

Miss Major Cushman

A play for one actor

Synopsis.

She's a wife, mother, actress and a failed union spy. Tonight, Pauline Cushman takes to the stage and tells her story. But how much of it is true is anyone's guess.

Time.

Three years, nine months, and five days after the American Civil War ended

Place.

Setting 1: A vaudeville stage. Pauline shines when she's in front of an audience.

Setting 2: Pauline's former dressing room. Unlike, the stage, the dressing room is cold and bare. In here, she performs for an audience of one: the lecherous touring manager who has fired her.

Transitions from the dressing room to the stage should be seamless and conducted without set changes. Instead, they can be delineated with lighting, sound effects, or simply by a shift in the actor's performances. As the play progresses, the transitions should become muddier. Truth blends with spectacle and performance.

Character.

Pauline Cushman: female in her late thirties. Currently, she is a recently terminated former vaudeville performer doing whatever she can to keep her job and legacy alive.

Here's what we know about Pauline that can be historically verified:

During the American Civil War, she served briefly as a volunteer Union spy. She was made an honorary major by President Lincoln for her service to the Federal cause. Before that, she was a touring stage performer. In 1893, she takes a suicidal overdose of pain medication and dies alone.

Everything else that has been said about her or that she tells us cannot be verified.

Note: Pauline is a good actor—but she's a good actor who is embracing the mannerisms of the stage that were popular during her time. (Think Françoise Delsarte.) Her gestures are broad and presentational. She commits 110% to every movement, character performance, and battle cry.

Original Production.

Miss Major Cushman was commissioned by the Greenhouse Theater in Chicago, IL in 2018. It was directed by Eglá Kishta and Nick Thornton and performed by Sarah Rachel Schol. It was performed later that year at Water Street Studios in Batavia, IL.

ON THE STAGE:

**A woman drags a large PROP TRUNK into the space.
The lights go dark. After a moment:**

PAULINE

So, you've come to see the famous lady spy? Your wish has been granted. Feast your eyes on me.

Lights snap up to reveal Pauline Cushman. Her eyes are shining—both ready and desperate. She wears a corseted hoop dress that would only look ragged if you saw it up close. The colors of the dress are faded red, white, and blue.

(singing)

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on!*

*Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on!*

Ladies and gentlemen! While we may be at peace on our streets, in our towns, on our fields today, remember only three years ago, we were at war. We were strapped in and armed up killing our brothers, protecting our sisters, and destroying our enemies, bullet by bullet.

The War of the Rebellion!

Shotguns. Cannons! Horses stomping onto dead soldier bodies.

Northerners at odds with Southerners.

Nobility from above.

Threats from down below.

Slavery! States rights! Abraham Lincoln!

Death all around. But we picked up our heads. We rallied round the flag. And we fought for what was ours.

I fought for what was ours. And tonight, I will tell you how I did it. I've been a performer my entire life, but this evening's performance is a special one.

Tonight, I'll tell you about survival, freedom, and persistence. Tonight, I'll tell you my story.

One day, many decades from now, I'll be lowered down into the Earth as hundreds of my adoring fans weep and watch my once-very alive body return to its origins. My tombstone will read: Pauline Cushman: Union spy and esteemed war hero.

The lights shift. So does Pauline.

We transition into a different time and a different place—a place where Pauline is no longer in control of her own show.

IN THE DRESSING ROOM

We're in Pauline's dressing room—or at least we're in the room that used to be her dressing room.

Someone enters. Pauline looks up and takes in his surprised face.

PAULINE

If you walk out now, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. I swear that to you.

(beat)

Keep me the circuit, let me update my act, and you'll be selling out shows left and right. Everyone will be clamoring to get to see the great Miss Major Cushman relive her harrowing tale. I guarantee you.

But you must know that. After all, you're still standing here in my dressing room, listening to my plea. You couldn't resist me. You never could.

Pauline pours herself a heavy glass of BOURBON.

How many evenings after my performances have you begged me to share a bottle with you? Here in this dressing room or in your office or a secluded bar. Far from your home and the voices of your wife and your two children. Now's your chance.

Both you and I know how much swill is already swimming inside that teacup you're clutching. Don't be embarrassed. I've known many a worse drunk than yourself. Sit and drink with me.

