

THE COLLECTION

SHARON YABLON

First produced by the Echo Theater Company, Los Angeles, CA, January 2009

Director: David Burke

Actors: Shawna Casey and Carter Jenkins

Artistic Director: Chris Fields

CHARACTERS

ANNETTE Middle-aged, well-off. There are hints of her past attractiveness, but they are fading. She's bright but has a passivity about her future.

KENNETH Teenage boy. Smart and precocious, which makes him eccentric. He relates more to adults than kids. He is quietly traumatized, as his parents' marriage is crumbling. At times he can be unstable.

TIME & PLACE

Present day. The den of an expensive "McMansion"-style house in Hidden Hills, an exclusive community at the edge of San Fernando Valley suburbia and wilderness. The play occurs during a holiday party.

THE COLLECTION SHARON YABLON

Lights up on a den in a house. Annette, in festive attire, enters. Music and voices are faintly heard from offstage. She has a drink, and is wanting to escape the party. Kenneth is in the room. She sees him and tries to mask her surprise; she was hoping to be alone.

ANNETTE Your father is telling people to come see this collection he found, in here. In Mongolia was it? *(Pause)* Why does he have a Christmas party every year when we're all Jews? I find it confusing.

(She stops in front of something.)

What are these things then? They're scary.

KENNETH There's blood on some of them. It's real. Do you know why some societies still perform sacrifices?

ANNETTE They're misogynists . . . ? Never mind, don't remember that word.

KENNETH I already know that word. It's not about an offering for the gods. They use the sacrificial victim as a scapegoat. The people in the village surround the victim and blame him for everything, and then they kill him and they all feel better.

ANNETTE *(Wandering around)* I see.

KENNETH If it's a virgin sacrifice, then that's about something else entirely.

ANNETTE What?

KENNETH Purity. Cruelty. I'm not really sure.

ANNETTE *(Looks more closely at something)* Is that human hair?

KENNETH It's mouse fur.

ANNETTE *(Looks at something else)* And this?

KENNETH A priest's robe. It's Assyrian.

ANNETTE Really?

KENNETH I don't know.

ANNETTE How old are you now?

KENNETH Fourteen.

ANNETTE Don't you want to be at the party?

KENNETH It's important that people understand what these relics are.

ANNETTE I saw a girl your age, out there.

KENNETH It's Moira.

ANNETTE Well, Moira was looking like she needed some company her own age.

KENNETH I know. I brought her to this room. But she wanted to make out. I said no, that's not why I brought you here. You're misunderstanding. And she left. I'm glad she made it back to the party. There are long corridors here.

ANNETTE Yes, your house is very big.

KENNETH Sometimes we don't see each other for days.

ANNETTE But all the other houses in the development are smaller, and the same size.

KENNETH My dad's the developer, so ours is different. Besides, he hates homogeneity.

(A clock gongs once.)

ANNETTE It's already 1 AM.

KENNETH It doesn't matter to me. I have insomnia. My parents think it's because I'm in AP English and Math. Which I am. That I'm too smart. Which I am. But it's because they're probably getting a divorce and I have to plan my future. Where will I live? In an apartment with one parent somewhere and not this house? I don't think so. I'm part of the culture of the San Fernando Valley, and I can't just move to the city. I know where all the cheap sushi here is. But I can't tell you, or else it will catch on. Have you ever been to the Castaway, in the Burbank hills above the Media Center? It's got a spectacular view, and I shouldn't have told you about it. I've heard my parents talking. They're worried because at my age they were both already screwing a lot. I'm not gay although I don't like sports, so that can be confusing. *(Pause)* I'm waiting for a suitable partner. She has to love science fiction. In the meantime, Vikki Carr has helped me to better understand women. Listen to this. That Christmas music sucks out there.

(He puts on Vikki Carr's "It Must Be Him" and it plays for a little while. Both of them listen and Annette responds to the music. The song ends.)

