

How Orville Peck Got His Mask: A Modern Fairytale

By Steve Mele

Cast, in order of appearance

Playwright/Queen B/Fairy Drag Mother – the Playwright and Queen B are around 50, the Fairy Drag Mother is ageless

Orville Peck/Bobby Ray – early 20's and raised in Dixie

Anita Diamond/Orville's Mother – around the same age as present-day Orville

Shewanna Tall/Young Orville – Shewanna is about the same age as present-day Orville, Young Orville's age is specified in the scenes

The roles should be cast without regard to the gender identity of the actors. As the Playwright makes clear in their opening monologue to the audience *drag queen is its own thing*.

Scene 1: The Phone

(The scene begins with the set in darkness. The Playwright walks out onto the stage with the set dimly lit. Spotlight on the Playwright.)

Playwright: Note to all you politically correct motherfuckers that coming to see this show. “Drag Queen”, here, in this play, is its *own* thing. It *does not* connote, denote, or indicate gender identity, sexual orientation, sexual position, size, color, creed or any preference thereof. It's both who they are and what they do. They can't -- or do not want to -- do anything else to put food on the table but perform.

Because guess what, Drag Queens, professional Drag Queens like the bitches in this play, are never *off*. They may not be onstage, they might not be wearing makeup, or a dress, or - - at the best of times -- anything at all, but they are *on*. So when they walk, talk, dress, and act they are *in character* all day every day. And you know what else that makes them? Tired. Tired to the BONE! You know what I'm saying? Tired to the motherfucking bone. So don't. You. Sit there. All smug. Judging who we are unless you've walked a mile in our heels. OK bitch? Walk a motherfucking mile in these eight-inch bad boys then you tell me what. Now sit back, relax and enjoy this *motherfuckin'* show! (softly) Girl, don't *think* so much.

(Dim lights come up on a dressing room, there is no one onstage. We watch as Orville enters the stage pushing a cleaning cart with the usual paraphernalia of mops, brooms, spray bottles, etc. Orville turns on the lights and prepares to start cleaning up. As the lights come up we see dresses, wigs, and padded bras, it is the dressing room for a drag show, and it's a mess. Orville begins humming as he starts putting things to rights. We hear loud cackling as two outrageously fabulous drag queens enter the stage.)

Anita: Are you sure you left it in here girl?

Shewanna: I ain't sure of nothing, that boy from the audience is waiting outside right now. Did you see that face? Those arms? (beat) That ass? Damn, he's fine as hell! (beat) Maybe I don't even need to find it, it's here somewhere, I'll get it tomorrow.

Anita: Slow your roll bitch. It's got to be here.

Orville: Uh, hi Ms. Shewanna. How ya doin' Ma'm? Ms. Anita.

Anita: Oh hello

(Shewanna glances at him but doesn't say anything.)

Anita: Ms. Shewanna is looking for her phone, have you seen it?

Orville: No ma'm but I'm happy to help y'all look.

Shewanna: (in a mock drawl) Well thank ye kindly good sir. (in her normal voice) If you'd kept this place clean it wouldn't have gotten lost.

Orville: Sorry ma'm, I'm happy to help look for it. Did you check your costume?

Anita: Trust me, there are no pockets in *that* costume Orville.

Orville: Oh right. Um, well I'm just getting started here...if you give me your number I can call your phone.

(Ignoring him, Shewanna starts looking through Orville's cleaning cart.)

Anita: Girl, what the hell are you doing? You planning to help with the clean up?

Shewanna: (Addressing Orville) You're always sniffing around here collecting things. Did you take my phone?

Orville: No m'am

Shewanna: Don't you "no m'am" me. I don't buy that southern belle routine for one minute. Where's my damn phone?

Orville: I don't...

Anita: Leave the boy alone Shewanna. Damn girl! What's gotten into you?

Shewanna: I just don't trust him, never have. He wants something. Showing up here out of nowhere.

Anita: Have you lost your mind? That's how people show up bitch. Out of nowhere. Where'd you come from?

(Shewanna continues to rustle through the cart, lifting a fringed dress...)

Shewanna: Aha!

Anita: Aha what?