So, you want to cut my act from the show. Why? Do you see me as dead weight bloating your payroll? Are you threatened by the internal fire that fuels every move I make on the stage and off? Or is it something more sinister? Do you want people to forget what happened?

It was three years, nine months, and five days ago that the war ended. Three years nine months and five day's time was all it took for people to forget our bravery and our sacrifices.

But we can't let them forget. That's why you need my act. Last night, I was upset with you. I cursed at you. I see that when I lashed out at you, my nails cut at you. But my temper has eased. Your skin will heal. And tonight, I will perform my act with more vigor and patriotism than you could ever imagine. I'm sure you're wondering how.

She pulls a HANDWRITTEN LIST out from inside her SHOE.

I made a list.

Idea number one: More dramatics! Everyone loves a good origin story. They don't want to know about my bravery alone. They want to know how I became who I was. They want to see me transform.

The lights shift.

ON THE STAGE

Pauline is onstage performing once again.

PAULINE

So, you ask, how did this beauty become a patriotic war hero? I'll show you. And to show you, we must go back in time. We must journey together and trudge through the swampy, sticky landscape that is the South.

Ladies and Gentlemen, close your eyes. Feel the air hang heavy on your wet neck. Smell the sweet corn and beans and the smoking pork on the spit.

You've arrived.

Scene: Kentucky, 1863. It was a mixed and turbulent battleground masquerading under the guise of a neutral territory. But no man or woman or child was neutral in the great war. For this was the state our brave president was born: Abraham Lincoln!

MUSIC! Pauline signals for applause from the crowd.

But he wasn't the only one to claim Kentucky as his state of birth. Oh no, my friends. There was another. Kentucky was also the birthplace of our greatest foe, the leader of the Confederates himself: Jefferson Davis!

She signals for "boos" from the crowd.

This land was a breeding ground for powerful men. And—as the world would soon learn—an unstoppable spy.

Now, imagine that we're in a very fancy dressing room of a theatrical star.

Character one is the acclaimed actress herself, Pauline Cushman. That's me! Widowed too young. My husband dying bravely on the battlefield crushing the rebellion and preserving our great union. But back to me. I was young. I was talented. I was beautiful. I was powdering my nose.

Suddenly, we hear a knock knock knock!

Pauline knocks.

Pauline acts out the following scene, playing both characters:

(as Young Pauline)

Come in!

And he does. But much to my surprise, Character Two isn't the director, he isn't the costumer, or even an adoring fan.

Character Two is a Confederate soldier! I reacted appropriately:

(as Young Pauline)

Get out of here you rat bastard. I want nothing to do with you or your evil rebel ways. I'm a Yank through and through!

I ducked under the makeup table to hide. But he was too swift.

He grabbed me with his large oily hands and he whispered into my ear:

(as the Confederate)

Miz Cushman, everyone told me you were the most beautiful woman they'd ever seen, but I didn't realize how true it was until I laid eyes on you myself.

But his charm left me cold:

(as Young Pauline)

Save your breath, your southern sweetness does nothing for me. What do you want?

And ladies and gentleman, you won't believe what he said to me next:

(as the Confederate)

The honorable Mister Jefferson Davis will attend tonight's performance.

Honorable Jefferson Davis? Ha! That hornswoggler had crawled back to his home state and landed right inside my theater. I wanted to spit on the shoes of that swarthy Confederate. But I didn't. I let him continue:

(as the Confederate)

Seeing as you are most beautiful of all the actresses, we would like you to step out in front of the curtain at the end of the show and give him a toast. It sure would mean a lot to those of us who love good old Dixie. What do you say?

"No!" I wanted to scream. Me? Me?! How could I? My blood has —and always will— pump red and strong for the Union.

I supported the union. I'd die for the union.

No. I would never give a toast to that man. Unless..... unlesssssssssssss.

A true spy knows that every opportunity thrown her way must be seized upon before it flies away. But I was no *spy*, I was a woman of the stage.

And yet...

Patriotic music seeps in slowly.

I supported the union. I'd die for the union!

As that Confederate looked me up and down and up and down again, I knew in my heart of hearts what I must do.

Stage lights bathe Pauline.

The curtain rose. The performance began and I performed.

Pauline performs many beautiful poses.

