

PANEGYRIC



BY KENNETH N. KURTZ



PANEGYRIC

by Kenneth N. Kurtz

A SMITH SCRIPT

This script is protected by copyright laws.
No performance of this script – IN ANY MEDIA – may be undertaken without payment of the appropriate
fee and obtaining a licence.

For further information, please contact SMITH SCRIPTS at info@smithscripts.co.uk

PANEGYRIC

A PLAY BY KENNETH N. KURTZ

Panegyric (93 pages) is a romantic comedy. It is 1905 and three men who never really grew up find their shades delivered to the perfect purgatory. Oscar Wilde dallies quite innocently with a beautiful boy, Lewis Carroll flounders with a young and fetching mermaid, and Paul Gauguin chases after a nubile native princess. Of course they all learn to fear the ticking sound of the crocodile. You guessed it. Their souls have been delivered to the Neverland.

This is a sequel to *Peter Pan*, and we recently witnessed the centenary of that lovely classic, which two prequel novels by humorist Dave Barry and an estate commissioned sequel as well as a Johnny Depp biopic have helped to celebrate -- to say nothing of the 2003 film version of the original play, plus *Peter And The Starcatcher* and a musical version of *Finding Neverland* currently running on Broadway.

Peter Pan lives on and on...and on?

Two acts, 1:35. One set -- that luscious tropical Island and its inviting lagoon.
5 men, 1 boy, 2 women, Edwardian costumes, and two pendulum flying lines.

ACT ONE

Scene One

A mound of sand spreads across the stage hemmed on either side by lush tropical forest. Upstage the mound slopes down to an unseen shore line. We know this because we can see the ocean's horizon beyond. The sand also slopes down in front, for the orchestra pit smacks of lagoon. Rock ledges lead down to it on either side.

Soon we notice that the sand sparkles a little too much, that the forest foliage is a bit too lustrous and is dotted with the most fantastic fruits and orchids, that the sea and sky are of blues too true, and that the clouds are tinged with pinks, lavenders and golds just a mite too lovely to be believed.

It is late of an afternoon. We hear the sounds of gentle surf along with a chorus of exceedingly enthusiastic gulls and then, surprisingly, human voices in the distance.

CHARLES

Look, gentlemen, It's land! Land! A lovely island! Surely we must sing Hosannas for we have b-b-been delivered like Jonah from the b-b-belly of the whale, or b-b-better, like Noah from the Great F-f-flood.

(CHARLES stutters. Now that you know that, we can ab-b-bandon f-f-further hyphenations of B and F in the script.)

OSCAR

True, but it would seem to be neither as bright as Brighton, nor nearly as nice as Nice.

PAUL

Mon Dieu, ce ressemble l'île de Tahiti!

OSCAR

Mais oui, Monsieur. It might seem almost as titillating as Tahiti. Of course we will have to take your word for that.

(We can see them now, three men in a boat. OSCAR is rowing it to the shore up center.)

CHARLES

Row, merely row. The important thing is that we are as the saved.

OSCAR

I assume that your metaphor is secular, Charles, though I have always tried to be exceedingly frugal in anything that pertains to religion.

PAUL

Sacrebleu...Fermez la bouche, et ramez!

OSCAR

Oh, fermez your own bouche. Shall we three now get into a row about rowing? Well, we needn't, because we're almost there, or rather...we are now...just one stroke more...here.

(The little rowboat noses onto the shore up center. As OSCAR ships the oars, CHARLES bounds onto the sand and strides forward towards us to the top of the dune. He is 65, a thin little man who looks every bit the Victorian village curate, though he is actually an Oxford don.)

CHARLES

It's quite pretty, this place.

(OSCAR is the next to step on the beach. He is 45, tall, robust, and a dandy in every respect, wearing well-polished pumps, striped pants, waistcoat, ascot, and a most correct cutaway. The requisite green carnation resides in his lapel.)

OSCAR

Ah, but is it brillyg, and are there likely to be any of your slithy toves lying about? Or, since they're so slithy, Charles, might they slither?

CHARLES

Why one could almost imagine such things here. But more importantly, there is apt to be food and water in abundance. We must thank the Almighty, for we are indeed rescued.

(PAUL shuffles on to the land and up the beach. He wears baggy pants, a paint-spattered smock and a broad-brimmed straw hat. He is rumped, 55,

somewhat fat and very French, and therefore has little, beyond a sneer and shrug, to say about anything.)

OSCAR

But rescued from what, pray tell? From the clear blue violence of the storm-tossed sea, which rages ever so peacefully behind us? From vast winds that roar like those gentle zephyrs tickling the trees? Or from the tragic loss of a steamship that we didn't actually see sink? How in Heaven's name, Charles, can we be rescued from anything if the one certain thing that we already know is that we're dead? Dead, Charles, dead. WE ARE DEAD! We've known that chilling fact for all of the seeming æons during which we have been endlessly outward bound, darting hither and yon beyond the lost horizon, through a never ending fog, on that unspeakably unfashionable ship of fools.