Shewanna: What do you mean what? This bitch has my cowgirl costume all hidden away. (Turning on Orville) You think you gonna be a drag queen bitch? (Then back to Anita) I knew it, this bitch has a plan. (pause) Orville, that's probably not even your name, you little peckerwood. Little Miss *E-Ville*. *That's who she is!*

(Anita starts laughing and grabs the dress out of Shewanna's hand.)

Anita: Girl, you so stupid. He didn't take that tired old dress, your fat ass ripped right through it last week during your big Reba McEntire number. When you got off stage you threw it across the room.

Shewanna: I KNOW THAT! But why does *he* have it?!

Anita: He's probably using it for a rag.

(Orville looks horrified)

Orville: Oh no, I'd never do that. I just...I have a thing for fringe.

(Shewanna and Anita give each other a *look*)

Anita: OK honey, I've heard of a lot of fetishes in my time. Lord knows every Johnny has a secret...

Orville: Not like that, I mean not that there's anything wrong...I mean...I just like clothes with fringe. When I saw Ms. Shewanna throw it last week I picked it up. I figured I might be able to...

Anita: To what? Mend it? Sweetie, she didn't rip the seam, the ass is *gone*, there ain't no fixing that.

Shewanna: I don't care, I'm talking to Queen B tomorrow and getting the little thief fired.

(A cell phone starts ringing on one of the dressing tables, Shewanna's name is written across the mirror above the cell phone. Enter Queen B cell phone in hand)

Queen B: You ain't gettin' no one fired Miss *Thang*. Grab your cell phone and let my em-ploy-ee do his damn job.

(Shewanna starts to argue but Anita sees the look on Queen B's face and grabs her arm, pulling her out the door. Exit Shewanna and Anita)

Queen B: Don't let those bitches get you down boy.

Orville: Oh, I don't mind them so much m'am. Maybe if I was talented like them I'd be a little bitchy too.

Queen B: Lord you're sweet (laughing, then to the audience) And maybe a little "touched" (back to Orville) Shewanna ain't a bitch to you cuz she's talented, she's a bitch to you because she's jealous.

Orville: Jealous? Well, I'm not sure I see that m'am.

Queen B: I ain't being nice.

Look, you're everything she wants to be. You're so young and handsome with those pretty eyes.

Orville: But m'am I'm a janitor and they're...

Queen B: They're what? Stars? Girl, they're a couple of mid-level performers in a mediocre show (Orville looks horrified) No no no don't give me no pretty words. I know what this is. I

don't need it to be anything more than this. I'm good with what I've done. (More to their self than to Orville) If you only knew what it took to get here, you'd understand.

(Silence as Queen B is lost in thought a moment)

Queen B: Anyway, don't let them get you down. (begins to walk out, sees the dress back on the cart) Why did you take this dress? You know as well as I do, there ain't no fixing this. *Do* you want to be a drag queen?

Orville: Oh, m'am, no m'am.

Queen B: Hmmm, and why's that? Too femme for you? The girls not *manly* enough?

Orville: No m'am, nothin' like that at all. I think they're...wonderful

Queen B: Ok, then...(holds up the dress)

Orville: My momma taught me to sew a bit, I just thought I might be able to use that fringe is all. It just seemed like such a waste.

Queen B: (to the audience) He sews? (back to Orville) OK, now I'm curious. What is it you do want to do? Why be a janitor here instead of someplace else? I know it's not the pay.

Orville: No, it ain't the pay....uh...don't get me wrong, the pay is nice and all.

(Checks in with Queen B to make sure he didn't offend)

Orville: Well m'am, I do write songs.

Queen B: Oh, so you're a singer.

Orville: No, well, I do love to sing but there's just one problem...

Queen B: And that is?

Orville: I can't carry a tune.

Queen B: (laughing) Well, that *is* a problem. But you shouldn't let that stop you. Performance is about the show, not the performer. What do you think we sell here? There isn't anything special about a boy in a dress. At least not enough to keep this old bar up and running. We sell the show...we sell magic! Lighting, costumes, music, makeup, glitter, and **attitude** (aside to the audience) *and not a little booze and drugs* (back to Orville) and these boys are super stars, they're dream girls, they're whatever the audience needs them to be. I'll bet you're just underestimating yourself. Let's hear you sing.

Orville: (laughing and shaking his head) I don't think that's a good idea m'am.

Queen B: Why isn't it? Are you shy? Is that what you're laughing for?

