

Let Down Your Hair

a play

by Matthew Ivan Bennett

CHARACTERS*(3W, 1M, 1GN)*

FABLE

A puckish puppet master who narrates and plays parts as needed.

HETTIE WIEGLE

30s–40s. A passionate, paycheck-to-paycheck school teacher.

FRAU GÖTHEL

An immortal faerie who appears 50s+.

RAPUNZEL

A "12-year-old," brilliant, but suppressed and depressed girl.

PRINCE

A "15-year-old" schlubby boy in a wilderness therapy program.

TIME

Now-ish.

PLACE

A tower in the Dark Woods; Hettie's apartment, car, and imagination; a city street corner; a restaurant, etc.; all of this expressed through the magic of shabby chic theatre: live foley performed by Fable and the actors where possible, canned ambient sound where necessary, a minimum of props, a maximum of pantomime, and some microdose of traditional light and set.

Notes:

- The role of Fable is gender neutral.

- Rapunzel and Prince should be cast with actors in their 20s—the goal is innocence. To set Rapunzel and Frau Göthel apart vocally, they could speak in Mid-Atlantic/Stage Standard.

- The world of the play is magical realist. Any character can be any race/ethnicity, though Frau Göthel is a metaphorical stand-in for American conservatives. The text has capitalized fill-in-the-blank descriptions of Rapunzel, e.g. "BLANK-eyed girl." Fill them however the act wants.

- Wiegle is pronounced "WEE-gl."

- Göthel is pronounced "GEr-tl" (as in "Myrtle").

- The faerie words and phrases, which are made up—sheling; boen-ey-mal, malkashi mem; mae h'migh—are pronounced "SHEE-ling," "bone-'A'-mall," "mall-KASHee mem," "may h'MY." A sheling is a young female faerie. The boen-ey-mal is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Malkashi mem means, basically, "Reveal!" Mae h'migh is a greeting of respect.

- Wenceslaus is pronounced "WEN-suh-lus."

- Other words in brackets — [blah blah blah] — can be replaced appropriately.

PROLOGUE

(The stars chime. The wind keens.

*A lonely pubescent GIRL shivers on a balcony in
a tower on an island in the Dark Woods.*

Under a quilt, she wishes on a star when—

*Music, from nowhere. FABLE appears, like magic,
singing. As they dance, the girl dances, unwilling,
as if enchanted, moving as they do.)*

FABLE

(Irving Berlin)

AFTER YOU GET WHAT YOU WANT, YOU DON'T WANT IT
IF I GAVE YOU THE MOON, YOU'D GROW TIRED OF IT SOON
YOU'RE LIKE A BABY
YOU WANT WHAT YOU WANT WHEN YOU WANT IT
BUT AFTER YOU ARE PRESENTED
WITH WHAT YOU WANT, YOU'RE DISCONTENTED

*(as the accompaniment grows wilder,
distorted, and dark, they cut it off, and the
girl falls limp and frightened)*

Good evening, ladies and gentleman. Good evening to those of you between, beneath, or beyond those titles. Welcome to my story. Settle in, unwrap your candies, if you would, unwad your panties or equivalent. I always like to start with a song, regardless of copyright; there is magic in music that softens the blow, don't you think? They call time a healer, but what is time if not the ballad of our screams in space? And by a scream to say pleasure as well as pain. *Rapunzel*, or as I like to call this story, *Let Down Your Hair*, has been told in one form or another for thousands of years. The twelve-year-old in the tower has been the Baltic sun goddess, Princess Danaë to the Greeks, Ethniu to the Irish, but in 1812 she was pressed into paper by two brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, they who hurled a burning book into the straw of our subconscious, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, commonly known as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Oh, 1812 also rang with war, with earthquake and ruin, but the bones lie untended, the rubble has been shoved aside, while everywhere, every year, in every township, there are thin-lipped mothers who combust into opinion that the Brothers Grimm and company are fit for neither eye nor ear. Unfortunately, for them, some stories—once started—cannot be stopped. Like the one that goes thusly: Once upon a time, there was a job interview. Hettie Wiegler, a woman with the mind of a poet and the mouth of a trucker, answered a personal ad: "Wanted: Teacher For 12-Year-Old Daughter. \$7.25 per hour. NO LIBERALS."

PART 1

1.

(FRAU GÖTHEL and HETTIE meet in the Dark Woods. Sitting, Hettie clicks a spoon in a tea cup. Frau Göthel, a faerie in all black, stares up at RAPUNZEL, who is now dangling her feet from the window of a tower high above as she reads.)

Drugs?

FRAU GÖTHEL

Never.

HETTIE

Tobacco?

FRAU GÖTHEL

Only second hand.

HETTIE

Where?

FRAU GÖTHEL

On the streets, strangers, breathing out, passing me, I breathe in.

HETTIE

(She coughs, demonstrating her reaction.)

You walk on the street?

FRAU GÖTHEL

I mean on the side of.

HETTIE

You should say what you mean.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Sorry. I'm usually more clear. An old professor of mine, in poetry, used to point me to a saying on his wall, "Ambiguity is the route of all evil," with route instead root, R-O-U-T-E, and the quote branched out in a sentence diagram. The meaning was never lost on me.

HETTIE

If you exposed my Rapunzel to poetry, what authors would you select, Ms. Wiegle?

FRAU GÖTHEL

Depends on her reading level.

HETTIE

She's twelve.