The curtain fell. We bowed.

Sounds of applause. Pauline steps out into the light.

I stepped out in front of the others and I took on the greatest role of my life:

(as Young Pauline)

Ladies and Gentleman. We have a special guest in the audience tonight so let us raise our glasses. Here's to Jeff Davis and the Confederacy. May the South always maintain her honor and her rights!

I played a Confederate.

They booed me. But I didn't care. They fired me. But I didn't care. Because I had bigger plans: to take down the Rebels from the inside!

Patriotic music swells. The lights shift.

IN THE DRESSING ROOM

Pauline pours herself more bourbon and drinks deeply.

Believe it or not, I was never classically trained. Not in manners, or dance, or the dramatic arts. But that never stopped me. I've been performing since I was an infant. (Off his look) Or a child at least. (Off his look again) Or by fifteen at the very latest.

(reciting her reviews)

“She was warmly applauded in every scene of tonight’s performance!” — The Louisville Journal

“She has the figure of a madonna and a voice as melodious as a trombone” —The Baltimore Gazette

“Miss Cushman’s costume is best suited for a much warmer climate than here but never the less she keeps it steamy.” — The Iowa City Chronicle.

Yes, I memorized my reviews. And yes, I hold them closer to my heart than any possession I could ever hope for because I was born for the stage.

With a name like Pauline Cushman, how could I not be?

I played Juliet! I played Antigone! And I played many other women who died.

Dying makes you lie still onstage without moving. Dying leaves you cold and lonely on a wooden stage floor. But it’s not what hurts you. What bruises and beats you is getting back up, crawling out of death, preparing yourself to be born and dead again day after day after day.

I died many nights, but at the end of the evening I was always back on my feet. After all, true talent finds a way to separate itself from the masses. And like the slick oil gliding on the Mississippi river, I arose.

Idea number two: Use props.

The lights shift.

ON THE STAGE

Pauline picks up a BUTTERFLY NET.

PAULINE

Ladies and Gentlemen, trust me when I tell you all it took was one toast to Jefferson Davis and those corncrackers were smitten with me!

I said what they were all thinking. I praised the man they loved. And like starving sailors to a siren, rebels crawled out from every corner, ready to talk to me.

She readies her net.

And I listened—not because I was told to. No one expected that of a woman like me.

I listened because I knew what these generals and wives and soldiers were telling me could change our country forever. I snatched up clues with the grace of a praying mantis.

Pauline leaps and tumbles as she catches clues in the air.

Shipping supplies!

Secret alliances!

Sympathizers shuttling sugar and shotguns!

Pauline pulls out a lovely FAN from her trunk.

The stories they told haunted my dreams. Desperate Kentucky sympathizers would do anything to get information to their southern brothers.

(doing her most mocking Southern Bell)

“Do tell!” “Not if I had ma’ druthers!” “Well, aren’t you a saucy lil’ peach!” “Tell me MORE.”

One sad woman confided in me, after many glasses of the sweetest tea, that she transported letters from her husband via the strangest of all vessels... a chicken:

Pauline mimes nursing a baby as she plays this role:

(as the Confederate Woman)

He waits until I pluck and feather every inch of them birds. (To her baby) Quiet Bessie. Your mamma’s talkin’ to her new best friend. Then, my husband picks out the biggest bird from the pile. (Using her baby to demonstrate) He cracks their jaws, snapping them right at the beak, like so. Then, he takes papers with all sorts of important messages and codes written on ‘em. Then he balls those messages up and shoves ‘em right up their little chicken throats. I pack them chickens up and I cart ‘em right past those no-good Yanks, straight south past the state line and right into god’s country. (Calling offstage) Billy, Susie, you kids put that pick ax down! You’s got corn to shuck! The first time I did it, I was mighty afraid. But after making the trip time and time again, I stopped fretting. No one suspects anything from someone like little me.

(beat)

(Looking into the audience)

A year later, after the war ended, they told me my methods of transporting letters in my shoes was careless. But at least I never mutilated an innocent animal to serve my needs.

(Pauline returns to the joviality of her story
and her butterfly net)

I was spying on monsters. And I wanted more than anything to keep doing just that.

The Battle of Boonville!

The Battle of Big Bethel!