Orville: No ma'm I ain't shy but...

Queen B: But nothing. You play guitar?

Orville: Yes ma'm.

(Queen B grabs a guitar that's been propped up in the corner and hands it to Orville. With a practiced hand, Orville takes the guitar and starts to tune it up. After a couple of minor adjustments he looks at Queen B.)

Orville: What would you like to hear?

Queen B: (Deadpan) Mary Had a Little Lamb. (Orville starts to play) No you fool, I want to hear what you wrote.

(Orville smiles and begins to play *Turn to Hate* and humming along. He's humming loud like he wants to sing the words but doesn't. Queen B is clearly pleased -- and maybe a little relieved -- and starts to move to the music a bit.)

Queen B: OK, now that wasn't so hard. Now this time, move a little while you play. Don't be so nervous. And stand up straight. (Orville straightens a bit) Come on now, tits out, ass tight! (Pats Orville's ass.) Girl, you're *fabulous*. Don't forget that for one minute onstage.

(Orville straightens up and starts to play again, this time less tentative and with a little swagger.)

Queen B: Right, that's the way! Swing those slim hips sugar! Werk!

(Orville stops, clearly pleased with the attention.)

Queen B: OK, now remember all that, but this time I want to hear you sing. I want to hear that attitude I just saw. Loud and proud!

(Orville begins to protest but decides to give a shot)

Orville: (begins playing, then, singing) *It's got an awful bite...*(Orville's voice is like fingernails on a chalk board. It's high pitched and screechy and no where close to the key in which he plays.)

(Queen B grimaces as if in physical pain and waves her hands.)

Queen B: Sugar, you weren't kidding.

Orville: (Looking defeated.) I tried to warn you.

Queen B: Don't look so down sugar. I like the tune. Next week why don't you bring me in some of your songs and we'll talk about finding someone to maybe sing them in the show while you play. How does that sound?

Orville: (Very excited.) That sounds...great...wonderful...(starts to go in for a hug.)

Queen B: (At a distance.) Calm down, I said we'd look at it. It ain't all that yet. I'm going to head out and let you do your work. I'll see you tomorrow.

Orville: OK! Thank you Queen B!

Queen B: Don't stay too late

(Exit Queen B. Orville resumes cleaning, humming his song. Once he's sure Queen B is out of earshot, he starts to sing a bit quieter though still off key. He sees the dress on his cart and holds it up like a Lone

Ranger mask, fringe covering his mouth and looks at his handiwork in the mirror. Tries a swagger then laughs to himself.)

Orville: Hmmm, if stage magic was real...

(Alternates humming and singing, maybe a few “stage moves” like he’s imagining performance.)

Orville: (scoffs) Jealous of me? Lord. Hell, I’d give anything to be able to sing my *own* songs the way I hear them in my head.

(Laughing at himself he goes back to cleaning. As the lights go down, he finds a place to sit and rest and falls asleep).

End Scene

Scene II: The Fairy Drag Mother

(Gentle lighting. This should be reminiscent of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or the visitation of the Ghost of Christmas Present from *A Christmas Carol*. A spot reveals the Fairy Drag Mother (FDM) standing, hands on hips, looking down on the sleeping Orville.)

FDM: Boy, get the hell up!

Orville: (groggy) What the...?

FDM: Boy, didn’t you just ask the Universe for something?

Orville: Huh?

FDM: Damn. (To their self) Is this wish diviner on the fritz again? (Then to Orville, a little louder and slower as if to a child.) I said, did you (beat) ask (beat) the Universe (beat) for something. (To the audience) *Maybe it’s me*.

Orville: (trying to shake off the dream) Am I dreaming?

FDM: (To the audience) *No, it’s him*. (Back to Orville) I asked my question first, sweetie. (Then faster, remembering their schedule) And look, you’re *not* the only Wisher I got to see tonight so get with the program. Time’s a wasting.

Orville: Uh, yeah, I guess so.

FDM: OK then! (Puts the wish diviner away with an approving nod). Get up and touch the hem of my garment. We’re already late!

(Orville reaches out tentatively still in disbelief, lights fade to black as music comes up, Reba McEntire’s *Fancy*. Lights up on Young Orville (YO) sitting in a trailer home on the floor in front of an old record player. YO is around 10 years old.)

Orville: That looks like me.

