

The Spoon River Project

One Act Adaptation by Ms. Roberge

based on scripts by Charles Aidman and Tom Andolora

Licensed by both Samuel French and Playscripts

(The setting for this show is a cemetery at night.)

CUE SONG 1: INTRO MUSIC

(Actors make a slow entrance from different areas of the stage/ theatre/house. They do not enter all together. They eventually assemble onstage. They are carrying lanterns that are lit. As they reach the playing area, the actors acknowledge each other by hugging, or not, and quietly saying hello. They greet each other as old friends would.

Some actors are singing, humming, joining in. Then we layer in the first lines as the recorded music softly continues and the entrances continue.)

Actor 6: Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley?

Actor 2: The weak of will,

Actor 3: The strong of arm,

Actor 5: The clown,

Actor 2: The boozier,

Actor 4: The fighter?

Actor 1: All are sleeping on the hill.

Actor 9: One passed in a fever.

Actor 7: One was burned in a mine,

Actor 8: One was killed in a brawl,

Actor 1: One died in a jail,

Actor 10: One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife...

Actor 6: All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

Actor 7: Where are Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie, Edith?

Actor 3: The tender heart,

Actor 4: The simple soul,

Actor 1: The loud, the proud, the happy one? -

Actor 5: All, all are sleeping on the hill.

Actor 9: One died in shameful child birth,

Actor 8: One of a thwarted love,

Actor 6: One at the hands of a brute in a brothel,

Actor 7: One of a broken pride, in search of heart's desires,

Actor 10: One, after a far away life in far away London and Paris,
was brought home, to her little space by Ella, Kate and Mag,

Actor 2: All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

Actor 3: Where are Uncle Isaac and Aunt Emily?

Actor 4: And old Towny Kincaid and Sevigne Houghton?

Actor 1: And Major Walker who had talked with venerable men of
the revolution...

Actor 8, 9, 10: All, all are sleeping on the hill.

Actor 2 & 5: They brought them dead sons from the war,

Actor 6 & 7: And daughters whom life had crushed,

Actor 1, 3, 4: And their children, fatherless, crying -

(all music stops)

ALL: All, all, all are sleeping, sleeping on the hill.

*(Arleen makes her way to the stage, stops and shouts her first
line.)*

Arleen Higbie: I loathed you, Spoon River.

ALL: Arleen Higbie.

Arleen Higbie: *(moving)* I loathed you.

I tried to rise above you,

I was ashamed of you,

I despised you as the place of my nativity.

And there in Rome, among the artists, *(she is centre stage now)*

Speaking Italian, speaking French,

I seemed to myself at times to be free of every trace of my origin.

I seemed to be reaching the heights of art.

And to breathe the air that the masters breathed,

(Others breathe.)

Arleen: ...and to see the world with their eyes,

But still they'd pass my work and say,

"What are you driving at, friend?"

There was no CULTURE you know in Spoon River,

And I burned with shame.

What could I do except aspire

And pray for another birth in the world

With all of Spoon River rooted out of my soul?

*(Lights up on Tom Beatty and Fiddler Jones on two "stools"
played by Mike and Alex, in a card game.)*

Tom Beatty:

And I say to you that Life's a gambler

Head and shoulders above us all.

Fiddler Jones: No mayor alive can close the house.

Tom Beatty: And if you lose, you can squeal as you will;
You'll not get back your money. *(They play their game in silence.)*
(Lights up on Walter Simmons, climbing a ladder in his workshop.)

Walter Simmons: My parents thought that I would be...

ALL: Walter Simmons.

Walter: As great as Edison or greater:
For as a boy I made balloons
And wondrous kites and toys with clocks.
I played the cornet and painted pictures,
Modelled in clay and took the part
Of the villain on the stage.
But then at 21 I married
And had to live, and so, to live
I learned the trade of making watches
And kept the jewelry store on the square,
Thinking, thinking, thinking, thinking -
not of business but the engine
And all Spoon River watched and waited
To see it work, but it never worked.
A few kind souls believed my genius
Was somehow hampered by the store.
It wasn't true.
(He climbs down.)

The truth was this:
I didn't have the brains.