I'll get the sexual experience I need and will couple that with the empathy I learned from Vikki Carr songs. I'll be more marketable that way, to women.

(Pause) I'll never have to be alone.

(Not knowing what to say, Annette smiles at him and notices another artifact.)

Those are from New Guinea.

ANNETTE What are they?

KENNETH Boar's teeth. Have you ever seen a boar about to attack something?

ANNETTE No, how would I?

KENNETH Right before, their pupils change from circles to slits.

ANNETTE You've seen that?

KENNETH They're golden. Like the moon here. When it's low and full, and shrouded in smog. *(Pause)* My dad told me about them. He's seen boars. He's seen a knee-high praying mantis. It was outside his cabin door in Lamu, clicking, wanting to come in.

ANNETTE How does your mother feel when your father takes these long trips?

KENNETH Neglected, but she has affairs too.

ANNETTE *(Interested)* She does?

KENNETH I shouldn't have told you that. It's private stuff, about my family. My self-loathing could deepen now. *(Starts to get fidgety)*

ANNETTE *(Doesn't really want to)* Want a hug?

KENNETH No.

(Pause.)

ANNETTE *(Trying to be sweet)* It's okay. I'm sure you have a lot to get off your chest. Your mom is so cultured and discerning. I can't imagine who she might be having an affair with. . . . Is he at the party?

KENNETH *They.* There I go again. I hate myself. But not really, because I'm going to be brilliant. I just can't keep secrets. I tell people that up front, and that way they can decide if they want to be my friend or not. Right now I have no friends, but I'm confident that I'll find someone who has no secrets for me to tell.

ANNETTE Everyone has secrets.

KENNETH Why can't we just tell everything to people?

ANNETTE *(Agrees, smiling at him)* I don't know.

(She sits on the couch.)

KENNETH There's booze in here.

(He unlocks the desk drawer and removes a flask from within. He pours some of it into a glass and hands it to her. She drinks.)

ANNETTE My god, it's Schnapps! *(Makes her happy, seems to awaken something in her)*

KENNETH Yes, I think so.

ANNETTE *(Drinks more, stares off)* It reminds me of when I was at Vassar. In the winter we would go to the Green Mountains to ski. Brian was my boyfriend. He wanted to marry me, and I loved him. I've never loved anyone like that. But I didn't marry him. My parents talked me out of it, because Brian's family didn't have money. At one point Brian's father asked my father if he wanted to invest in something. It was such an awful, awkward scene. *(Remembering)* Brian used to talk in this Indian accent. It would make me laugh! We were so optimistic. . . . It seems like such a strange quality to me now. With our failed love affairs and careers. All those options we thought we had when we were young, running out. . . .

KENNETH Why can't you just keep doing new things?

ANNETTE After a certain age, you just can't.

KENNETH Of course you can. Home sapiens can do anything. We rule the planet for God's sakes.

ANNETTE I was so devastated when I broke up with Brian. But then time passed, and I barely thought of him anymore. And then I married someone else.

KENNETH Mr. Birnbaum?

ANNETTE *(Looks at him)* Yes.

(Pause. Kenneth approaches her and pours more of the Schnapps into her glass. He goes back to the desk.)

My husband has been having an affair.

KENNETH There's a gun in this desk.

(She laughs; he likes that he made her laugh.)

And Ritalin. Rare coins that, alone, could pay for my college.

ANNETTE *(Turns to him)* Do you think I should confront him?

KENNETH I think. Mrs. Birnbaum.

ANNETTE Annette.

KENNETH Annette. That freeways are our monuments. They're the first things that aliens will see when they come to Los Angeles. Other people had totems and

temples, or blood and fruit. But we have freeways. They're beautiful. If you stand under them, or look at them from above. They're really amazing. No other species has accomplished transportation like this. I want to be a civil engineer. I've always known that. It will save me a lot of time, that I already know what I want.

ANNETTE I've known about his affair for some time.

KENNETH Don't you like catching people in lies? I do.