FDM: (laughing) It is, well sort of. It’s a shadow of you. (beat) You loved that song.

Orville: It was one of Momma’s favorites.

(Enter Orville's Mother (OM). She picks up the chorus of the song and YO and OM harmonize beautifully.)

FDM: Listen to you two sing!

(YO and OM continue to sing and dance clearly having done this many times before. The song ends.)

YO: How was work Momma?

OM: Long (she says as she starts to get comfortable, taking off her shoes), I couldn't wait to get home because guess what? I've got us two tickets to see Dolly Parton tonight!

YO: Really? (beat) It's not just Auntie Shade playing Dolly is it?

OM: Nope, it's not no tired old drag show sweetie, it's the real deal.

YO: How? I thought we couldn't afford it.

OM: (Looking a little shocked) Never you mind about that sugar. (beat) Momma has friends, you know. (beat) Now, what are you going to wear? We got to get going, the show starts soon!

(Lights down on YO and OM and lights up on Orville and FDM, *Working 9 to 5* comes up in the background)

Orville: I remember that night like it was yesterday. We had a great time. We always did...

FDM: You sounded so sweet singing with your Momma.

Orville: Yeah, I remember. That was the night I decided I was going to be a country singer. Seeing Dolly Parton on stage really was magical. I wrote my first song that night when I got home.

FDM: Do you still remember it?

Orville: (Hums a bit) Yeah, I think I do.

FDM: So, what happened baby? How'd you lose your voice?

Orville: You know, puberty came and my voice changed.

FDM: Oh is that what happened?

(Lights up on the front door of the trailer, later the same night. YO and OM are returning from the concert and singing snippets of songs by Dolly Parton. They are clearly euphoric. Bobby Ray steps out of the shadows as YO and OM come upon their trailer. Bobby Ray is noticeably drunk and starts clapping his hands and hooping and hollering as they approach. At his appearance, OM moves YO behind her.)

Bobby Ray: Why'd you stop? That was so sweet you two.

OM: Hey Bobby Ray. What you doing here? You ain't supposed to be here, you know that.

Bobby Ray: Well, that didn't stop you from taking those tickets now did it darlin'?

YO/OM: Momma!/Hush up Orville.

OM: You said no strings Bobby Ray. You said you couldn't use them anyway. And none of that changes the court order. Now you get out of here.

Bobby Ray: Ah now, don't be like that baby.

YO: She ain't your baby, leave us alone.

OM: I said hush Orville. You let me handle this.

(OM turns to YO and takes him by his arms speaking directly to him with her back to Bobby Ray. Bobby Ray uses this as an opportunity to move closer. When Bobby Ray speaks again, OM turns on him.)

Bobby Ray: You listen to your Momma little man and stay quiet. Why don't you go inside and let the grown-ups talk.

YO: I ain't leaving. You are!

(YO takes a run at Bobby Ray throwing his body into him. Bobby Ray reflexively smacks YO to the ground and grabs OM.)

Bobby Ray: Stay down little man. (To OM) Ain't nothing for free baby, now get over here.

(Bobby Ray starts to maul OM as she fights him off. YO stands and runs at Bobby Ray a second time but this time Bobby Ray catches YO by his throat and holds him at arm's length stepping back from OM.)

OM: (Taking in the scene) Bobby Ray, now you let him go. He's got nothing to do with this.

Bobby Ray: Maybe, maybe not. (Beat) But he's always getting in the way. Maybe if he weren't here you'd be a little nicer to me.

OM: (changing tactics) Bobby Ray, let him go now. You're right, he should just go inside so we can be alone. OK baby? Now, let him go and I'll show you how grateful I am.

(Bobby Ray considers her words and sees he's won. Let's YO go. YO runs to OM and they embrace.)

YO: You don't need to give him nothing Momma. Let's go inside...

OM: I'm OK baby, Bobby Ray and I are just going to talk for a while. You go inside and put on your records, OK? Momma will be in in a minute.

(OM pushes YO to the door. YO reluctantly goes inside looking back at OM who continues to try to reassure him as the door closes. Lights down on the trailer, lights up on FDM and Orville.)

Orville: I..(silence)

FDM: You? You what?

Orville: I...should have protected her.

FDM: How would you have done that child? You were what? 10 years old?

Orville: I felt so guilty. So alone.

