

Excerpt from Chabanais by Gary Young ©2004 Gary Young

France, 1890 - the nightlife and absinthe.
Based on the photographic essays of Brassai.
One-act drama. 30-40 minutes

SET:

Run-down barroom. The bar can be presentational. Tables and chairs, wooden with table cloths. Old bottles of wine set around for clarity. Much of this can be done presentationally, and the costumes can be suggestive rather than specific, if budget is a problem.

CAST:

LILY is 60, but looks older. She is worn down by poverty, a hard life, liquor, social unsuitability, mental illness. She is dressed in ragged layers, which might have once been elegant, but now look as if dust might fly off at the slightest touch. She wears enough perfume to cover up her hygiene, but her nicotine stained hands and mostly gray, ratty hair, tell much about her. Her face is without makeup except for bright red rouge on cheeks and bright red lipstick. She sometimes wears glasses, stored around her neck. She has deep, dark circles under her eyes. She is a daily fixture at the bar.

BRASSAI, 38, wears a black mourning coat, white shirt and tie. His long salt and pepper hair cascades over his jacket theatrically. Incurably curious, he looks healthy. An outsider, he is free of the ravages of absinthe.

GUILLIARD, 32, wears an elaborate, bloussy white shirt. His hair is uncombed. His hand shakes a little, especially when he is trying to do anything with it, such as picking up a glass. He frequents the bar.

KIKI, 29. A popular singer and courtesan. She is very aware of her popularity and uses it to the fullest. She is also a loner and often refuses company, making her even more in demand. Her dark hair and exaggerated eye makeup add to the mystery. She is very sure of herself, if not completely aware of the shaking in her right hand, not from Absinthe, but from a poison used as a sexual stimulant, non-fatal, if used in proper dosage, but not without a certain cost.

TOUR LEADER, 29. (Can double with KIKI)

TOURIST, JOURNALIST 25 (Can double with Galliard)

LILY

This suffering and the company I keep. But why hurry?
What if there is nothing but oblivion awaiting me?

BRASSAI

How would that differ from your life now?

GUILLIARD

It would not.

BRASSAI

I'm going home. (*Gives a look to both, as if asking permission*)

GUILLIARD

You are rich. You are lying about your poverty. A lie about poverty is the worst kind. It belies charity.

BRASSAI

No. I have not two centimes to rub together.

GUILLIARD

Your profession does not provide for you?

BRASSAI

I have no profession. I am a physician. And a writer and photographer by avocation.

LILY

I do not care about physicians. They cannot help me.
Tell me. Your photographs. Tell me about them.

BRASSAI

Pictures of people and places. Then I write the story apropos the photograph.

LILY

Do you sell the photographs?

BRASSAI

I keep them in my flat. Some in my dresser, some on the walls and some scattered through the flat.

LILY

You will take a photograph of me? And what will you do with it?

BRASSAI

I might. I might present you with a copy. I do other things, too, with my photographs. I might sell them or include them in a collection for historical perspective. Or I might keep them in a box.

LILY

That sounds boring, as if history cares about you or your photographic acquaintances. You should keep them in a dark room, accessible only to you. Then you will die and your photographs will be discovered. All those images, everyone in the pictures will be dead and gone, and the world will wonder who they are. You will tell them, in your words, and a famous book will be made. But you will not know because you will be dead.

BRASSAI

Good idea. I'll darken my room the minute I return.

GUILLIARD

I will show you my photographs one day.

LILY

He takes a different kind.

GUILLIARD

How do you know, Lily. You have never seen them.

LILY

Guilliard, that is because you have none. You are a liar. (to BRASSAI) I do not talk to strangers. I have seen you here three times and twice you did not introduce yourself. You wished to remain anonymous? Discretion is not practiced here, you know. It's no matter. I do not speak to people the first time they visit Chabanais. Scarcely the second visit, and only upon rare occasion the third. I may decide to remain mute to you from this moment.

GUILLIARD

She spoke to the idiot Monsieur Memoir the first time. The idiot. He pissed on the table as Lily introduced herself.

LILY

He is a swine, but at that moment, he possessed a certain chic naïveté, especially after his life and personality

was revealed.

GUILLIARD

More than his personality was revealed that day. He is an idiot. He has no discernible personality and he is a rag picker. An idiot. I was compelled to clean up the piss because of my indebtedness. It smelled of asparagus and alcohol. I owed 100 Francs, spent on Absinthe and forgetfulness. My debt was lowered two Francs for that undertaking. I now owe 135 Francs. If you piss on the table, I'll clean it up and reduce my obligation to 133 Francs.

BRASSAI

I don't have to go now. Maybe later.

LILY

You will not piss on the table. You must respect this place. You are not an idiot. I will not speak to you if you piss on the table.

GUILLIARD

To get her to shut up would be worth it (turning to BRASSAI). What is your name, Monsieur Writer-Photographer-Physician?

BRASSAI

Call me Brassai.

LILY

Now you say your name. Only after prodding. (to GUILLIARD) You see? A strong name. A name of distinction, possibly nobility. He would never piss on the table. He would never piss on the table of a dying woman. One who is rich.