

The Excavation of Mary Anning

an excerpt of a new play
by Ian August

Ian August
PO Box 6206
Lawrenceville, NJ 08648
732-406-7451
ijaugust@hotmail.com

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Although this excerpt includes only five parts, *The Excavation of Mary Anning* features 28 speaking roles. These roles are intended to be played by six actresses. A full cast list and track breakdown will be included with the full draft of the script.

Cast of Characters:

MARY ANNING – mid 20s, 19th century fossil hunter, low class

TRAY – Mary’s faithful terrier

ELIZABETH (BETSY) PHILPOT – 30s, Mary’s best friend and confidant, middle class

REVEREND WILLIAM BUCKLAND – 60s, Priest, theologian, and amateur

geologist—also Mary’s benefactor

MISSUS – Actor portraying the assorted wives of the men at the helm of the Geological Society of London

Place:

Lyme Regis, Dorset, Southern England (and thereabouts)

Time:

1821 - 1826 (and thenabouts)

Notes on Casting:

The cast should be comprised entirely of women for both male and female designated roles.

Although Tray is a terrier, he should be portrayed onstage as an obedient little boy—not as a dog. No barking, please.

SYNOPSIS:

Amidst the groaning cliff sides and weather beaten shores of southern England, fossil hunter Mary Anning combs the earth for glimpses of the ancient past. Armed with only her determination, her lucky hammer, and her erstwhile companion, Tray, Mary uncovers secrets that redefine science and religion and philosophy. But 19th century geology is a nobleman’s game, and Mary’s discoveries are buried beneath the rubble while the stars of her male counterparts grow ever brighter. *The Excavation of Mary Anning* is a historical fantasia about things that come from the earth and things that go to the earth, and one woman’s quest to reclaim her legacy in a society that refuses to acknowledge her worth.

The Excavation of Mary Anning is slated for two professional readings in 2018: At the Writer’s Theatre of NJ in January, and with Williams Street Rep (outside of Chicago) in June. This play has had no additional workshops or productions. (Yet!)

THE EXCAVATION OF MARY ANNING – An Excerpt

Scene 6:

(The music fades as ELIZABETH stalks on stage, with MARY pursuing her, and TRAY not far behind. They are in ELIZABETH's studio. ELIZABETH holds a canvas under her arm, and a bucket of art supplies. MARY holds a flimsy wooden easel and her basket)

ELIZABETH:

Calm down.

MARY:

Don't TELL me to calm down!

(ELIZABETH picks a spot in the room, places down her objects)

ELIZABETH:

If they can't recognize your worth, Mary Anning, then I don't understand why you'd want to be a part of their silly club anyway.

MARY:

They're the gatekeepers, don't you see? Without them, no one in England—no, in Europe—will take me seriously as a fossilist. I'll be doomed to selling a penny's worth of ammonites every week for the rest of my life.

ELIZABETH:

That's absurd.

MARY:

They're not willing to do what I do. They're not willing to dig until their fingers bleed. They're not willing to look the past in the eye and stare it down and see who blinks first!

ELIZABETH:

True. Easel.

(MARY hands ELIZABETH the easel. ELIZABETH sets it up, places the canvas on it)

MARY:

It isn't proper, they said. Would set a precedent, they said. The organization would suffer, they said. What the hell does the bloody Geological Society know about suffering? I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll denounce them in the press. I'll petition the queen! I'll follow them one by one out of their precious Freemasons Tavern and lure them into a dark alleyway using ancient fish bones and then I'll leap out of the shadows and threaten them with a chisel!

ELIZABETH:

(horrified) Mary!

TRAY:

(excited) Fish bones!

MARY:

What?

ELIZABETH:

These are not adequate solutions.

MARY:

I know.

ELIZABETH:

Tray, come over to me.

TRAY:

Elizabeeeeeeeeeeeth!

MARY:

Scientific evidence. That's how we win the day. We create a record of my accomplishments. We publish ourselves. Eventually, they'll see.

ELIZABETH:

That's right. Now where's the skull?

(MARY reaches into her basket and removes a large skull of an ichthyosaur, round head, giant eye holes, long thin muzzle with pointed teeth)

(Beat)

MARY:

She's beautiful, isn't she?

ELIZABETH:

It's a "she," now?

MARY:

Why wouldn't it be?

ELIZABETH:

I guess I hadn't really thought of it.

Tilt the muzzle upward. No, more towards you. Open the jaw slightly, please.

MARY:

It's infuriating. Those *men*.

ELIZABETH:

Hold still, please.

MARY:

If not for me, what would they have to talk about?

ELIZABETH:

Stop moving, Mary.

MARY:

(*grumbling*) Fine.

(Beat)

Do you really think this will help?

ELIZABETH:

Only if the drawings are exact.

