

Family Disability and Identity in *Amy and the Orphans*

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Summary

Lindsey Ferrentino's *Amy and the Orphans* begins as an uncomfortable family road trip and gradually develops into an examination of disability, family secrecy, institutionalization, and identity. After their elderly father dies, the sparring siblings Jake and Maggie must collect their younger sister Amy, a woman with Down syndrome who has spent much of her life in a state-supported residential setting, and take her to the funeral. Their practical problem initially appears simple: they have to travel approximately one hundred miles, decide how to tell Amy about the death, and manage the emotional strain of being together. The trip becomes much more difficult when Kathy, Amy's outspoken guardian and companion, joins them and challenges the assumptions Jake and Maggie have made about their sister. The original essay correctly observes that the siblings discover how little they know about one another and about the history of their family. Amy, whom they initially treat as the person least capable of defining the situation, ultimately proves to be the sibling with the clearest understanding of her own life and the consequences of the decisions made for her. (Ferrentino, 2018)

The play links the present-day road journey with a second story involving Sarah and Bobby, a younger married couple whose nervous conversation reveals a family crisis unfolding in an earlier period. Their scenes initially appear separate from Amy's journey, but the connection gradually becomes clear. Ferrentino uses the two timelines to show how parents may describe institutional placement as protection while the disabled child experiences separation, neglect, and loss of family life. The title identifies all three adult siblings as "orphans," yet their experiences are not equal. Jake and Maggie become orphans after their father's death, whereas Amy was effectively separated from ordinary family membership while her parents were still alive. The comedy therefore contains a serious reversal: the siblings who believe they are rescuing Amy must confront the possibility that the family's earlier version of care was also abandonment. (Ferrentino, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006)

The Mood of the Audience

The original review emphasizes the surprising comic mood of a play containing death, a troubled marriage, disability, institutional abuse, and family guilt. Ferrentino balances humor and pathos so that the audience is not placed in one emotional position for the entire performance. The crowded journey, Maggie and Jake's arguments, Kathy's blunt interruptions, and Amy's use of familiar movie

quotations produce rapid comic exchanges. The laughter does not erase the serious subject; instead, it exposes the nervous behavior of the nondisabled characters. Jake and Maggie repeatedly attempt to control the conversation, decide what Amy can understand, and present themselves as responsible family members. Their elaborate management appears increasingly absurd as Amy demonstrates that she understands more than they expect and possesses memories they have avoided. (Ferrentino, 2018; The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

At times, the play moves close to sitcom-style one-liners, as the original essay notes. This creates a risk that the audience may consume a painful disability history as an entertaining family revelation. However, the script's "strong beating heart" prevents most of the comedy from becoming empty. Humor allows Amy to participate as a full theatrical character rather than as a solemn symbol of suffering. She can be impatient, funny, observant, angry, affectionate, and self-directed. The audience laughs with her and sometimes at the patronizing behavior directed toward her. This redistribution of comic authority matters because disabled characters are often represented only through tragedy, pity, or inspiration. Ferrentino's comedy makes Amy socially present, while the later revelations force the audience to reconsider whether earlier laughter contained unexamined assumptions. (Ferrentino, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006; The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

The tonal movement also reflects the experience of family conflict. Grief rarely arrives in a pure dramatic form. People argue about travel, food, medication, clothing, and old resentments while avoiding the subject that frightens them most. Jake and Maggie use sarcasm and practical planning to keep guilt at a distance. Kathy uses loudness and provocation to demand attention. Amy uses repeated phrases and film language to communicate her preferences and interpret the people around her. The result is a mood that shifts quickly between amusement, discomfort, sympathy, and anger. The audience is kept emotionally active because the play refuses to announce clearly when comedy has ended and tragedy has begun. (Ferrentino, 2018)

Analysis

The Two Interconnected Stories

The original analysis identifies Sarah and Bobby as a thirty-something couple attempting to make their marriage work during a vacation. Their nervous dialogue suggests that something is wrong and that the expected emotional or medical solution is not working. Sarah resists Bobby's efforts to remain relaxed and criticizes his overeating, whose effects become visible when he appears bare-chested. These details initially seem to belong to an ordinary marital comedy, but they gradually acquire a darker meaning. Sarah and Bobby represent the parents at the moment when fear, medical authority, and social expectations influence a life-changing decision about their child. Their uncertainty makes them human, but the later consequences prevent the audience from excusing the decision merely because it was difficult. (Ferrentino, 2018)