FDM: She was strong, she survived and so did you. Nothing to feel guilty about there. Life ain't always fair, never will be. Your Momma did the best she could. (Orville turns away and FDM gets his attention again.) Don't let what's happened to you define you sugar. It's not what's happened to you that matters, it's what you do with it that does.

(Lights up on 18-year-old Young Orville (YO). He's in the same trailer as before, just 8 years later. He's alone and furiously stuffing clothes and things into a duffle bag. He has music on loud, the genre should be as far away from country music as possible; young and angry. Enter Orville's Mother, she's a little drunk and dressed provocatively with too much make up on.)

OM: Hey, sweetie (She says this to YO while backing into the apartment waving and blowing kisses to whomever she just left, turning she see's that YO is packing.) Whoa now, what are you doing darling?

YO: I'm getting out of here Momma. This place is strangling me, I can't breath.

OM: Baby you can't, I need you here.

YO: You don't need me, you have Billy and Bobby, or is it Ben, (softly) this week.

OM: It's Ben and you know it. Your Momma gets lonely sometimes that's all. (YO gives a look) And yes, maybe they buy me some gifts. It hasn't been easy since they closed the bar.

YO: (softening) Momma, I'm just in the way here.

OM: You ain't ever in the way sweetie, not for one minute of one day. I love you. (Orville stops, softening then returns to packing) I wish I could have done better.

YO: Momma. I got to do this. Some of the boys are talking about a band and I can still play. They're heading to New York City and so am I.

(At the oblique reference to his lost voice, OM looks pained.)

YO: Nothing is anybody's fault. But I can't stay here. There's a whole big world out there.

(Silence between them as he continues to pack. OM tries to unpack and YO snatches the items back.)

OM: (a little laugh) Oh now, look at me, I'm going to make my mascara run.

(beat)

OM: Do you have a place to stay? New York City huh? You know that's a pretty big place.

YO: Yes. I'm not stupid Momma. (beat) You remember Cletus? He was my best friend in like 5th grade?

OM: Oh sure, you two was thick as thieves if I remember correctly.

YO: We were. (Beat.) Anyway, he's living in New York City and he invited me to come stay with him. He said I can stay as long as I need, until I get on my feet.

OM: Orville you haven't seen him in 5 years or more and you're moving in?

YO: Momma, we're not "moving in", he's just helping me out.

OM: Hmmm, no one does nothing for free Orville. Lord you should know *that* by now. (beat)
You know where you should be headed.

YO: Do I? I know where you think I should go but Momma you're holding onto the past. I can't sing no more, Nashville doesn't want me. In New York...

OM: You can sing if you want to. You always sang so sweet when we sang together. I can't believe that's gone.

YO: Believe it Momma.

OM: Sing with me (she runs and puts on *Patches* by Clarence Carter on the record player) and starts to sing the opening verse encouraging YO to join her):

I was born and raised down in Alabama
On a farm way back up in the woods
I was so ragged the folks used to call me "Patches"
Papa used to tease me about it
'Course deep down inside he was hurt
'Cause he'd done all he could

YO/OM harmonizing:

My papa was a great old man
I can see him with a shovel in his hand...

(YO's voice comes out a croak and he walks to the record player and grabs the needle to stop the music. Turns on his Momma with a *look* that says "see".)

YO: I got to go Momma.

(YO closes his duffle and hugs his Mother then heads straight to the door. OM is clearly upset, and waves as he leaves -- almost like something she just remembered to do. Fade to black. Beat. Lights up on Orville and his FDM. They've "returned" to the dressing room.)

Orville: (Clearly moved) Why did you show me that?

FDM: That was the last time you saw your Momma?

Orville: I hurt her...so...bad...

FDM: Baby, you didn't hurt her, life did. You were her one great success. You couldn't fix nobody sweet child. You were only a baby your own self.

Orville: I sure wish I could have... For her.

FDM: We all got to make our own magic. That's how magic works baby. It's personal. (Silence) What makes Dolly such a Diva? Why do crowds still flock to see Reba? It's magic, child. You said you'd give "anything" to sing your songs the way you hear them in your head.

Orville: Yes Ma'm, anything.

