

Excerpt from

CRAZY DRUNK

by
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CRAZY DRUNK - CAST OF CHARACTERS

EARL ROGERS - Renowned defense attorney. Age 48 in narration. Age 33 during Griffith trial. Also plays John Barrymore.

ADELA ROGERS ST. JOHNS - Popular Hollywood journalist. Earl Rogers' daughter. Age 60 in narration. Age 10 during Griffith trial. Also plays age 25.

COLONEL GRIFFITH J. GRIFFITH - Eccentric philanthropist. Age 54 during trial. Also plays himself at other ages, including post-mortem.

CHRISTINA (TINA) MESMER GRIFFITH - Eldest daughter of prominent Los Angeles family. Wife of Col. Griffith. Age 42 during trial. Also plays herself at other ages.

CHORUS ONE - Male - Also plays Priest, Horace Bell, Dr. MacGowan, Liser, Deacon Anderson, Old Juror.

CHORUS TWO - Female - Also plays Mexican Woman, Woman Who Snickers, Judge.

CHORUS THREE - Male - Also plays Attorney Gage, Joseph Mesmer, Bathhouse Attendant, Pope, Dr. Kurtz, Dr. Cohn, Jennie Mesmer.

CRAZY DRUNK - SETTING & TIME

CRAZY DRUNK flows from one time and setting to another, and characters from different times/settings co-exist onstage together. Thus, a generally open, flexible space is greatly preferred, as opposed to trying to root areas within the parameters of a concrete, naturalistic set.

That being said, there are certain portions of the play that take place in specific time periods:

- a.) The Griffith trial is in 1904
- b.) Earl's narration is in 1919
- c.) Adela's narration is in 1955
- d.) Rogers v. Rogers is in 1919
- e.) The Griffith & Tina courtship/Briswalter argument/wedding scenes are in 1886-87.

It's not always important that the audience know exactly what year any given moment is in, as long as they follow the movement of the story. As the past is very much alive in all of these characters' memories, they may enter into their past (or, conversely, the past may enter into their present) without much external change. Thus, for example, the Adela of 1955 and the Earl of 1919 need not change any part of their wardrobe in order to play scenes in 1904. Changes in lighting may accompany these shifts, but they're not mandatory. A fearless sense of flow will create the definition needed for clarity.

A voice is heard in the darkness:

GRIFFITH

On your knees! Get on your knees before me!

LIGHTS UP. TINA GRIFFITH kneels before GRIFFITH J. GRIFFITH. CHORUS 1,2,and 3 view the proceedings. The Chorus is filled with the urgency and excitement of announcing a sensational, fast-breaking news story.

CHORUS 1

Los Angeles Times!

CHORUS 2

Sunday, September 6, 1903!

CHORUS 3

Statement of Mrs. Christina Mesmer Griffith to Acting District Attorney W.P. James, September 5 About 4 P.M.:

TINA

I noticed that he looked peculiarly as he asked me the question,

GRIFFITH

Would you swear on this prayer book as you would on a Bible?

TINA

I looked at him and answered, 'Why certainly.' I then noticed the revolver which he was holding in his right hand and behind him. I said, 'Griffith, put down that revolver: why do you hold it?' He said,

GRIFFITH

You don't think I would hurt you with it, do you?

TINA

I again asked him to put it down but he did not do so. He told me to close my eyes, but I was frightened and only partially closed them. He told me to answer his questions.

Griffith pulls out a very small menu card upon which the questions are written. Keeping the gun aimed at Tina, he reads from the card.

GRIFFITH

Did you ever hear or know anything about Briswalter being poisoned?

TINA

I said, 'Why no; I know that he had a sore foot and blood poisoning from that and nothing else.' He then asked:

GRIFFITH

Have you been implicated with or do you know of any one giving me poison?

TINA

I replied, 'Why, certainly not: you surely know I have not.' His third question was:

GRIFFITH

Have you always been faithful to your marriage vows?'

