

A nontraditional family



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Most Canadians when asked what the traditional family looks like will tell you that there is a mother, and a father, and their children, living together, and providing for each other. This is the standard, and simple, image of a family. Joan MacLeod takes the traditional family unit and gives it a modern, and some would say, more realistic, tweaking, twisting, and repackaging for today's society. In her play *Toronto, Mississippi* she creates a family unit consisting of, Jhana, a mentally handicapped girl, Maddie, her overprotective mother, Bill, their male boarder, and King, her mostly-absent father. Each character plays a nontraditional family role and Bill even takes on multiple roles. It is a complicated family situation. This family may be full flaws but it is also full of love and loyalty. Each character sincerely cares about what is best for Jhana and they each show it in their own way. They are not organized into the traditional roles but they each give Jhana a gift that comes from the heart.

Jhana's mother, Maddie, is the provider for, and the protector of, the family. As a single mother she has taken on, not only providing for Jhana financially by working full time but also making sure that Jhana is protected from the outside world. Maddie is the disciplinarian and the ruler of the house, playing both mother and father. She makes sure Jhana brushes her teeth, cleans her room, and does not touch strangers on the bus. She works very hard to keep her daughter safe, physically and emotionally, but in that struggle she does not know how to let her daughter grow up. It is Maddie who is suffering from a broken heart, from the loss of her husband King, as well as their marriage, and she is the one who needs to be cared for and protected from life's hardships. Although she lovingly gives everything she knows how to give to

her child, it is not until she learns to protect herself that she can stop overprotecting Jhana and let her grow up.

Bill, the boarder, struggles to find his place within the family. He takes care of Jhana. He stays home with her and becomes the domestic role model. He takes on the place of Jhana's mother. He patiently teaches her real life skills through coaching, role playing, advising, and he shows her love and acceptance . He wants to be part of the family but he does not know where he fits in. He is not a traditional father, or brother, or husband, or lover. What he is is the beautiful flawed heart that loves to give. He gives Maddie a new vision of family and he frees her from her past. He gives Jhana what her parents cannot; the romantic first kiss that she has been longing for. He gives her this kiss as a loving gift and protects her dignity at the same time. By playing all these different roles he embodies the mall. He becomes the father, brother, husband, and lover, as he embraces the essence of the role from his heart and as he gives each one to his adopted family he becomes an integral part of the whole.

The father, King, can not give to his daughter his life. He spends his time pursuing his own dreams. King is essentially selfish and although he says kind words to his daughter he is not really a father to her. He is always on the road and is not there for the day to day work of raising his child. He breezes in and out of her life. In a traditional family the father would be the bread winner. He would love and support the mother and make her feel safe and he would protect and provide for his child. King is not this kind of father although sometimes he wishes he were. By being outside of the traditional role, and by being a dreamer, he gives to Jhana the gift of hope. Jhana is

different and so is her father. It is in recognizing her differences and encouraging her to reach for her dreams that he is able to support her. Whereas her mother is trying to protect her, her father is trying to free her. He tells her " Sky's the limit for you. Don't forget that"(p. 376). While everybody else is trying to teach Jhana her limits, or how to stay safe, or how to be appropriate, King is teaching her to never give up.

This play is not meant to represent the perfect nuclear family. It is meant to show the deep and complex layers that take place inside all families. There is a tender humanity as each character gives to the child what is his or her gift to give. It is not about which role we play, but how well we play it.