FDM: What if I told you there's nothing to give? (Orville looks defeated, FDM laughs) No baby, you aren't getting me. (Glances knowingly at the audience). You don't have to give anything at all. You have to *find* your own magic. It's in here (touches Orville's chest), not here (touches Orville's head). It's your heart that broke, not your body, not your voice. You just have to believe. Do you?

Orville: Yes Ma'm. I mean...I've tried to.

FDM: There is no try, sweetie, there is only do or don't do. (Beat) Maybe you just need a little help. You know, costumes have their own magic. (Grabs Shewanna's torn dress)

Orville: That? Ms. Anita was right about that. That's just a tired old dress.

FDM: Is it? (She tosses the dress into the air and in its place is a mask. It has the fringe of the dress and is styled to cover Orville's eyes similar to the Lone Ranger.) Well...(She raises her arms and music comes up at her command. She hands Orville the mask and he puts it on.) Sing sugar! (Spot on Orville. The music builds, it should be country, it could be Reba's *Fancy* or one of the songs by Orville Peck. He opens his mouth to sing and fade to black.)

Scene End

Scene III: Orville Finds His Drag

(Lights up on the dressing room. Orville is asleep, he should be lying in such a way that his face is obscured for the audience.)

Orville: (groggily) That was a strange dream (laughs), wait till I tell that to Queen B, she's gonna...(as he starts to get up he reaches his hand to his face to discover the mask from his "dream" is on his face). What the...? (He starts to pull the mask off, then turns and looks in the mirror.) What the...? For the love of... (The mask won't come off.) Miss Shawanna? Miss Anita? Is this some kind of a joke? Did you super glue this to my face? This ain't funny y'all. Come on now! (He runs around the dressing room pointlessly looking for the culprit and comes across the guitar and stops.). Nah. (Laughs). That's just plain stupid. Isn't it? (Looks over both shoulders to see if anyone is watching). Anybody? Anyone here? (When no one answers he tunes up the guitar and starts to play. He opens his mouth and sings like a country angel/ somewhere between Roy Orbison and Elvis Presley.)

(As he finishes singing, Queen B is seen standing in the door with Shewanna coming up behind them. Queen B applauds as he finishes.)

Shewanna: What are you doing mopping floors with a voice like that? I knew it. You're some sort of spy?

(Queen B looks at her like she's lost her mind.)

Queen B: I got a better question, where the hell did that voice come from? And what the hell is that on your face? Is that Shawanna's old dress?

Shewanna: It sure is.

(Shewanna moves to snatch it off his face. Startled, Orville turns around, stopping Shewanna in her tracks.)

Orville: I mean, like you said Queen B, there's magic in the theatre.

Queen B: I guess there is. (Beat.) With a voice like that we got to get you onstage, sugar.

Shewanna: Queenie, did you know about this?

Queen B: He told me he wrote but I heard him sing yesterday and trust me, it didn't sound like that.

Orville: Yesterday? Oh hell, I slept the night here? My roommate probably thinks I'm dead.

Queen B: (reaching for the mask) Let's get that thing off your face...

Orville: (recoiling) I don't think it comes off. I mean, I think this is mine now.

(Shewanna and Queen B look at each other then back at Orville)

Queen B: (Holding up her hand to shut down Shewanna.) Everyone needs their own drag. Girl you know that. (To Orville.) OK sweetie, well if you're going wear her dress, you may as well have the hat to go with it.

(She finds a cowgirl hat and places it on his head, it should be over the top western dazzle.)

Queen B: (To Shewanna.) OK girl, now go sit down. (Shewanna takes a seat in the front row of the audience. Then to Orville.) Let's hear it sugar.

(Orville begins to play, it should be a song that highlights his voice. After a couple bars, lighting shifts so that Orville is in shadow and he continues to "sing" silently. Spotlight on Playwright who addresses the audience.)

Playwright: Looks like things turned out OK for our simple minded hero. (Laughs) Are you wondering what happens after this? I mean, does he become rich and famous? You got to know, don't you? (beat) Well honey, you done missed the point. Our hero has already won. He found his own drag, he found his voice, and no one can take that away so no matter what happens next he won in the Big Game. He knows who he is. If you walk away tonight with anything – other than mad respect for me and mine – take with you that one message. You want to win at life? Then take a minute and find out who you are. And if you do it right, maybe you all can be as fabulous as we all are. Good night you all. (she laughs as she exits the stage).

(Lights out)