By connecting the parents' story with the adult siblings' journey, Ferrentino shows how one family decision can organize several generations of silence. Jake and Maggie inherit a version of events in which Amy's placement was unavoidable and beneficial. They have not examined what the institution was like, how often the family remained present, or what Amy remembers. The parents' anxiety becomes the siblings' mythology. The play therefore asks the audience to distinguish intention from consequence. Sarah and Bobby may have believed that professionals would provide appropriate care, especially in a period when parents of children with intellectual disabilities were often advised to institutionalize them. Nevertheless, Amy experienced the removal, not the intention. Ethical judgment requires listening to the person affected by the decision rather than evaluating care solely through the motives of those who made it. (Ferrentino, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006)

Amy's Identity and Authority

Amy is initially discussed as a responsibility rather than approached as an adult sister with a distinct identity. Jake and Maggie worry about how to break the news, how she will react, and how they will complete the journey. Their concern contains affection, but it also contains ableism: they assume that intellectual disability gives them the right to control information and make decisions on Amy's behalf. Amy repeatedly disrupts this assumption. She has routines, preferences, knowledge of popular culture, emotional memories, and an understanding of her family that exceeds theirs. Of all the siblings, as the original essay observes, Amy is in the best position to define herself because she has spent years living with the consequences of being defined by others. (Ferrentino, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006)

Her use of movie quotations is particularly significant. The quotations should not be treated as evidence that Amy lacks an original voice. They form part of her communication and cultural identity. Like many people, she uses familiar stories to interpret unfamiliar situations, create humor, express emotion, and establish connection. Her speech reminds the audience that communication competence cannot be measured only by whether someone uses language in a conventional academic manner. Amy communicates meaning even when her siblings fail to listen. The failure belongs partly to the listener, not automatically to the speaker. (Ferrentino, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006)

The casting of Jamie Brewer, an actor with Down syndrome, strengthens this aspect of the play. Brewer's professional experience, including her recognized work in *American Horror Story*, challenges an industry in which nondisabled actors have frequently been cast as disabled characters while disabled performers receive limited opportunities. Authentic casting does not make a production automatically ethical, but it gives a disabled actor interpretive authority over timing, gesture, physical presence, and character. Brewer is not present merely because she resembles the fictional Amy; she is an experienced performer whose skill helps hold the audience throughout the play, as the original review recognizes. (The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

Institutionalization and Family Secrecy

The family's decision must be understood within the history of institutional treatment of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Large residential institutions were frequently presented as places of medical care and protection, while many residents experienced overcrowding, isolation, neglect, loss of autonomy, and abuse. Families were sometimes told that placing a disabled child outside the home would protect the other children or provide specialist care unavailable in the community. Such advice created powerful pressure, especially when public education, accessible healthcare, financial support, and community services were limited. These historical conditions help explain Sarah and Bobby's fear, but explanation is not the same as justification. (Shakespeare, 2006)

The play's emotional turning point occurs when Amy's memory challenges the family's protected narrative. Jake and Maggie have been able to regard the institution as an unfortunate but settled part of the past because they did not experience it. Amy's testimony makes the past present. The siblings must decide whether to defend their parents, question Amy's credibility, or accept that the family benefited from not knowing. Ferrentino gives the disabled character narrative authority over a history that institutions and relatives have often recorded from outside. This is one of the play's most important achievements. Amy is not only the subject of a family decision; she is the witness who can judge it. (Ferrentino, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006)

Kathy's Role

Kathy is a talkative and sometimes disruptive stranger to Jake and Maggie, but she knows Amy's current life far better than they do. Her presence prevents the siblings from controlling the road trip completely. She interrupts their patronizing language, explains Amy's preferences, and exposes the distance between biological relationship and actual involvement. Kathy's behavior may appear excessive, yet her bluntness serves a dramatic purpose: ordinary politeness has allowed the family to avoid difficult questions for years. (Ferrentino, 2018)

At the same time, the play should not replace family control with professional control. Kathy is most useful when she supports Amy's communication rather than speaking over her. Disability support should enable choice, access, safety, and participation. It should not assume that a guardian or caregiver owns the person's story. The strongest moments occur when Kathy creates enough disruption for Amy to be heard and then allows Amy's own account to govern the scene. (Shakespeare, 2006)

Lighting, Backdrops, Costumes, and Sound

The original essay praises the lighting because each change in illumination reflects the intended mood. This design element is particularly important in a play that moves between time periods and emotional registers. Lighting can distinguish Sarah and Bobby's earlier story from the adult road trip

without making the two worlds feel unrelated. As the connection becomes clearer, transitions can become less protective, allowing the past to intrude visually upon the present. Light also helps the production move from broad comedy to intimate disclosure without requiring a complete scenic change after every shift. (The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