ANNETTE The truth is, we reach out to whoever's there. Don't let this discourage you.

KENNETH Are you kidding? My parents have been on the brink of divorce for years.

My dad just stands there, while my mom is trying to tell him something. This isn't very good for me, to see him passive like that. He gives her the silent treatment, and it makes her talk more. You can see the fear in her eyes when nobody answers her, and there are clearly people in the room. *(Pause)* We have hundreds of steaks in our freezer. They're for the end of the world. You should see my dad's barbeque. It's top of the line and he won't let me near it, which only makes me want to blow it up. Wouldn't that be cool? But hey! It's nobody's business! Especially not yours! But I have to tell someone. I don't have a therapist. Mr. Birnbaum is always nice to me. When he comes here to drink and fool around.

ANNETTE When is that?

KENNETH I've got your attention now! Sorry, that was mean. I like you and I didn't mean to be mean.

ANNETTE I know.

KENNETH He's been coming here afternoons. At first it was to hang out with my dad.

They would drink and sit in the yard, that's why my dad ordered that umbrella from Frontgate that oscillates, so it keeps moving with the sun. I told him it doesn't matter, that the earth is falling into the sun and we're all going to die. It will be in a beautiful burst of orange and flesh and feathers. You can be scared about it, but it won't help. My dad is away a lot now but Mr. Birnbaum still comes, and Carmen serves him his drink. He called her a "dirty cancan girl" once, and she is clearly a maid. He wasn't trying to be funny. I think he really thought that.

ANNETTE *(Stands, lets it be funny)* My god, it's amazing! Nobody really knows what anyone is doing!

KENNETH Some people don't do anything. Some people have fallen through the cracks, and have nobody that knows them anymore. They're like ghosts, walking in the cities. If you're not at home where your husband thinks you are, where are you?

(Annette is saddened by something and walks to the window, looking out.)

I think Mr. Birnbaum lost his job. I heard him talking to my dad about it.

ANNETTE A very close friend of mine is in a coma.

KENNETH My dad says there are a glut of unskilled anesthesiologists. Can you believe that? How am I supposed to keep up my optimism with this kind of thing?

ANNETTE I've been going to visit her. There's a nurse there. Her name is Evelyn. She takes care of Emma. She's been very straight with me. Emma may not wake up, and if she does she will have extensive brain damage. Evelyn has a pen light and opens Emma's eyes and shines it on them. The light just glides across her eyes and they look like beautiful green marbles. *(Pause)* Emma was my friend. My only friend perhaps. I used to have so many; I don't know what happened. *(Pause)* Evelyn sits in the room with me, while I read to Emma. One day, she put her hand on my thigh, and turned my face to hers. And then she kissed me. She is not an attractive woman. I let her put her tongue in my mouth. I don't know why I did that.

KENNETH Could I film you and Evelyn?

(Annette laughs, then gets lost in thought again, which he notices.)

Maybe your friend Emma is dreaming and having the best dream she's ever had. You can't know what her experience is, and maybe it's not bad. I really want to stay in Hidden Hills, but I don't think I want to live with either of my parents. God, it's hell here. Seeing them ignore each other, and never touch.

ANNETTE Your mother was talking about how smart you are.

KENNETH What about my dad?

ANNETTE I haven't seen him all night.

KENNETH My dad is brilliant.

ANNETTE I know.

KENNETH He gave a woman in a car accident a tracheotomy once.

ANNETTE I didn't know that.

KENNETH There was a man in the car too. My dad told me to sit with him, while he helped the woman. The man was not going to make it, he said to me, but I should

be with him so he wouldn't have to die alone. A stranger was the last person he saw. *(Pause)* I have very little in common socially, with people my age.

ANNETTE I've started drinking during the day.

KENNETH I'm going to take the Schnapps back then.

ANNETTE Okay.

(Kenneth takes her drink. He locks up the flask in his father's drawer.)

KENNETH Close your eyes.

(She does, and he hides the key.)