TINA

I said, 'As God is my judge I have, and you know that I have.'

BLACKOUT. A LOUD SHOT RINGS OUT.

LIGHTS UP on EARL ROGERS, a well-dressed gentleman. Earl sits beside a small table with a cigarette box, a cut-glass decanter partially filled with whiskey, and a glass. Throughout the play, Earl periodically pours whiskey and drinks from the glass.

EARL

I used to say, you take the logic out of a murder trial and most times you're left with a Penny Dreadful. It isn't merely the purple tint of the reporting, no sir. *People*, in danger, in pain, they're *removed*--the words come out in cartoon balloons, an instinct planted in the intellect to grasp for posterity. One way to trick death. Of course, Tina Griffith tricked death by jerking her head back a few inches. Lost an eye, lost her good looks, must have lost a piece of her soul, poor woman. Her...love. But she's still around, probably outlive, well, a good many of us.

TINA

(calling, crankily:)

Willa? Are you bringing me my toast? Willa?

EARL

The woman had survived in full cognizance of the fact that her husband, for all intents and purposes, had murdered her. No woman should have to live with that knowledge. A primary reason I took on the case. At that time. To explain: I do not ordinarily condone men shooting women, much less their wives.

(MORE)

Nor would I take on a most unpopular case -- and I need not stress enough just how important the defense of Griffith J. Griffith was -- his donation of the park notwithstanding, the Colonel was not known to be beloved by his peers --

CHORUS #2

A midget megalomaniac. When President McKinley was in town, he actually suggested --

GRIFFITH

--I believe it would reflect well upon the President to ride through the city in the Griffith carriage. It is always beneficial to be associated with a locality's most important citizen.

CHORUS 3

He owes me money!

CHORUS 1

We were riding from the Jonathan Club into Hollywood. And in that time, in the time it takes to get from the Jonathan Club to Hollywood, he told me the same story three times. Three times! Told it twice. Then said:

GRIFFITH

Oh!--Oh!--I heard a new one. This is a good one:

CHORUS 1

--And told the same story again. Three times! Terrible story to begin with. I think he was bughouse.

EARL

No, I had to find a reason to take on the case. One might say that I had exceptional skill at finding reason where most men could not. I believed that Tina Griffith loved her husband. I felt that she had survived through sheer force of will in order to save him from a death sentence.

(He takes a sip of liquor.)

No love dies completely. It does not comprehend the logic of betrayal. Even a last remaining flicker has a potency ... unthinkable.

(Beat.)

Would that I could convince the poor woman that this man, this man who inflicted unspeakable pain upon her body and soul, that this was not a man acting in his own "sane" and "reasonable" mind, the mind of the club room and the board room and even, perhaps, the bedroom -- but another man. Another side. A proverbial Mr. Hyde -- a man on the far side of a transforming potion.

(Pause.)

My daughter Nora ... she calls herself 'Adela' ...

(MORE)

What is it about reaching the Pacific Ocean that makes people want to change themselves? EARLA (cont'd) changes a last name, but ... Nora is a lovely name. A tart tongue, that girl. She's put it to productive use. What was the phrase she used? "Self-serving". My reason for taking on the Griffith case. Smart girl. Revisionist historian. She was ten years old. At the time. Went with me everywhere.

LIGHT SHIFT to ADELA ROGERS ST. JOHNS, age 60. She speaks in the rapid-fire style of a Winchell era radio journalist, slowed only when consumed by the power of her memories, of her ghosts.