The Battle of Ball's Bluff!

Sieges and troops and sailors and secrets. Routes and plans and I caught them all! And like the good little spy I was becoming, I brought back my findings to the Union Provost Marshal.

(Looking into the audience)

A show of hands from the audience! How many of you know the roles and responsibilities of a provost marshal?

(Scanning their response)

At least twelve of you are bluffing.

During the war, a Union provost marshal hunted and arrested deserters, traitors, and war criminals. He convicted prisoners. He decided who went where and how. He controlled who lived and died...and he canceled all of his appointments when I came to his office.

Scene! Kentucky, 1864. The private office of the Union Provost Marshal.

Character One! a beautiful woman waiting nervously in a private office. That's me.

What will he say? What does he want of me? Will he like my new dress?

Promptly at half past one, I heard a knock knock knock.

Pauline knocks.

A Yankee officer is always punctual. The Union Provost Marshal entered. He took my hand. He kissed it:

(as the Union Provost Marshal)

Miss Cushman, I'd say you've provided quite a service for your union brothers here in Kentucky.

I'd say!

(as the Union Provost Marshal)

So much so that you've become a bit of a heroine amongst our traitorous neighbors. Those rebels can't get enough of you.

(as Young Pauline)

Why sir, your kindness is surely making me blush!

(as the Union Provost Marshal)

Thanks to your dedication to the cause, we've been able to get ahead of our enemies in many a battle. And, with your permission, of course, we'd like you to take your...skill set down south. Beyond enemy lines. We'd like you to get into bed, metaphorically speaking, with General Braxton Bragg. It won't be easy! He's a well-guarded mark and he has an eye for espionage, but something tells me that you are the right woman to hunt him down and disrobe him, if you will. Er, strip him of his secrets. Lemonade? My girl, Dora, brewed it herself.

(beat)

I'd heard of this General Braxton Bragg. I'd seen his picture in the papers. I knew what he was capable of. What he'd done to my Union brothers. What he'd done to men like my valiant husband.

(as the Union Provost Marshal)

I've arranged a role for you at a theater down in Nashville, Miss Cushman. It will be the ideal setting for you to mingle with the highest ranking officials in the state of Tennessee. Take each morsel they give you and follow their trail further south. You find General Braxton Bragg and you tell us his plans, and God willing, we will have the bastard's head.

(as Young Pauline)

His head?!

(as the Union Provost Marshal)

Metaphorically speaking, Ma'am! ...But yes, we will likely sever him right at the neck and toss around his skull to properly celebrate. This mission will not be without its challenges but I believe you have the wherewithal to succeed.

Pauline, still playing the Provost Marshall, pulls a REAL PISTOL out from her trunk of props.

(as the Union Provost Marshal)

And of our course, we'll provide you with a loyal friend to help you along the way.

Now what do you say, Miss Cushman? Will you help us?

(as Young Pauline)

I'll do it because my country needs me. And I'll do it to right the wrongful death of my patriotic and good husband.

(More to the audience now and sort of
breaking character)

But I will never make physical contact with the men I am to spy on. Nor will I let them peek at the flesh of my ankles, no matter how much they beg of me. I may be a spy, but first and foremost, I'm a lady! A lady who knows her worth.

Pauline polishes the pistol as she walks through the audience.

I've always been aware of what I'm worth. It made me a good spy and it makes me an unstoppable performer.

Case in point? I've counted how many of you are crammed into this space, multiplied it by your ticket price and subtracted out the worth of my opening act, all in the first five minutes of stepping onto this stage. All of this arithmetic is done in my brain while simultaneously entertaining you. Being aware of your worth can be sobering, especially as you see your worth wane over time. But it's essential to survival.

I did the same that day in the Union Provost Marshall's office. I calculated my worth. Would these union officers protect me, just as I was to protect them? Would they help me if I was endangered, if I was captured or caught? Would they protect me once the war ended?

(With a smile)

I did the math. And like Orpheus, I traveled downwards.

IN THE DRESSING ROOM

PAULINE

Idea number three. Use a real rifle.

Pauline cocks the pistol.

I come on stage. Tell my story. Pull up a brave volunteer from the audience.

Give him a Confederate flag. He holds the flag, waving it back and forth across his torso, like a matador. I aim and I shoot. Perfectly putting a bullet right through the flag!

