need on her chest —

LI'L BIT. — Maybe I want to learn things. Read. Rise above my cracker background —

PECK. — Whoa, now, Li'l Bit —

MALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandfather.*) What kind of things do you want to read?

LI'L BIT. There's a whole semester course, for example, on Shakespeare — (*Male Greek Chorus, as Grandfather, laughs until he weeps.*)

MALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandfather.*) Shakespeare. That's a good one. Shakespeare is really going to help you in life.

PECK. I think it's wonderful. And on scholarship!

MALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandfather.*) How is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark? (*Li'l Bit is on her feet.*)

LI'L BIT. You're getting old, Big Papa. You are going to die — very very soon. Maybe even *tonight*. And when you get to heaven, God's going to be a beautiful black woman in a long white robe. She's gonna look at your chart and say: Uh-oh. Fornication. Dog-ugly mean with blood relatives. Oh. Uh-oh.

Voted for George Wallace. Well, one last chance: If you can name the play, all will be forgiven. And then she'll quote: "The quality of mercy is not strained." Your answer? Oh, too bad — *Merchant of Venice*: Act IV, Scene iii. And then she'll send your ass to fry in hell with all the other crackers. Excuse me, please.

(*To the audience.*) And as I left the house, I would always hear Big Papa say:

MALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Grandfather.*) Lucy, your daughter's got a mouth on her. Well, no sense in wasting good gumbo. Pass me her plate, Mama.

LI'L BIT. And Aunt Mary would come up to Uncle Peck:

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Aunt Mary.*) Peck, go after her, will you? You're the only one she'll listen to when she gets like this.

PECK. She just needs to cool off.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Aunt Mary.*) Please, honey — Grandma's been on her feet cooking all day.

PECK. All right.

LI'L BIT. And as he left the room, Aunt Mary would say:

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS. (*As Aunt Mary.*) Peck's so good with them when they get to be this age. (*Li'l Bit has stormed to another part of the stage, her back turned, weeping with a teenage fury. Peck, cautiously, as if stalking a deer, comes to her. She turns away even more. He waits a bit.*)

PECK. I don't suppose you're talking to family. (*No response.*) Does it help that I'm in-law?

LI'L BIT. Don't you dare make fun of this.

PECK. I'm not. There's nothing funny about this. (*Beat.*) Although I'll bet when Big Papa is about to meet his maker, he'll remember *The Merchant of Venice*.

LI'L BIT. I've got to get away from here.

PECK. You're going away. Soon. Here, take this. (*Peck hands her his folded handkerchief. Li'l Bit uses it, noisily. Hands it back. Without her seeing, he reverently puts it back.*)

LI'L BIT. I hate this family.

PECK. Your grandfather's ignorant. And you're right — he's going to die soon. But he's family. Family is ... family.

LI'L BIT. Grown-ups are always saying that. Family.

PECK. Well, when you get a little older, you'll see what we're saying.

LI'L BIT. Uh-huh. So family is another acquired taste, like French kissing?

PECK. Come again?

LI'L BIT. You know, at first it really grosses you out, but in time you grow to like it?

PECK. Girl, you are ... a handful.

LI'L BIT. Uncle Peck — you have the keys to your car?

PECK. Where do you want to go?

LI'L BIT. Just up the road.

PECK. I'll come with you.

LI'L BIT. No — please? I just need to . . . to drive for a little bit. Alone. *(Peck tosses her the keys.)*

PECK. When can I see you alone again?

LI'L BIT. Tonight. *(Li'l Bit crosses to C. while the lights dim around her.)*

A Voice directs:)

Shifting Forward from First to Second Gear.

LI'L BIT. There were a lot of rumors about why I got kicked out of that fancy school in 1970. Some say I got caught with a man in my room. Some say as a kid on scholarship I fooled around with a rich man's daughter. *(Li'l Bit smiles innocently at the audience.)*

I'm not talking.

But the real truth was I had a constant companion in my dorm room — who was less than discrete. Canadian V.O. A fifth a day.

1970. A Nixon recession. I slept on the floors of friends who were out of work themselves. Took factory work when I could find it. A string of dead-end day jobs that didn't last very long.

What I did, most nights, was cruise the Beltway and the back roads of Maryland, where there was still country, past the battlefields and farm houses. Racing in a 1965 Mustang — and as long as I had gasoline for my car and whiskey for me, the nights would pass. Fully tanked, I would speed past the churches and the trees on the bend, thinking just one notch