ADELA

Dear listeners, this is Adela Rogers St. Johns reporting to you from the Griffith Observatory, where any citizen, rich or poor, can look up to marvel at the heavens ... and look down to marvel at Hollywood--Land of the Nth Degree. Trucks, trailers, and cranes litter the landscape this morning, as the city's most prominent landmark serves host to the filming of Nicholas Ray's Cinemascope tale of teen delinquency, "Rebel Without A Cause". Your Mother Confessor of Hollywood feels old this morning, dear listeners, more a Custodian of Legends than Mother Confessor. As cameras capture the living onto celluloid, I feel the undeniable presence of ghosts, standing behind my shoulder, breathing lightly upon my ear. Before you think that yours truly has gone unmistakably off the deep end, let me add that these are not the ghosts of Gothic novels -- cold, clammy, floating, diaphanous--no. They are a presence. A palpable stillness. As when someone you are so familiar with stands in a doorway -- and you do not see them or hear them or smell them, but you know that their distinct presence hovers upon the threshold of the room. A loved one watching you sleep.

(beat)

I stand on this promontory and cannot help but be reminded of Mr. Griffith -- No, not the legendary Founding Father of Films, the genius who created a wondrous Babylon at the intersection of Hollywood and Sunset, no-- I'm reminded of Col. Griffith J. Griffith, donor of these 3,000 acres in which I stand. He is a memory:I do not sense his ghost -- he was a petty, inconsequential presence in life and, apparently, in death as well. But I feel the faintest whisper of his wife, a woman I never knew personally. I only knew her as a tragic figure rustling in and out of a courtroom, a muffled voice from behind a thick black veil.

TINA

DON'T KILL ME, OH DARLING DON'T KILL ME, YOU KNOW I'VE NEVER BEEN UNFAITHFUL TO YOU!

ADELA

She cried out that fateful night in September, 1903, as she knelt before her husband, her desperate plea answered by a bullet discharged from her husband's gun, striking her in the face at point blank range. Not a single member of the medical profession could fully provide an explanation for her survival. Perhaps it was a testament to divine faith.

TINA

(standing)

Griffith, put the gun away, I beg you, please put it away.

(brief pause)

Then let me pray. Give me a moment to pray.

Tina kneels and begins a murmured prayer that continues to the end of Adela's speech.

ADELA

The couple's fifteen year old son was in the very next room when the incident occurred. As a girl, I used to wonder if there was any comfort in his being spared the lurid and electrifying trial that was to follow, sequestered as he was within the home of his maternal grandmother.

EARL

(softly)

Los Angeles Times. September tenth, nineteen-aught-three.

GRIFFITH

Headline:

EARL

Colonel Griffith's Son Is Taken From Him.

GRIFFITH

"Colonel Griffith's son is to be taken away from him and given to some person whom the sick mother shall choose."

EARL

(pointed toward Adela)

"Their son, Vandell, has been Col. Griffith's companion since the tragic shooting of Mrs. Griffith, and even accompanied him to the arraignment in the City Justice Court." End quote.

ADELA

My father's ghost does not accompany Mrs. Griffith. Nor does it obliterate her. It is a louder presence, to be sure, being of my own flesh and blood. And yet it is not, not all-encompassing.

EARL

Look at me, Nora.

ADELA

I hear him say.

EARL

Look at me.

ADELA

When he asks me to look at him, it is not a request for my eyes to focus upon his visage, but for my heart to see his heart. I tried to save him from death once. Does a child betray the parent by failing to save him, or by trying to save him at all?

(beat)

As my eyes gaze outward upon this beautiful spot, this 3,000 acre haven from the struggle and heartbreak of the city, I can almost find justification for my father's decision to defend Col. Griffith. And yet I know that the source of his decision lay not in tribute to Mother Nature, but rather, in tribute to a nature of darkness, one that is born in the back rooms of clubs, in locked desk drawers, and tucked behind orderly rows of lawbooks.

CHORUS #1

Los Angeles Times! February 24th, 1904: "Griffith's legal defense is that strong drinking for fifteen years brought upon him a species of insanity which grew gradually until it resulted in a dementia of such a nature that he knew not the difference between right and wrong."