Mr. Pantier: Mrs. Cantrell Williams

(The crowd whispers and looks as Mrs. Williams walks through the crowd with a hat box and a child in hand.)

Mrs. Williams: I was the milliner,

Talked about, lied about,

Mother of Dora, *(they shut up)*

Whose strange appearance

Was charged to her rearing

My eye quick to beauty

Saw much beside ribbons

and buckles and feathers,

to set off sweet faces,

and dark hair and gold.

One thing I will tell you

And one I will ask:

The stealers of husbands

Wear powder and trinkets,

And fashionable hats.

Wives, wear them yourselves.

Hats may make divorces -

They also prevent them.

And if all of the children

Born here in Spoon River

Had been reared by the County, somewhere on a farm,

And the fathers and mothers had been given their freedom

(the child runs away silently, waves at Abner Peet as he approaches...)

To live and enjoy, change mates if they wished,

Do you think that Spoon River

Had been any worse?

ALL: Reverend Abner Peet (*who is now downstage*)

Abner: I had no objection at all to selling my household effects at auction

On the village square.

It gave my beloved flock the chance to get something which had belonged to me

For a memorial. (*The sound of a fire begins to crackle...*)

But that trunk which was struck off to Burchard, the grog-keeper!

Did you know it contained the manuscripts of a lifetime of sermons?

And he burned them, all, as waste paper.

(*The fire burns loudly as Reverend Abner takes 8 steps, the crowd assembles as his flock of believers, then cut to:*)

Dora: I grew up (*the ensemble becomes a class of small children*) as some children do. (*She moves to centre as the class turns their backs on her.*)

ALL: Dora Williams.

DORA: And with all of the rumours, I moved to Springfield.

There I met a lush,

whose father left him a fortune.

He married me when drunk. My life was wretched.

A year passed and...one day they found him dead.

That made me rich. I moved to Chicago.

After a time I met Tyler Roundtree, villain.

I moved on, to New York. A gray hair magnate
Went mad about me - another fortune.
He died one night in my arms, I saw his purple face for years
thereafter.
There was almost a scandal. I moved on.
To Paris. I wed the Count, Navigato. Native of Genoa.
We went to Rome.
He poisoned me, I think.
See what they chiseled:
Contessa Navigato Implore Eterne Quiete.
(She returns to the ensemble.)

Margaret: Some do get out and make something of themselves.

ALL: Margaret Fuller Slack (Margaret takes centre stage. 8 ensemble members create a frame and she strikes a pose, then they surround her, as her children...whimpering.)

Margaret: I would have been as great a novelist as there ever
was,
For look at that beautiful photograph of me made by Penniwit,
Then John Slack - the rich druggist - wooed me,
Luring me with the promise of leisure for to write my great novel,
So I married him, giving birth to eight children,
And had no time to write.
It was all over with me anyway,
When I ran the needle in my hand
While washing the baby's things,
And died from lock jaw, an ironical death.
Hear me, ambitious souls,
Sex is the CURSE of LIFE!

(As the audience reacts, ensemble members disperse to reveal that Ollie and Fletcher are on the slabs centre stage, being lifted into view by others who were not the Fuller Slack children.)

Fiddler Jones (SL): Ollie and Fletcher McGee.

Ollie: Have you seen walking in the village
a man with downcast eyes and haggard face?
That is my husband who by secret cruelty
Never to be told, robbed me of my youth and my beauty.
Till at last, wrinkled and with yellow teeth,
Broken pride and shameful humility,
I sank into the grave.

Fletcher: She took my strength by minutes,
She took my life by hours,
She drained me like a fevered moon,
That saps the spinning world.
The days went by like shadows.
The minutes wheeled like stars.
She took the pity from my heart,
She was a hunk of sculptor's clay
My secret thoughts were fingers.
My soul entered that clay
And she held it. I beat the windows,
Shook the bolts.
I hid me in a corner.

Ollie: But what think you gnaws at my husband's heart?
The face of what was!

These are driving him to the place where I lie.

Fletcher: She died and haunted me,
Hunted me for life.

Ollie: You're haunted, you're hunted, wherever you roam.
(*pause...*)

Fletcher & Ollie: Damn you to hell!

