

BILLION DOLLAR BABY

a one-woman show
about excessive parenting

by

Julie Jensen

CHARACTERS

(all played by a single actress)

POLLY, a woman in her mid-to-late fifties. A theatre reviewer for a local daily newspaper and also the grandmother of a four-year-old granddaughter. She's opinionated, pops off at will, and delights in her own misbehavior.

ARDEN, Polly's son, whose manhood lies in his ability to protect his daughter.

DOREEN, Polly's daughter-in-law, Arden's wife, a smooth-talking, sure-of-herself crystal, bead and seed person.

BERNIE, Polly's granddaughter, Arden and Doreen's daughter. The center of the universe.

MARK, Polly's good friend, in his retirement, a political activist, somewhat hapless, a New Yorker.

POLICE OFFICER, young and officious.

DOREEN'S MOTHER, Southern.

SETTING

Polly's somewhat cluttered apartment with galley kitchen. The dining room has been co-opted for a home office. There are bookshelves, files, and a computer station. The place looks "lived in" and comfortable.

SCENE I

NOTE: All roles are played by the same actress.

NOTE TOO: All underscored lines are meant as direct address to the audience, whom she treats like her best friend.

ANOTHER NOTE: Permission is granted to make changes in the script to include local names and places. Such references in the script are marked with an asterisk.*

AT RISE: Morning. An empty apartment. POLLY, a woman in her fifties, enters, slightly disheveled. She punches on a coffee pot, stands there reading a playscript, marks something with a pencil.)

POLLY

All right, you have a one-person play, and the single actor plays thirty-eight different parts. Do you think that's interesting or just cheap?

(Pause.)

I think it's interesting.

(Pause.)

And cheap.

(A cell phone rings. She shouts at it.)

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I'm busy. I'm a worker.

Have you seen that play, I Am My Own Wife? It does that. Thirty-eight different roles, no exaggeration, all done by one actor.

Nine Parts of Desire. She plays maybe half a dozen roles.

Yellow Man, one woman plays two parts, maybe three. There are lots of others. It's a trend. Versions of Shakespeare are being done with four actors.

(The phone rings again. She shouts back at it.)

Sor-ry! Bus-y!

Is this what the American theatre has come to? Is this what we've contributed to the art form? More roles, fewer actors?

(She moves to the computer.)

Just like every other aspect of the American economy, fewer workers, more multi-tasking.

(The phone rings again. She yells at it again.)

Damn it, shut up! There's thinking going on here!

My son bought me that cell phone when my granddaughter was born. So he could always find me. Who wants that? I said. Who wants always to be found? What happened to the thrill of the chase?

(The phone rings again.)

That's got to be him.

(She begins searching for the phone.)

The damn thing's always lost. Now I need a
land line so I can call the cell phone just to
find the damn thing.

(She finds it under a pillow on the
couch.)

Hold that thought. One-person shows. I'm
coming right back.

(She punches it on.)

Morning, darlin'.

(There is a cascade of chatter from the
other end.)

Calm down, Arden. Calm down. She'll be all
right. Wait. Wait. Start again, deep breath,
de-ep bre-ath. She's been bitten....

She **might** have been bitten....

You **think** she **might** have been bitten.

If you only **think** it, Arden, she hasn't....
Because you'd know it if she had, Bernie would
be screaming....

All right. You found a bug on her.

(She sighs deeply.)

Yes. Those are bumbles, Arden. They don't
bite....

No, those are box elder bugs, honey,
harmless as a tree leaf....

Sugar ants, Arden. They couldn't
sting if they wanted to....

And no, do not spray that stuff all around!
Because **it's** far more dangerous than whatever
bugs you think you've sighted....

All right, all right, go ahead, catch some, good idea, and take them over to the university for identification. What a fabulous idea.

(She punches off the phone.)

My son, Arden. Absolute dare devil as a kid. Broke every bone in his body before he was twelve.

Skied backwards behind his friend's car, a dog leash tied to his waist. Fell off the garage roof constructing a slide for his skate board. Blew up the neighbor's shed trying to move a pile of lumber with a cherry bomb.

Now he has a daughter. And he's someone else. A safety freak.

The locks, the fences, the alarms, the movement sensors. Every damn child protective device they make.

You want to make a fortune? Take a bit of advice: Invest in the child protection racket.

ARDEN

Ma, you can't let Bernie out in the yard by herself.

POLLY And that's another thing. Her name is Bernice. Why do they choose the ugliest damned names to attach to their children? Bernice? That's the name of your grandmother's friend who didn't have a leg and smelled funny. It's also the name of my granddaughter. It's actually even worse than that--Alberta Bernice. But where were we?