EARL

"Crazy drunk", my father called it, when the Natives turned ugly on the white man's firewater. Of course, it can happen to white men too. I called it "alcoholic insanity". A defense previously unheard of in a courtroom. I was ... profoundly ahead of my time. "Alcoholic Insanity: an incontinence of impulse due to prolonged and persistent abuse of alcohol." The eloquent language of law, a far cry from experience, reassuring in it's distance, in it's containment of the danger. It didn't take much digging for me to find out that Griffith J. Griffith been secretly tippling anywhere from a pint to two quarts of whiskey a day for fifteen years. Bootblack or tycoon, everyone seems willing to divulge the private habits of a famous personage. Particularly when the habits are linked to tragedy and the personage is one to be envied.

He pours a generous shot into his glass, lifts the glass delicately, and then downs it in one indelicate, "manly" swoop. He looks up and smiles, mischievously self-satisfied.

EARL (cont'd)

(melodramatically)

And the famous lawyer defended the violent drunk because, deep in the darkness of his soul, he felt a need to justify his own darkness, his own secret struggle with the devil's nectar.

(Beat)

Or so Nora would have you believe. A good story -- neat, aesthetically balanced, like a good, straightforward sixteen bars of music that resolve to the major chord. Might not hold up in court, hard to *presume* a man's motive and present it as hard evidence, but I bet you it would suit her beloved motion pictures admirably. Pickford could play the daughter.

"Father, dear father, come home with me now." Not that the Griffith case had any particular dearth of drama to begin with. The chief counsel for the prosecution, Attorney Gage, yes, former *Governor* Gage, saw to it that we were provided with plenty the very first day.

GAGE

(played by Chorus 3)

Mr. Sheriff, will you be so kind as to call Mrs. Christina Mesmer Griffith to the stand?

Tina, wearing a heavy black veil that completely obscures her face, walks slowly downstage.

CHORUS 1

Los Angeles Times, February 17, 1904: "She was a long time getting through the crowd,

CHORUS 2

--veiled so heavily in black that no part of her face could be seen.

ADELA

"She would not notice Mr. Griffith while she told the dramatic story of his attack upon her.

GRIFFITH

He sat far down the table, shoved along by his lawyers, helpless and impotent, watching her with troubled eyes, his face turning red and white by turns."

TINA
(from beneath veil)

End quote.

ADELA
It did not surprise me that this man and this woman were still married under the eyes of god and the law. I thought back to a distant time, before my mother left us, when I'd be put into my crib and it was still light outside and I could hear my parents' footsteps on the gravel as they set out on their evening walk. And I would climb out of the crib, yes, and lift the shade ever so slightly and I would see them walking, arm in arm, as if down the aisle, as if they'd walked down the aisle time and again, with the soft, soothing crunch of the gravel beneath their steps. And even at the age of ten, I understood that the Colonel and the woman beneath the veil were no mere strangers, but were man and wife still.

Break in tone, to one of swift movement and lightness, as Tina, and Griffith, both younger, leap up and join each other.

TINA
(tossing off her veil)
Our courtship began in the city.

GRIFFITH
Her father owned the U.S. Hotel.

CHORUS 1
Griffith had set up shop next door.

CHORUS 3
Money lending. Eight percent.

GRIFFITH
I drove her about in my carriage. It was the most beautiful carriage in town.

TINA
I never felt that I knew him at all -- or at least any better than a prospective client -- until he took me to the Rancho.

CHORUS 2
Rancho Los Feliz'.

CHORUS 1
The land he was to donate to the city.

CHORUS 3
Griffith Park.

ADELA

They rode their horses to a plateau overlooking the basin. She was a finer equestrian than he.

TINA

And we hiked a short, healthy distance to the highest peak.

GRIFFITH

She was an able climber. Her sweat was sweet to smell. Yet she carried a delicate parasol. To protect her eyes from the glare.

Griffith and Tina stand overlooking the basin.
Long pause.

TINA

It's so lovely up here.

GRIFFITH

Yes. It is.

TINA

I've visited the ostrich farm. With my niece.

GRIFFITH

Yes. The children do love the ostrich farm.

TINA

Do you ever visit the ostriches yourself?

GRIFFITH

I used to. I don't anymore. Not since the night they stampeded.