FRAU GÖTHEL

HETTIE

When I was twelve, I had a collegiate vocabulary.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Rapunzel's favorite book is *The Cat in the Hat*.

HETTIE

Then I'd skip Elizabeth Bishop and try...Shel Silverstein?

FRAU GÖTHEL

A Light in the Attic?

HETTIE

Where the Sidewalk Ends.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Excellent.

HETTIE

Also, I'm certified in Math and History, along with Language Arts, so I could serve as—

FRAU GÖTHEL

I read your résumé, dear. Can you commute? The Dark Woods is quite a ways for you and I shan't be reimbursing for mileage.

HETTIE

No prob: I have a Prius.

FRAU GÖTHEL

As a political statement?

HETTIE

Psh. Just to keep 'em guessing. As a teacher, I assure you, my politics remain my own.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Indeed? Then tell me, Ms. Wiegler, who won the Civil War?

HETTIE

The American?

FRAU GÖTHEL

Of course the American. Who won?

HETTIE

...No one wins when it's brother against brother.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Well put. Now what about TV news? Whom do you trust?

HETTIE

I...am on a total media fast right now. No TV, no Facebook. I just can't. With all the bias. I mean, I know what I believe, so...

FRAU GOTHEL

I understand completely. Final question: What are your thoughts on sex education?

HETTIE

Nnn, I have a few thoughts—

FRAU GÖTHEL

You will neither hem nor haw.

HETTIE

Oh there's no haw. I have one or two thoughts, mostly one, and it's actually very clear: Vaginas...should...and my mother always said this...vaginas...should be time capsules. "Y'don't dig 'em up till it's time."

FRAU GÖTHEL

But when is the right time to dig?

HETTIE

I turn that over to the Big Shovel. From the Bible.

FRAU GÖTHEL

How soon can you start?

HETTIE

Right now.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Be here tomorrow. But understand this: I reserve right of approval for all curriculum and materials; I will not pay one ducat to have my daughter be indoctrinated.

HETTIE

Understood.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Also, your employment shall be subject to termination at any time for any sensible reason.

HETTIE

How do you define "sensible"?

FRAU GÖTHEL

A copy of *The New Yorker* slips out of your purse, my daughter touches it, I sauté your flesh.

HETTIE

Fair enough. Are there benefits?

FRAU GÖTHEL

Yes: you'll be paid in cash—contingent on this: that you, and only you, row the dinghy to the island at dawn, and you—and only you, Ms. Wiegler—return to the far shore for dusk.

HETTIE

I work dawn to dusk?

FRAU GÖTHEL

Will that be a problem?

HETTIE

No, but...it means fewer hours in the winter.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Along with less work. If you do as the ant, and not as the grasshopper, Ms. Wiegler, you will prevail. Do you agree to the terms?

HETTIE

Can I bring my cat in? On Fridays?

FRAU GÖTHEL

Is it a black cat?

HETTIE

He can be.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Then yes. But should he claw any songbird up in the tower, half its entrails are mine.

HETTIE

Deal.

FRAU GÖTHEL

“Deal”—in just a moment. First come have a gander at her.

*(Hettie sets aside her tea and joins Frau Göthel.
They look up at the girl.)*

HETTIE

She is lovely. Such long hair. Must be a nightmare to pin it up like that. Hot.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Tradition is never easy.

HETTIE

The women in your family wear their hair up?

FRAU GÖTHEL

In faerie culture, a *sheling*'s hair is worn up, and never cut, until a gentleman calls.

HETTIE

Oh, I didn't realize you weren't human.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Is that a problem?

HETTIE

The opposite, some of my best friends are friends with non-humans. Although never having had a faerie for a boss—

FRAU GÖTHEL

The answer is no, Ms. Wiegler, your soul belongs to you still.

HETTIE

Okay, good. I just heard there were conditions—

FRAU GÖTHEL

I need a splash of your blood, nothing more.

HETTIE

(hiding her fear)

I can do blood, I got lots of blood.

FRAU GÖTHEL

Fantastic. You see, I need Rapunzel to withstand the worst public mudsling within the year. So if you could gaze up at her, hold out a finger, and speak your promise to do right by her.

HETTIE

Question first: Who's going to be slinging the mud? Just to—

FRAU GÖTHEL

Ah, I got ahead of myself. The media. I'm running for office, Ms. Wiegler. I hate to leave her, my only child, but I must be on the march. This place no longer nourishes me. My tower is not the haven it once was. The land is under siege and this welter of wimps in the Capitol cannot hold the wall. Does it gall you too? Of course it does. The economy chokes, faith is made mock, our freedom slips into the grave of King George and now Ms. Wiegler, this bouffant bureaucrat, this beltway insider, appears on the picture-tube in a million family rooms and says what? He wants our children goggling at diagrams of gonads; in the classroom, a girl stretching latex onto a vegetable; contraceptives pattering down as if candy from a piñata. Long ago, in another age, I would have flown over the man's hut and smashed him with a boulder, but now? The magic is going out. Charles Darwin. Vladimir Lenin. Even the apples that tempt us have been computerized. The only way forward for us faeries is politics. There is power still in politics that can sustain us. And so despite my peaceable nature, I must enter the fray. For November comes, Ms. Wiegler. November comes and I need but one fluid ounce from your veins. What say you?

HETTIE

(almost woozy)

I've come this far.

(She holds out her finger to the faerie, looking away. With F/X from Fable, lights change.)