SONG 2: I WILL WAIT (*ensemble circles each other*)

ALL:

Well I came home
Like a stone
And I fell heavy into your arms
These days of dust
Which we've known
Will blow away with this old sun
But I'll kneel down
Wait for now
And I'll kneel down
Know my ground
And I will wait, I will wait for you
And I will wait, I will wait for you!

(Lighting change. We are inside and outside the old school house where young Zilpha Marsh tells a ghost story. Actors are trees in the wind.)

11: Not when the stairway turns in the dark,

12: Not at the chime of the witching hour,
13: No yellow eyes in forest at night,
14: And not on the flap of a condor wing -
15: But on a sunny afternoon by a country road,
11: Where purple rag weed blooms,
12: Where the field is gold,
13: And the air is still,
14: At 4 o'clock in late October,
15: Alone in the old school house,
11: With the last of the sun streaming in the dirty windows...
ALL: Zilpha Marsh discovered her gift.

(Zilpha is in the "schoolhouse" and has produced a planchette from her apron.)

Zilpha: In an idle mood I was running the planchette -
All at once my wrist went limp,
My arm tingled,
My hand moved rapidly over the board,
Till the name "Charles Guiteau" was spelled and he a shiver
cleaved my bones.
I was not alone.

(The set pieces around her are very quickly removed as she takes off in a run from the place; we regather as the ghosts that Zilpha sees. She wanders through their world.)

Zilpha: I ran into the dusk bare headed, afraid of my gift.
And after that the spirits swarmed *(we take steps closer, fixated on Zilpha)...*
Wherever I went, with messages -

(The following is delivered as the villagers scorn her assertions about the spirit world, and Nellie and Zilpha play patty cake...)

12: Mere trifling.

13: Nonsense, Zilpha!

14: Keep your silly ghost stories to yourself!

15: Deacon Taylor tried to fix her.

(Zilpha is being exorcised by the Deacon.)

Deacon Taylor: In the name of Jesus,
Separate you foul spirits from this young girl's blessed soul
In accordance with the word of God!

Zilpha: I see what you cannot,
I hear what you cannot,
What you have no words for,
They have chosen me!

Deacon: Be gone demons!

(In slow motion, Zilpha falls into the arms of the ensemble and we surround her. Deacon Taylor steps forward to confess.)

Deacon: I belonged to the church.
And to the party of prohibition.
And the villagers thought I died of heart failure in pity for the sin-
ning sorrows of this world.
In truth I had cirrhosis of the liver,
For every noon for thirty years,
I slipped behind the partition
In Slack's Drug Store,

And poured a generous drink
From the amber bottle marked
“Spiritus Frumenti”.

(The actors change places to become the class of children seated cross legged for Emily Sparks, the school teacher.)

Emily Sparks: Only a chemist can tell
And not always the chemist,
what will result from compound substances.
And who can tell
How men and women will interact
On each other, and what children will result?

Julia: Emily Sparks.

Emily: Here lies Benjamin Pantier, and nearby his wife.
Good in themselves - but he oxygen and she hydrogen,
Their son, a devastating fire.

Benjamin *(we move to frame the husband and wife; a man run ragged)*:

Benjamin Pantier, Attorney at Law,
I saw aspiration and I saw glory,
Justice served and justice slain.
I saw failure and I saw executions,
Because of the truth, and in spite of it.
The truth does not set you free, ask any lawyer.
It broke me and I retreated to the simpleness of my most loyal
bedfellow, my dog.

Mrs. Pantier (*a woman who feels cheated by life*):
Suppose you are really a lady, of delicate tastes,
And loathe the smell of whiskey and onions,
And dog hair,
And the rhythm of Wordsworth boils in your ears,
“Oh why should the spirit of mortals be proud?”
And then suppose, in following the rules of law and morality,
You do not leave your husband but drive him out of the home,
To live with his beloved in a dingy hogroom behind his office.

Mr. and Mrs. : I lie in peace.

Benjamin: Under my jaw bone is nestled the bony nose of my
pup,
Our stories lost in silence.
Ah go by, mad world!