TINA

They stampeded?

GRIFFITH

Yes.

(She begins to giggle)

No, actually -- it was quite a bit more terrifying than one might think. I was awakened by one of my ranchhands. You could hear them in the distance. Thumping. No, I'm serious -- as we rode into their...herd, the horses became quite spooked. I held on for dear life, let me tell you -- the thought of being tossed among them was truly frightful. Scores of ostriches, running wantonly ...

(Tina still can't help but giggle.)

We found several dead the next morning. Their necks broken. An inexplicable phenomenon. The whole thing.

TINA

(vainly trying to be serious)

I imagine an ostrich with a broken neck is quite unsightly.

GRIFFITH

Yes.

TINA

Their tongues, I imagine--

GRIFFITH

Yes! That's exactly it. The tongues, that was the outstanding feature, they --

He closes his eyes and sticks his tongue out the side of his mouth. Tina howls with laughter. Now even Griffith can't help but laugh.

TINA

Oh, yes! Exactly how I pictured it. Oh, a frightening likeness -- no, no, no, no, I'm teasing, I'm teasing -- but you do make a clever impression.

He does the impression again, this time with a kind of "Ack" dying sound. They enjoy a good, if somewhat shy laugh together.

TINA (cont'd)

Well, my niece does love the ostriches. Except when they spit.

GRIFFITH

It pleases me that any child can visit them. Rich or poor. It's such a small gift.

TINA

It's very generous.

GRIFFITH

It's a pittance. I've prospered from this city. I think it's the duty of every man to render service to the community that has engendered his good fortune. To give back. It's my duty under god.

(Tina smiles.)

Why are you smiling?

TINA

I feel that you're making a speech.

GRIFFITH

(quietly)

What if I am? What if this means so much to me. And I want to tell you.

TINA

I'm very flattered that you'd like to tell me. It touches my heart. That you'd like to tell me. And it tells me that you have a streak of ... nobility.

GRIFFITH

I'd like to be able to give all of this land to the city. It would be the grandest park in the world. What would you think of that?

TINA

If I were truly giving as my duty under God -- and my giving was not an act of vanity--

GRIFFITH

I only mean to give with the humblest--

TINA

I don't say that you're not. But I myself would feel a duty to give to my church, not to the city.

GRIFFITH

A uniquely Catholic sentiment. I am not prone to ... indulgences.

TINA

Indulgences? Spoken as a true Methodist.

GRIFFITH

Proudly.

TINA

Yes, Griffith. Proudly.

Pause

TINA (cont'd)

I think I would like to be taken home now.

GRIFFITH

No. I know I'm not being a gentleman, but -- no. I can tell you all of my ideas and all of my beliefs and all of my dreams and none of them could express what I feel right now when I look at you on this spot, this sacred spot -- with the sun coming through your parasol and your eyes, so rich, so deep ... right now. The words cannot express, they cannot. Right now in my heart.

TINA

(somewhat dazed)

You are so many men.

WEDDING MUSIC plays. Adela, acting as Maid of Honor, places a white veil over Tina's head. Earl, as Best Man, accompanies Griffith. Griffith and Tina approach each other and stand before a PRIEST (Chorus 1), as if facing the altar.

PRIEST

You may kiss the bride.

As Griffith goes to lift Tina's veil, she begins to drift away from him as we hear:

GAGE

Mrs. Griffith, would you please lift your veil ...

A woman (Chorus #2) wearing a thick black veil steps into Tina's spot. Griffith recoils in horror.

GAGE (cont'd)

... and show the jury.

The veiled woman turns upstage. She slowly lifts the veil. The company is stunned.

TINA

Los Angeles Times, September 5th, 1903. "After an anesthetic had been administered, her left eye was removed. It was found that the bullet had struck squarely against the knife-like edge of the outer rim of the bone which forms the eye socket. A portion of this bone had been shattered and the bullet split upon it, one section passing directly through the eyeball, destroying it."