ARDEN

Ma, you can't let Bernie out in the yard by herself.

POLLY

Why not, Arden? The yard's fenced in by a ninefoot wall, topped by rainbow razor wire. What do you mean, she can't go out in the yard by herself?

ARDEN Because you never know who's watching.

POLLY

Arden, who can see through six inches of concrete?

ARDEN

These guys get up on houses and look into other people's yards.

POLLY

What guys?

ARDEN

Pedophiles.

POLLY

Well then, why don't we build a couple of towers, put armed guards in them with machine guns and attack dogs. We can call your yard Alcatraz East.

(She laughs. Then stops.)

That's when I had to excuse myself and retreat to Bernie's room--"to think about it."

Which was when I picked up this book about child rearing through the ages.

In there I ran on to this statistic: there are fewer child abductions now than there were in the 1950s. I come running out to show them.

ARDEN Ma, those are not reliable statistics.

POLLY How do you know? This guy's a serious academic.

ARDEN They're deliberately manipulating the statistics. They don't want us to panic.

POLLY Who doesn't want us to panic?

ARDEN The pedophilia cartel.

(POLLY nods at audience.)

I tell you, there ought to be a play about this. This obsessive parenting thing. And I'd like to take this opportunity to nominate my son and his semi-precious wife, Doreen, to be the subjects. Honest to god, you should see the plans they've made for Bernie's birthday.

A military campaign could not be more complicated....

But back on task here. Focus, focus, focus.

(She types.)

"Does the one-person show mean that we are returning to primitive story telling? Gathering around the camp fire sharing myths of our common origins? Are we actually investing the single actor with shamen-like powers?"

(She reaches for the phone, calls.)

Samantha, this is Polly Parchment. Listen, tell

Bernard I'm working on that feature about the one-person show.

Tell him I'll have it by Thursday. About a thousand words. He can use it for the Sunday Arts if he wants.

No, nothing time sensitive. Thanks, pumpkin.

(She punches off the phone.)

That old fart, Bernard Snellgrove. He probably goes by Bernie at home. He and my four-year-old granddaughter share the same name!

But I've got to stay on task here.

(She returns to her article. Typing.)

"What does it mean that there are fewer and fewer people on the stage, finally only one?

What does it mean about the way we understand other people, the way we understand ourselves? Anyone can be everyone?

It sounds profound, but it may be frightening."

(The phone rings again. She checks it.)

Damn it, Arden.

(She punches it on.)

Hey, Sweetheart....The bug was a weevil. Well, well, well. The mean and evil weevil. Glad that's been settled.

Who identified it, the kid next door?....

Sorry honey, just a little levity on an otherwise dreary day....

Me? I'm working on a piece about the one-person play, why?

Let me guess, you have to go pick up two elephants and a zebra for the birthday extravaganza.

You have to take Doreen to the doctor. For a thyroid check. Arden, that woman does not need any more thyroid.

Listen, my mother was twitchy like a house fly. They gave her thyroid, and she became a gnat.

The rest of us suffered, that's all I'm saying.

No, no, you're right. Of course, you're right. Take her to the doctor.

And I'll watch Bernie. Sure. Starting when?

(She sighs, frustrated.)

No, it's all right. It's fine. I'll be there, on time, yes, Sweetheart, on time and...and on time.

(She punches off the phone. Takes a deep breath.)

God forbid that we should any of us have an idea or god forbid accomplish anything.

(She gets up from the computer. Begins straightening up the somewhat cluttered house.)

Arden and his wife, Doreen. Monarch of the realm, the Queen Doreen. (She curtsies.) For whom I am the epitome of the mother-in-law she hates. Though opposite of the classic one. Because **I'm** the libertine, **she's** the tight-ass.

Between the two of them, they are convinced that they can control the world, the entire universe. I, on the other hand, believe it's humbling to have kids, because only then do

you understand that you cannot control anything.

I call that a moment of grace. They call it a capital offense.

And you can bet they didn't want to ask me to take Bernie today. Because I misbehaved on the last occasion.

Bernie and I were going outside. It took half an hour to put on the sun screen, find the knee pads and elbow pads, adjust the helmet, the safety goggles, the driving gloves, and the tooth guard.

She's going to ride her tricycle, mind you. It's eighteen inches off the ground. I suggested that it might be more advantageous to teach her how to fall. In response to which Arden listed all the major bones in the body, which could be broken.
(Singing to a Gilbert and Sullivan patter.)
"Manacle and clavicle, tibia and fibula, Humerus and radius, scapula and dracula."