The backdrops and scenic design create the feeling of an enclosed journey. A literal automobile is not always necessary; the placement of seats, narrow acting space, projected movement, or repeated road imagery can convey confinement. The important theatrical fact is that the characters cannot easily escape one another. A hundred-mile drive becomes a pressure chamber in which irritation and memory accumulate. The visual environment should also avoid turning the institution into a sensational horror image. Suggestion can be more effective than spectacle because the emotional truth emerges through Amy's account rather than through a set designed to entertain the audience with suffering. (Ferrentino, 2018; The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

Costumes help establish character, time, and social position. Jake and Maggie's clothing can reflect their adult lives and their effort to appear competent, while Kathy's appearance may reinforce her disruptive energy. Amy's costume requires particular care. Dressing a disabled adult as though she were permanently a child would repeat the paternalism criticized by the play. Her clothes should express her own preferences, age, and cultural interests. The original review correctly observes that the costumes remain in sync with character and situation when they support rather than stereotype the performance. (Shakespeare, 2006; The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

Sound provides another emotional structure. Music and effects can cue movement, humor, sadness, and the interruption of memory. The original essay notes that the sound has a "roller-coaster" range of highs and lows, serving both happy and painful moments. The most effective design does not dictate exactly what the audience must feel. Instead, it creates continuity between the energetic road comedy and the quieter disclosure of institutional trauma. Silence can be as important as music when the family finally listens to Amy. (The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

Direction and Ensemble Performance

The director's central challenge is balancing humor and pathos without allowing either to destroy the other. If the comedy is played too broadly, Amy may become a source of novelty and the institutional history may feel manipulative. If the production becomes solemn from the beginning, the audience loses the surprise, vitality, and ordinary family behavior through which Ferrentino builds her argument. Direction must allow the characters to be flawed without making the siblings monsters or treating the parents' fear as a complete excuse. (Ferrentino, 2018; The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

The chemistry among the actors is essential because the play depends on conflict that still feels familial. Jake and Maggie should irritate one another in ways that suggest a long shared history. Kathy must be capable of dominating a scene without making Amy disappear. Brewer's performance must remain the emotional and interpretive center even when other characters speak more frequently. The

original essay's observation that the actors demonstrate teamwork is therefore more than general praise. Ensemble discipline allows changes in rhythm, interruption, and silence to reveal the family's hierarchy and its gradual reorganization. (The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

The Limits of Reconciliation

The road trip creates an opportunity for reconciliation, but the play should not imply that one conversation repairs decades of separation. Jake and Maggie can acknowledge Amy's experience, remain involved in her life, and stop treating her as a burden inherited from their parents. They cannot restore the childhood she lost or demand forgiveness as proof that they have learned. Family repair becomes ethical only when it increases Amy's recognition and control rather than simply relieving the guilt of the nondisabled siblings. (Ferrentino, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006)

This distinction prevents Amy from becoming an inspirational device. Disabled people are often expected to transform mistreatment into lessons that improve others. Ferrentino is most persuasive when Amy is permitted to retain anger, complexity, and independent desire. The audience may leave hopeful, but hope should come from the possibility of a different future relationship, not from the false belief that humor has erased the past. (Ferrentino, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006)

Conclusion

Amy and the Orphans succeeds by combining a comic road-trip structure with a difficult history of disability and institutionalization. The mood of the audience moves between laughter, discomfort, sympathy, and grief because the play repeatedly reveals that the characters who believe they understand Amy have misunderstood both her and their family. Jake and Maggie begin as organizers of the journey, while Kathy acts as a disruptive advocate and Amy becomes the person with the strongest authority to define her identity and memory. (Ferrentino, 2018)

The production's lighting, sound, backdrops, costumes, direction, and ensemble chemistry support this balance of humor and pathos. Jamie Brewer's performance is especially important because Amy is portrayed by an accomplished actor with Down syndrome rather than reduced to an idea interpreted entirely by nondisabled artists. The play's tonal inconsistencies may occasionally resemble sitcom writing, but its central emotional force remains strong. Its lasting argument is that care cannot be measured only by family intention. Genuine care requires presence, listening, respect for autonomy, and willingness to confront harm committed under the language of protection. (Ferrentino, 2018; Shakespeare, 2006; The Hollywood Reporter, 2018)

References

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