(Beat)

MARY:

You're a better artist than I am, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH:

I know.

MARY:

I'm better at collecting.

(Beat)

I said, I'm better at collecting.

ELIZABETH:

Don't distract me, please.

TRAY:

I am accomplished at licking things.

MARY:

He is.

ELIZABETH:

Do you need acknowledgement for everything? Get a husband.

MARY:

You sound like my mother.

ELIZABETH:

Whom I'd very much like to meet.

(Beat. MARY shifts, uncomfortable. TRAY is bored. ELIZABETH works diligently, humming to herself.)

(TRAY, tired of not being attended, approaches the easel.)

Don't distract me.

(He leans over and rubs up against the easel. It wobbles)

MARY:

(warning) Tray...

TRAY:

It smells so woooooody. Like my stick.

(He does it again. The inkpot falls to the ground and shatters)

ELIZABETH:

Tray!

MARY:

You naughty dog!

TRAY:

I am! I did it! I made the thing fall! I am both ashamed and elated that I did this!

(MARY pulls TRAY close, ruffles his hair)

MARY:

You're my naughty boy, Tray. All mine.

TRAY:

No one else's!

(ELIZABETH places her brush and palette back into the bucket of supplies)

ELIZABETH:

(sighs, frustrated) That was all the ink I had.

MARY:

All of it?

ELIZABETH:

I'll have to order more from the shop in town, but there's a shortage. It's likely to be a week before I can continue. Maybe two. Really Tray? I hope you're happy.

TRAY:

I'm soooooo happy!

(MARY grins, pulls out a belemnite from her basket)

ELIZABETH:

Why are you grinning like the cat that ate the canary?

TRAY:

Cat? Where?

MARY:

Thunderbolts—belemnites—they're fossilized squids, essentially.

ELIZABETH:

Yes.

(MARY takes out her hammer and splits one open)

MARY:

Inside, you find something that looks very similar to an ink sac in a squid. Cut it open. And add a little water.

(ELIZABETH takes it from her, wide eyed)

ELIZABETH:

My God.

You really are a genius, Mary Anning.

MARY:

I am well aware of that, Elizabeth Philpot.

TRAY:

I have an itchy bum.

(Beat. MARY and ELIZABETH grin at one another)

ELIZABETH:

If you're really distraught about the Geological Society, we can pursue matters further. We'll write a firmly worded letter.

MARY:

To those old men? They won't listen to reason.

ELIZABETH:

Not to them. To their *wives*.

(MARY stops. She thinks)

MARY:

Okay.

(ELIZABETH whips out a piece of paper and a pen. She and MARY sit on the floor. TRAY perches beside them. MARY adds a bit of water to the belemnite, ELIZABETH dips her pen in it.)

ELIZABETH:

Dearest Missus Parkinson,

(A plywood carnival cutout of an elderly woman rolls onto the stage, a hole cut behind where the face would be. MISSUS fills in the face.)

I beg your humble forgiveness for the nature of this missive, but I would appeal to the better angels of your nature. I write to you on behalf of Mary Anning, the most accomplished fossilist that Dorset has ever known...

MISSUS PARKINSON:

Oh, Miss Philpot. How delighted I was to receive your letter. It has occurred to me that your mother and my dear departed sister, poor thing, were once linked by a mutual acquaintance who has since died, poor thing, and whose name I don't recall—nor the location of where they all congregated. I'm sorry I can't be of more help to your friend Annie, poor thing. Write soon!

(The plywood carnival cutout rolls off, and across the stage, a second image rolls on, this woman much broader, also missing a face. MISSUS fills in this face, too.)

ELIZABETH:

At current, Missus Greenough, she has located and sold five full skeletons of a previously unidentified ancient reptile—a discovery that greatly impressed your husband, but not enough to sway his mind on a most important matter...

MISSUS GREENOUGH:

I refuse to discuss anything via post that would better be conversed in a tête-à-tête. That includes topics such as card playing, aperitifs, bonnet sizes, how to get the best servants for the least money, widows and widowers, who looks dreadful now?, the occult, and my husband's sexual failings. If you would like to speak with me further, please set up an appointment with my steward, who does fine work, but gets very little compensation.

(The plywood carnival cutout rolls off, and from the first side, a third image rolls on, much lower, a woman lounging with a book, also missing a face. MISSUS fills in this face.)

ELIZABETH:

We strongly urge you to speak with your husband, Mrs. Babington, on behalf of the community of Lyme Regis, to permit Miss Anning to join the Geological Society of London, thereby cementing her place in the annals of scientific discovery forever.

(MISSUS BABINGTON begins to speak in a whisper, so low in volume, it is barely words. At last, she clears her throat:)

MISSUS BABINGTON:

(timid, but audible) No.

ELIZABETH:

Yours truly, Elizabeth Philpot.