And so out she goes looking like an underwater space man, waddling like a duck in mud.

When she gets on her trike, she can't see her feet because the goggles slip down.

And she can't look left or right because the helmet strap cuts her neck.

And so as soon as we're out of sight, I remove the goggles and helmet. She's much happier and much safer. She can actually see what's coming. But then we arrive back home.

BERNIE Grammy took off my helmet and goggles!

POLLY

Doreen glowers, Arden flinches, and Bernie
grins like Patty McCormick in The Bad Seed.

I decide to move on down to Bernie's room
"to
think about it."

Where I take a solemn oath. Striving to do
better. I have **got** to do better.

I'm being unfair to them, uncharitable.

After all, they mean well.

(Short pause.)

That's what my mother used to say about
people she thought were hopeless. Anyway,
Bernie's their kid. This is their job.

(A thought lingers and she can't resist.)

Except she turns four this weekend--god bless
the holy day--and she's still nursing!

DOREEN

(Holding a large, invisable child.) She's
supposed to nurse until she decides to give
it up, Grammy.

POLLY Who
told you that?

DOREEN Her
pediatrician, of course.

POLLY

I see through that one. A middle-aged man-
called "a pediatrician"--in the advanced stages
of infantile regression accompanied by a
serious case of wish fulfillment.

DOREEN

I guess you don't know this, Grammy, but one's I.Q. is directly connected to the length of time one nurses.

POLLY

In the meantime, I see Bernie's future like the headlights of an oncoming car.

She's nine, running home twice a day at recess to get some...nursey-nursey.

She's seventeen, leaving her own junior prom to slip home for some...nurseynursey.

She's thirty-five, excusing herself from the board meeting, driven home by the company car, to get some... nursey-nursey.

But I'm practicing my swallow.

(She takes a swig of water.)

...and saying nothing.

It's like Trip to Bountiful, remember that play? She was always in trouble with her kids. That's how I feel.

I'm not a grown-up with them. I'm another child.

Only **I** have to behave. Bernie doesn't.

We're at a restaurant. Bernie is beating her silverware on the table, the chair, the wall, the floor.

I'm a little nervous. This kind of behavior makes me tense.

No one minds, no one at our table.

Everyone else minds, but they don't count, do they?

Finally, I say something.

Bernie, let's not do that anymore.

BERNIE No, I'm
making music!

POLLY
I know you are making music, but maybe quiet
music now.

BERNIE No,
this music!

DOREEN
Let her be, Grammy. She has something to teach
us.

POLLY
She's now about to lecture me on the subject of
the Azure Child. Bernie is one. They have
books on the subject, and Doreen has them
memorized. Of course, this is only the latest
in a string of fanatical answers Doreen has
found.

DOREEN The Azure Child has lived many
times, Grammy.
Many lives, many times. The Azure Child is old
with wisdom. If she is not allowed free
expression, her lessons will go unlearned.

POLLY
Bernie is cute, Doreen, charming, funny,
verbal, a million things. Maybe even azure.
But when she behaves like this, I'm hard
pressed to find the lesson.

DOREEN
You really **do** lack a spiritual dimension, don't
you, Grammy?

POLLY

So the clanging goes on. Bernie is under the table now, beating on the various legs. People's legs, table legs. I decide to challenge my daughter-in-law.

All right, Doreen, what are you learning from this?

DOREEN

I am learning that the urge to control her must be suppressed. That very well may be the reason she was put on this earth. To teach us to endure.

POLLY

Listen here, I've got too many of those people in my life already.

The state legislature, the President, the Supreme Court.

I don't know if I need anyone else--up with which I must learn to put!

That's what I wanted to say, but that's not what I did say. No, instead, I recited my mantra.

(Reciting in an exaggerated rhythm.)

How wonderfully well you've done,
How wonderfully well you're doing,
How superbly you're raising your child,
And what a treasure she
is, A gift, unique and
amazing.

And you, oh yes, and
you, A mother of
mothers.

Totally devoted, completely understanding.
Truly the parent I should have been. Amen.

The Queen Doreen grins that condescending grin and nods. That's what she wants to hear. That's what I'm on the earth to say. But of course, the mantra does not stop her. Doesn't stop Bernie either. Both of them are at it now.

DOREEN

You may not know this, Grammy, but the Azure Child is responsible for world peace.

POLLY

Well, maybe Bernie should practice that. Right now.

DOREEN

In another life Bernie was a healer. She spent at least one lifetime in India and one in Tibet.