CHARLES

I beg your pardon, Oscar, but I must note that you have a slight tendency towards exaggeration. For instance, half a decade does not an æon make. You died in the year 1900. By my calculations, which are perforce, mathematically precise and therefore accurate to a nonce, it is now one day shy of 1905 and you were on that ship for four years, eleven months and twenty-nine days. And I for two years, one month and five days longer.

(PAUL, who is the essence of ennui, reclines upon the dune, with hat tipped forward to shade his face)

OSCAR

Then I must wish a happy New Year to all. But Charles, will not your ninny's nonce allow us a further announcement of exact hours, minutes and seconds as well?

CHARLES

Alas, you must remember that the ship's steward confiscated all of our timepieces.

OSCAR

And a good thing too. Æons must never be nonced. That would be tantamount to parsing a parsnip.

CHARLES

I know that you were regarded to be exceedingly witty, Oscar, but of late I find that you only annoy.

PAUL

D'accord!

OSCAR

You have miffed me, Charles, but it's a slythy miff, so I forgive it. Now, to the matter at hand. Why are we here?

CHARLES

Here? Well, to begin with, we are told in Genesis...

OSCAR

Not quite so grand. Why are we here upon this island?

CHARLES

Oh. Because I saw it? And because, despite an unfortunate propensity for endless chatter, you do row rather well.

OSCAR

Ah yes, the one worthwhile legacy of Oxford. I also punt to perfection. But you, Charles, like all mathematicians, even ones from Oxford, seem to be unable to grasp anything mid-way between the tiny integer and the grand theorem. Allow me to rephrase the question. Why have we three been deliberately marooned upon this island?

CHARLES

I should hardly call it marooned, for that would imply an act of callous abandonment.

OSCAR

But that is precisely what it was. Reconstruct the event. We die, you in the cosy comfort of your ivory tower at Oxford, and I, two un-noned years later, in a somewhat more penurious position in Paris. But then we "wake up," as it were, in snug little staterooms on a sizeable steamship which has no name, though for all I know it might just as well have been christened Her, or of late, His Majesty's Ship Purgatory.

CHARLES

Most perceptive and perfectly correct. I believe it was Purgatory, albeit reconstructed in a way that we simple souls might understand.

OSCAR

Well, bully for the simplicity of your soul. Next we have Paul, who, happily for your sake, eschews chattering in favor of disapproving shrugs. He wafts aboard only a year or so ago.

CHARLES

One year, three mon...

OSCAR

Cease Charles! When next you nonce, I shall utterly nullify you. The important thing is not when or how we three arrived on the ship. It is the manner of our leaving it.

CHARLES

But the ship was sinking. That steward awakened us in the middle of the night and thereby saved our lives.

OSCAR

Piffle. Was there a noticeable list to the deck?

CHARLES

Why, no.

OSCAR

Was the ship's horn blasting away?

CHARLES

Not that I noticed.

OSCAR

Did any signal rockets explode overhead?

CHARLES

No, they did not!

OSCAR

And life jackets...where were they?

CHARLES

I...I don't know.

OSCAR

And now the most telling question of all...aside from the steward, who else did you see on deck. Was anyone clamoring to get in that rowboat with the three of us, or indeed any of the lifeboats?

CHARLES

Oh, there wasn't anyone, was there? And he stayed behind to cast off for us.

OSCAR

Aha, Watson, now you may have grasped it! There was the steward on the gangway, so very brave as he yelled at us to row away quickly before the ship had a chance to drag us down in her wake. As though purgatory might sink. Now why didn't I think of that earlier? No matter. So we...no, no, no...so I rowed with all my heart, as the fog closed around us and the ship vanished behind it. Then the sun rose on a clear morning, and did we see any flotsam or jetsam? Might you have made up those two words, Charles? No? Well you should have. So there we were utterly alone. I rowed for the better part of a day, and we were still alone in the middle of the bright blue sea, except for a small island that proceeded to materialize ever so magically off our bow.

PAUL

Oui, c'est magique!

CHARLES

Oscar, you are quite right about that. You, of course, had to face astern in order to row, while Paul and I had sunk into an afternoon nap, and suddenly I was awakened by the cries of gulls. I turned forward in the bow, and there was the island!

OSCAR

But now I must ask you to remember the manner in which others left the ship. Aubrey Beardsley for instance. I was delighted to see him when I first came aboard. One person who had the promise of being interesting amidst that maudlin human menagerie. Oh dear, no offense meant, Charles.

CHARLES

But one taken, nonetheless.