...Or perhaps it's not an audience member, perhaps it's a planted performer from another act! Perhaps it's that mealy-mouthed contortionist.

(purposefully aiming the pistol at her
companion)

Or perhaps it's you, and perhaps I miss the flag and I shoot you on purpose.

Wait! I didn't mean that. I've become callous on the road and unaware of the sensitivities of men like yourself.

**Pauline puts the pistol in the trunk and shuts it
purposefully.**

(appeasing)

You need to sell tickets and I need to be on stage. We can solve this equation together. I've done it before with men like you. I've been married. I know what it means to negotiate.

ON THE STAGE

PAULINE

For the first time, since the war began, I moved behind Confederate lines. And I traveled down to the pits of hell that make up the south.

My travels showed me horrors I'd never seen above the Mason Dixon line. Behavior that reminded me this war was about much more than protecting states rights and preserving our union. I saw the ugly sides of this country. I saw the abuse and the power. I saw the cruelty. What a world, where we enslave our brothers and kill our sisters. What a world, where we enslave our on. Where we point rifles at our brothers and sisters. What a world. It makes you want to pick up a pistol, point it at your breast, and end it all.

**Pauline reaches back down into the trunk. But instead
of picking up the rifle, she grabs the butterfly net.**

I was on a mission and I curried favor. They took me to their parties. Their rallies. They took me to their homes! I slid my way from camp to camp to official to official, each day one step closer to General Braxton Bragg.

But being a woman, even a woman as beautiful as myself, only gets you so close to a General. To get the information my fellow men in blue needed, I had to abandon my dress, bind my bosoms, and disguise myself as a rebel.

(Adopting a male presence)

I donned those unmentionables convincingly well. Sure, I was not the only woman to put on a pair of trousers to fight for our cause.

But with curves like these, all plump lips and hips, it took more than a pair of pants to convince anyone I belonged. So I relied on my secretest of weapons, my skills from the stage. And each character I assumed moved me one step closer to finding the General.

With my performance, even my dearly-departed husband wouldn't have recognized me, even if his pistol was pressed to my beating heart.

IN THE DRESSING ROOM

PAULINE

My husband's name was Charles. Did I ever tell you that? He looked like you in a way. Tall. With a similar shock of hair too blinding and pale for this dark world. He was handsome. And he was a musician. He was the one who taught me how to sing. He taught me everything. He left me for the war. 41st Infantry. We were all so proud. I think of him often, every time I smell this...

(She sniffs her drink.)

or feel the phantom swelling of my right eye.

(She touches a phantom black eye)

I've had children as well. Would you like me to tell you about them?

Of course not.

A man like you has no interest in the dead. The burden of their memory is shouldered by me alone. My secret narrative, kept hidden, kept preserved...

I never speak of them in my act for obvious reasons. I know our audience. To them, I am Joan of Arc, noble and single-mindedly throwing myself into battle for the love of my country and my unjustly slaughtered mate. Belly taut. Mind open and full of hope and honor.

I know better than to cloud their vision of me. And I know better than to drown in my own memories. I may have been raised a Catholic, but I've never been one for self-flagellation. Or anything religious for that matter.

(re: her list)

Idea number four: Based on the way I see you leering at my stockinged feet, this one should please you quite a bit.

ON THE STAGE

PAULINE

One hot July day in Shelbyville, my bravery caught up with me. Battle plans I'd lifted from a particularly powerful Confederate were discovered. You could say this was my Achilles heel. But really, those battle plans were lodged deep in my sole.

Sexy music plays!

Pauline spins down onto a chair and pulls off one STOCKING then another. She kicks her feet in the air, performing a saucy foot-forward strip tease.

She wiggles her feet and her shoulders seductively(?). She takes off her SHOE.

Inside, the shoe is the BATTLE PLAN. She shows it to the audience.

These very battle plans were what incriminated me when they were discovered in my shoes.

The paper says, "BATTLE PLANS."

I was caught! I was confronted! And, like any good spy, I denied it all. I tried to leave, but those rebel bastards wouldn't let me go. They seized me, threw me inside of a bedroom, chained my hands to a wrought-iron bedpost, and locked the door.

END OF SAMPLE