(The plywood cutout image exits, as does MISSUS. ELIZABETH looks up at MARY from the letter. MARY scowls. Overhead, the light begins to dim.)

MARY:

It's hopeless.

ELIZABETH:

I think you're famous enough, Mary Anning.

MARY:

It's not about fame, Betsy Philpot.

ELIZABETH:

Then what is it about?

MARY:

One can't live handout to handout. They have the power to change *everything*.

(ELIZABETH's hand finds MARY's, and gently touches it)

ELIZABETH:

Does everything really need to change?

MARY:

Betsy...

If the world doesn't see you, you don't exist.

ELIZABETH:

I see you, Mary Anning. You exist to me.

(They grin at one another again. There is a roll of thunder.)

TRAY:

You know,

Whenever I want to be noticed, I walk over to the person, and I very quietly, and very gently, open my mouth—

(He does so)

And I put it on the person's ankle or wrist or shoulder or shin—

(He does so)

And I give light little chomps. Chomp chomp chomp. As if to say, "I'm here I'm here I'm here!" You should try that.

It always works for me.

(Beat)

MARY:

Writing doesn't solve anything.

Digging does.

(There is another roll of thunder, this one louder than the first.)

Come on, Tray.

(MARY and TRAY exit, leaving ELIZABETH on the floor)

(Lights)

Scene 7:

(Blackness. The sound of thunder reverberates overhead, followed by the noise of torrential rains. A spotlight illuminates REVEREND WILLIAM BUCKLAND, holding an umbrella. He speaks loudly over the rain.)

BUCKLAND:

Oh, yes—

When the rains come, and it's England, so the rains, they do come—oh, yes—when they arrive, they strike at the Blue Lias like waves from Heaven, a skyward tsunami. The limestone that makes up most of the earth in this area, you see, the limestone is quite porous. It's essentially thousands upon thousands of years of compressed ancient sea life, hardened into calcium carbonate. But because of the peculiar nature of the creation of the stone, there are millions of tiny fissures in the limestone, fissures that small amounts of moisture seep into after a hard rain, and the water, oh yes—the water reacts with the calcium carbonate almost like an acid would, and begins to, both gently and violently, eat away at the surface of the stone.

(Across the stage, MARY and TRAY enter. MARY holds her basket and a lit lantern; TRAY holds a tiny umbrella. There is a thunderclap, and TRAY jumps.)

And when the tide is out, these same rains buffet down onto the limestone rich floor of the sea, and such wonders, such beauties, oh yes, such miracles are freed from millions of years in their stony prison, to be released back into the world.

(MARY spies a stone jutting up from the ground)

MARY:

What is that?

BUCKLAND:

And we, we who are only now beginning to grapple with our smallness in the enormity of the universe...

MARY:

Oh, Lord—Oh, Lord—

(MARY begins to dig with her fingers, and overhead, the thunder claps and lightning flashes.)

BUCKLAND:

..are able to see with our own eyes the quietest secrets of God.

(The thunder booms, directly overhead)

MARY:

Oh, Lord.

BUCKLAND:

Oh yes.

(BUCKLAND vanishes as the thunder builds, the rains build, MARY digs and digs and digs and then suddenly—

Light. Silence. MARY and TRAY remain where they are, alone on the empty stage. They are small. TRAY, resigned, lowers his umbrella. MARY is entranced.)

TRAY:

When she's like this...

(MARY slowly and methodically begins to work the sand and dirt away from the stone. And gradually, as TRAY speaks, more and more of the skeleton becomes visible to the audience.)

Nothing gets in or out.

Her fingers move.

Doesn't hear the ocean. Doesn't smell the salt.

She can only touch,

like, connecting to the skeleton,

as though her fingers know the

history

behind the bone

how they connect,

where they meet

to make a thing

whole.

Her fingers move.

She doesn't eat. She sleeps like this,

kneeling, praying to the Holy Fossil.

The tide comes in, her knees sink deeper and deeper and deeper into the clay and her skirts grow heavy with the weight of the waters of the Channel

And the cliff face rolls to crumble down around her,

pushing against her back, her heels—

She could be buried in sea and sand.

A bee stung her on the neck. A jellyfish on the third knuckle of her left hand.

Only fingers and the brush and the hammer and a chisel made from steel.

Her fingers move.

I know bones. But not like she knows bones.

It's my job to keep the gulls away.

And the stone crabs. And the tourists.

And it's my job to bite the jellies. And the rats. And the tourists.

So she can

So my Mary can

move her fingers.

(Beat)

I'll protect her from whatever comes.

(At MARY's touch, the skeleton is unearthed. It is something new, over twenty feet long from nose to tail; the weathered remains of a plesiosaur.)

MARY:

Brilliant.

(Beat)

(Beat)

END OF EXCERPT