OSCAR

And it's yours. I give it freely. I suppose part of my delight was due to the happy fact that Aubrey had died young. Indeed, when I first arrived and saw the advanced age of most of our fellow passengers, I surmised that we might never arrive in port. We should be delayed by too many burials at sea. That was before any realization of the true nature of the ship. At any event, Aubrey was a light-hearted, youthful soul with whom I might happily have gamboled through eternity. Alas, he was among the first to leave. And now I ask you to consider the normal—if that can be the word—way of leaving the ship. One is initially invited to an interview with the captain. Was either of us awarded one of those? I certainly wasn't.

CHARLES

Nor I.

PAUL

Moi non plus.

OSCAR

How annoying, Paul, that you plainly understand everything that we say, yet you answer only in French. But then of course, you are one of that most insular breed.

(PAUL answers with a supine and therefore sandy shrug.)

Now think, both of you. Aubrey is summoned to the interview. A few minutes later he exits from the captain's cabin with a lilting whistle and a beatific smile and proceeds down to the gangway to be whisked away by an elegant little steam launch that ever so pleasantly puttters off into the fog. I wave from the promenade deck and sing out charming endearments, but Aubrey merely beams some more and goes tootling on his foggy way. And then consider the next exit...a week later, give or take an unnecessary nonce...that of the ever-disapproving duchess of doom from Devonshire. She emerges from the interview with tears drying on her stony cheeks, to be greeted at the gangway by an old rusty scow, which also carries her, albeit bereft of any Bon Voyages, off into the fog. That has proved to be the continuing pattern of all such disembarkments from the H.M.S Purgatory. Launch or scow. Scow or launch. Do either of you have any doubt as to the differing destinations of those two crafts?

CHARLES/PAUL

(Together.) Alas, no./ Non.

OSCAR

Well?

CHARLES/PAUL

Well what?/ Quoi donc?

OSCAR

Good Heavens, I truly am like Sherlock Holmes. Well then, Watson and Lestrade, will you please tell me, WHY ARE WE HERE ON THIS ISLAND? We've none of us had an interview. And our conveyance hither was neither steam launch nor rusty scow.

CHARLES

I hope that I am not deluded, but I think it may be that this place is...might...could be... Oh, dare I say it?

OSCAR

Please do. I delight in the deluge of your delusions. They're such remarkably wet phenomena among dry mathematicians.

CHARLES

I think that this may be...oh yes, it must be...Paradise. It is after all such a very pretty place.

(Sorry to say he P-p-probably stutters his Ps as well.)

OSCAR

I knew that you would say that. You suffer from a most oppressive optimism.

CHARLES

And you from an entirely too-pleasant pessimism.

OSCAR

Charles, was that a form of wit?

CHARLES

It seems to me, Oscar, that of late you confuse wit with an annoying predilection for alliteration.

PAUL

D'accord.

OSCAR

Merci, Paul. I adore having a Greek chorus, even if it's only an impoverished French one. Well then, Watson, let us, in a burst of communal optimism, accept your geographical judgment. I perceive the ocean behind, the lagoon ahead, and lush tropical forest all around us. But the Pearly Gates, Charles, can you perchance deduce them to be flapping about somewhere?

CHARLES

Surely they are but a pleasant metaphor. Nonetheless, Oscar, you must admit that there is more of Eden than Eton about this magical place.

OSCAR

Eden-Eton? You see, Charles, alliteration can be catching. Very well, dash the gates. What about Saint Peter. Do you foresee him making an appearance?

CHARLES

You might fervently hope so, for his guardianship is of course a Romish conceit. But I think, were there to be a gatekeeper, that angels would herald his coming.

OSCAR

How very pleasant. What should we watch for? A fanfare of the surf, perhaps? A burst of concentric rainbows? Do you think that the angels might materialize from those orchids, or swoop above us like the gulls? Here we are, three castaways...waiting for God. Oh...oh dear.

(PAUL rises with his usual shrug, and begins to explore, first the beach and eventually the edges of the forest.)

CHARLES

I rather fancy the standard vision of lovely young girls with wings.

OSCAR

Standard version? Ah yes, your literary alter-ego comes to the fore at last, and Lewis Carroll dreams of little angels looking perhaps more than a little like welcoming flocks of little Alice Liddells?

CHARLES

What, Sir, do you insinuate?

OSCAR

Insinuation, Sir, is in the eye of the beholder. That may have been the only moral of my trial.

CHARLES

Well, Wilde, since you have cast the first insinuation, would you rather that they look like youthful Adonises, such as your beautiful Bosie?

OSCAR

Goodness gracious, malevolence in a mathematician. I did not know that that was possible. Apparently our particular Paradisiums are a trifle disparate, but if I am correct in recalling my Bible, the names of all the angels are male.

CHARLES

Oh...yes...I must admit that you are correct in that. And perhaps our recent negative thoughts would not be appropriate to our present situation, especially if this is...that place. I shall both forgive and forget. I must. And so must you, Oscar. Besides, angels are spirits distinctly incorporeal.