In the last few days she has revealed to me that she was a Native American medicine man.

She lived in the Zuni Pueblo in the eighth century.

POLLY How did she reveal this to you?

DOREEN

She speaks to me without words. Sometimes when she does things that do not make sense to us, she is following the suggestions of her angels.

As you know, she's been communicating with her angels since birth.

POLLY

The angels, oh god, not the angels!

I tell you, I do not fit in this family. I'm an atheist. For me angels are little plaster

putas dripping off the balconies in old theatres.

(She returns to the desk.)

As you can tell, I'm preoccupied by that family.

I think they're making terrible mistakes.

I worry about Bernie. What will become of her?

A friend of mine is a collage artist.

Before she could talk, before she could walk, she was arranging little rocks and clumps of dirt into patterns.

What will Bernie become?

(She returns quickly to the computer and types.)

"Does the one-person play somehow go hand-in-hand with a move toward totalitarianism? Does it prepare the way for a world in which all people are represented by one actor, therefore that all people are reflections of only one point of view?"

This is so smart. Don't you think this is smart?

Sooner or later, I'm gonna think this is bullshit, but right now, it seems brilliant.

It also feels as if I could make a major breakthrough if I had just fifteen more minutes.

Ahh, but Bernie calls. (A screech.) Gram-my!

(She grabs the phone. Punches a number. Then waits. Points at the phone.)

Mark, my so-called boy friend. Perhaps after this many years, we could find a better term. **Boy** and **friend**, neither one of those words quite captures it. But since we're still sneaking around like teenagers, maybe they are appropriate.

(Leaving a message.)

Hey, Marco, it's me. I have to tend Bernie for a while this afternoon.

Then I'm reviewing something at the Acting Company* tonight. I have a ticket for you if you want to come along.

Oh, and I'm working on a piece about one-person plays. Think about that on your pee breaks. I could use some help. Tah.

(She clicks off the phone, throws it on the couch, locates her jacket.)

Mark's the local chair for the Million Mourners March, the international day of mourning for the war. To tell you the truth, he's not very good at this sort of thing. He is not, for instance, planning logistics right now. No, he's off somewhere writing anti-Bush limericks. But he cares passionately, so they put him in charge.

The two of us met at an ACLU meeting. Then when my husband got sick, he brought over a tofu casserole. Then we found out he knew all the Jim Morrison lyrics from The Doors. We all did.

We were good friends after that.

A miracle is what you find when you're not looking for anything.

(She checks the time, grabs her jacket, her purse, her keys.)

(Singing.) "Break on through to the other side. Break on through, break on through."

I can't be late. It's one of their symptoms of Alzheimer's.

(She grabs the door and opens it, then delivers a little prayer.)

Please, Jesus, help me behave. I have **got** to behave myself.

(And she moves out of the door.)

ENTR SCENE ONE

(During the following Voice Overs, we see a pile of trash illuminated behind the set. The trash is composed of used baby items: car seats, high chairs, stuffed animals, cribs, cradles, play pens and fences. We should be able to detect generally what's there, but not specifically. The effect is an overwhelming amount of stuff, all going into a landfill near you. Light should isolate a car seat at the top of the pile.)

(NOTE: Permission grated in this as well as the other Entr Scenes to suit the material to particular seasons or holidays.)

FEMALE VOICE OVER

(Comforting.) Every day, every hour, every minute, children are injured, maimed, dismembered, crushed, impaled in automobile accidents. The Decathlon convertible, invertible, revertible child restraint systems carries children safely to every destination!

Decathlon, car seat for the stars and the children of stars, includes the following patented features:

the sculpted back and base, the push-button latch and release, the patented Visa-Tether and Versa-Lether, the built-in vehicle lock-offs and lock-ons, the tangle-free polyester five-point harness, the three-position crotch strap and shoulder holder, the soft and subtle belly pad, and the patented "embraceable you" hugging harness.

MALE VOICE OVER

(In the quick style of warnings for prescription medicines.) Product not intended for infants. Not intended for children under ten pounds. Not intended for children over twenty pounds. Not intended for animals or small pets. All straps, snaps, buckles and belts must be engaged at all times. Adjustments of belts and straps must be made with every use. Product could cause injury, dismemberment, strangulation, gastric distress, or inadvertent death if not

used as directed. Not intended for children with asthma or hysteria. Not intended for children with epilepsy or psoriasis. Not intended for children who eat while traveling, those who drink on the road. Product not to be recycled or passed on. Product designed for immediate disposal when your child is finished.

(Lights out on pile of trash.)

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