Reuben Pantier (*breaking out of frame as his parents disappear in
to the ensemble; we pull back*):

Dear Emily Sparks, let me tell you a story;
After the deaths of my father and mother,
I went out in the world,
Where I passed through every peril known,
Of wine, women and joy for life.
One night with a black eyed cocotte,
The tears swam into my eyes.
She thought they were amorous tears
And she smiled for her conquest over me...
But my soul was three thousand miles away...
The tears were not hers, the kisses weren't either,

My vision is filled with dear Emily Sparks!

Emily Sparks (*moving to him*): Oh my boy, my boy,
Reuben Pantier,
For whom I prayed,
Where are you,
The boy I loved best?
Wherever you are,
Pursue for your soul's sake,
Yield to the fire in you til the fire is nothing but light!
I'm just the teacher, the virgin heart,
I made them all, all my children,
But thought of you always, burning through the world,
Nothing but light!

SONG 3: I'M JUST AN OLD LUMP OF COAL

(Ensemble members gather to lift the podium for Hamilton Greene.)

Sidney: And now!

Clare: Honourable Judge!

Izzy: Leader in the State!

Tasos: Member of Congress!

Emily: Representing the fine citizens of the Spoon River Valley:

ALL: Hamilton Greene!

Hamilton Greene:

I was the only child of Frances Harris of Virginia,

And Thomas Green of Illinois.
To them I owe all that I became,
Judge, Member of Congress, Leader in the State.
From my mother I inherited
Vivacity, language,
From my father? Will, logic.
All honour to them -
In service to the people!

Nellie Clark: *(waving and joining Elsa to watch Hamilton Greene):*
Elsa Wertman!

Elsa Wertman: I was a peasant girl from Germany,
New, blue-eyed, rosy, strong.
And the first place I worked was at Thomas Greene' estate near
Spoon River.
On a summer's day, when she was away
He stole into the kitchen and took me
Right in his arms.
And I cried and cried as my secret began to show.
One day Mrs. Greene said she understood,
And would make no trouble for me,
And, being childless, would adopt it.
She hid in the house and sent out rumours,
As if it were all going to happen to her.
And - all went well,
And the child was born -
And I was offered a small house of my own North West.
Years passed and I married the shop keeper Gus Wertman.
At political rallies, sitters-by thought I was moved to tears

By the eloquence of vivacious young leader -

ALL: Hamilton Greene! (*applause*)

Elsa: That's my son!

(Ensemble members fall into formation and march past Mrs. Leona Kessler dropping off her laundry basket. She shakes and folds.)

Mrs. Leona Kessler:

Mr. Kessler you know was in the army,
And drew just 6 dollars a month in pension,
And stood on the corner talking politics,
Or sat at home reading Grant's memoirs;
I supported my family by washing,
Washing, ironing.
Learning all the secrets of all the people
From their curtains, shirts, skirts.
There are stains that baffle soap,
And colours that run in spite of you.
I went to all of the funerals held in Spoon River,
leading up to my own,
I swear, I never saw a lifeless face without thinking it looked
Like something washed, and ironed.

Bernadette Beatty: Life's a gambler all right,

ALL: Bernadette Beatty.

Bernadette: And gamble we did.

“Go away Elmer Karr,” I had said,
“Go far away!
You have maddened your brain
And I’m afraid that you will do some terrible thing.”
Life’s a gambler but Love’s the highest roller.
We risked it all.

ALL: Tom Beatty.

(The ensemble acts this out.)

Tom Beatty: At first I suspected something -
She acted so calm and absent minded.
And one day I heard the back door shut,
As I entered the front and I saw him slink
Back of the smokehouse into the lot
And run across the field.
Next time I’d kill him on sight.
But later that day, walking near Fourth Bridge lost in thought
Without a stick or a stone in hand,
All of a sudden I saw him
Standing,
Holding his rabbits,
And all I could say was, “Don’t, DON’T!”
As he aimed and fired at my heart.

Bernadette Beatty: *(the ladder is moved up to be the jail around Bernadette)*

Returning no word to the judge when he asked me,
I was silent before the jury.
What could I say to people who thought -
That a woman of 35 was at fault?

When her lover of 19 killed her husband?

Elmer Karr:

What but the love of God could have softened
And made forgiving the people of Spoon River?
Toward me who wronged the bed of Thomas Beatty
Then murdered him?