ANNETTE I was never a big drinker.

KENNETH You can open them now. There's a bottle that's very close by and it would be easy to refill the flask, but I won't. There are a variety of people that come in here and know where things are. It could be any one of us who drank it. If I wasn't going to be a civil engineer, I would be Hercule Poirot. There's Carmen, and my mother's masseuse has been in here; he thinks nobody saw him. A Feng Shui expert came in here and seemed to recognize an idol. She said that we should get rid of it right away, that the idol has seen lots of destruction and carries the experiences with it.

ANNETTE Where is the idol?

KENNETH Over here.

(Annette follows him. They look at it.)

ANNETTE It has more of a sad face than a scary one.

KENNETH It's got some poor sucker's real teeth around its neck.

ANNETTE Sometimes in that house, in the quiet of the afternoon. I drink and I think I see things. Once I saw all of my husband's exes in our house. Some wander around drunk, like me. One had turned into a little girl.

KENNETH *(Nervous)* Annette, do you think that consciousness is a reenactment of reality, or entirely fictitious, or *(Has trouble pronouncing)* an amalgamation of the two?

ANNETTE I don't think anyone can define consciousness exactly. That's why they haven't been able to make a robot that really is like a human.

(Kenneth is impressed; he looks at her longingly.)

KENNETH No girl my age would even conceive of saying something like that.

ANNETTE I think I need to leave my husband.

KENNETH But. Well. I mean. Since Mr. Birnbaum is having an affair. What do you do? For sex, I mean? *(Pause)* You must be lonely.

ANNETTE I've started sleeping with Evelyn.

KENNETH The nurse?! Does she wear her uniform?! Does she have high heels?

ANNETTE I don't know. I don't really know anything about her.

(Pause.)

KENNETH Do you love her?

ANNETTE Don't be silly.

KENNETH Sometimes Mr. Birnbaum talks to me, when he's here. He's told me about margin trading and prostate exams. Of the exquisite pain, as he liked to put it, of hiring young women as secretaries and knowing he could never touch them. But at night. He says that when you are sleeping sometimes he looks at you and becomes overwhelmed with love. He's never loved anybody as much as you. But it is not a sexual love, and he's sorry about that.

(Pause.)

ANNETTE Did he really say that?

(Pause.)

KENNETH These artifacts need to be constantly dusted. Carmen is a good maid and her life is horrible and poor. Her only future is here, with us, and I can't say we really care about her. Her family is missing in the hills somewhere in El Salvador,

she told me. Now this house is my whole world, she said. *(Pause)* One day Mr. Birnbaum encouraged her to have a drink. So you see we have all had some of that flask. She danced around the room, with her duster. It was funny and sad. I could see her thighs under her uniform, and they had dents on them. She said that if I lived in her village in El Salvador, I would be of marriageable age. She said if I married her daughter our wedding would be a party that would last a weekend. We would dance and drink Sangria. She started to cry, and Mr. Birnbaum rubbed her shoulders. It was sweet, even though I could tell that he wanted more. I think it must be hard to be married to him.

(Annette ventures out towards the audience.)

KENNETH Where are you going?

ANNETTE I want to go outside.

KENNETH Outside?

(Annette steps off the stage and into the audience; Kenneth watches. She breathes in the air. She is happy. He joins her.)

ANNETTE I do love how it smells here. The sage. At first I didn't want to come here. I thought I would miss the city. You'll like it, Ted said. You'll feel protected. But I don't feel that way at all. It's remote here. Every sound is magnified because of the blankness of this landscape. The sunsets are so intense they're frightening, and the night curves. I do like it, I told my husband. But not for the reasons you think.

KENNETH You can see more stars out here. You can imagine dying planets. Like ours will be, someday. But it won't be so bad. In fact, it will be beautiful. There will be terror and anger. And then acceptance and maybe love. A burst of flames. And then quiet forever. There might not be day or night anymore. Just the milky silence.

(They both look out.)

END