When I returned from 14 years in prison,
What helping hands took me in again,
What helping hands in the church received me,
And heard with giant tears my penitent confession.

Bernadette:

14 years for him...
30 for me. I never fired a shot.

Tom: And 30 years later,
The iron gates of Joliet
Swung as the gray and silent trustees
Carried her out in her coffin.

*(The ensemble acts out a funeral procession past Tom Beatty,
past Elmer Karr, and we hum "Old Chunk of Coal"...We line up.)*

ALL: Nellie Clark.

Nellie Clark:

I was only 10 years old, and before I grew up
And knew what it meant,
I had no words for it except -

That I was so frightened, and told my mother.
My father got a pistol and would have killed Charlie,
Except for his mother who pleaded and keened.
They left.
Nevertheless the story clung to me.
The man who married me 10 years later, a widower at 35,
Was a newcomer to Spoon River and never heard...
Til 2 years after we were wed.
Then he considered himself cheated.
He deserted me, and I died
The following winter.

(Select ensemble members "welcome Nellie home" as Fiddler Jones plays.)

Henrietta Bone:

My name is Henrietta Bone, and when I first came to Spoon River
And set up shop,
They'd bring me the epitaph -
And stand around the shop while I worked
And say "He was so kind," "She was so wonderful,"
I chiseled for them whatever they wished.
Memory plays fast and loose, outside a time
And with a life, that's lived and gone.

Fiddler Jones:

The earth keeps some vibration going
There in your heart, and that is you.
And if the people find you can fiddle,
Why, fiddle you must.

I never started to plow in my fields a day
Without someone stopping by to pull me away
To a dance, a picnic, or a wake,
Fiddler Jones at your service...
I ended up with 40 acres, and friends to plow and till,
I ended up with an old broken fiddle, a thousand memories,
Still.
Not.
A single
Regret.

Lucinda Matlock:

I went to the dances at Chandlerville,
Riding home in the moonlight middle of June
With the sweet smell of the grasses
And horses hooves tapping,
Davis proposed.
We were married and lived together 70 years.
Learning, working, raising 12 children,
8 of whom we lost.
I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
I made the garden and for the holiday
Rambled over the field where sang the lark.
We shouted to the wooded hills,
We sang to the green valleys,
At 96 I had lived enough
And passed into a sweet repose.
What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger discontent and drooping hopes?
It takes life to love Life.

Edgar Lee Masters:

Clare: The river of Life flows on:

Tasos: My grandmother Lucinda Matlock inspired me,
Once I'd grown enough to see the world outside
And sense the inner workings were more than they appeared.

Andrew: I wrote to let the ancestors speak;
To let them release their secrets from beyond this mortal coil.

Mara: We all have them, secrets;
All have strengths and weaknesses,
Celebrations,
Trials...

Emily: Some more than others whose choice has been stripped.

Sidney: In my day, it was the scandal and not the poetry of
Spoon River that got blood boiling,

Meg: But that's just it,
It's in my blood.

Evan: This Hill, this soil, this wind and these secrets.

Jenna: My own heart beats from within these lines.
As do theirs.

Alex: This is my own true epitaph, more lasting than stone.

SONG 4: FINALE SONG

ALL:

**The weak of will,
The strong of arm,
The Boozer,
Clown and Fighter,
All, all! Sleeping on the hill.**

**The tender heart,
The simple soul,
The loud, proud,
The lovers,
All, all! Sleeping on the hill.**

**For once having left,
You can never return,
There is no going back,
There is only the yearn.**

**You're haunted, you're hunted,
Wherever you roam,
Spoon River, Spoon River,
Calling you home.**

(Percussion, dancing, whoops and energy! Until: Sudden stop. Stillness. A pause filled with anticipation and vulnerability. Raw, real connection with each other, with the audience. We realize that, indeed, the ones onstage are not of this world.)

**Oh the river is time, It flows to the sea,
And in leaving its banks, You are free...**

(Ensemble continues to hum the two main melodies as they begin to process around the stage like a funeral procession until they are hidden behind the trees, behind tombstones and offstage... growing fainter until gone, meanwhile:)

Rose: Here, world, I pass you like an orange to a child.
Like an orange, to a child.
Life - there is no sweeter thing.