

PERUSAL SCRIPT

THE SCARLET LETTER

A Play

Adapted from the Nathaniel Hawthorne novel by

Jenifer Nii



Newport, Maine

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THE SCARLET LETTER

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THE SCARLET LETTER

CAST: 2f2m

Hester Prynne, late 20s. Wearer of the scarlet letter.

Arthur Dimmesdale, perhaps a bit older than Hester. The town man of God. Roger

Chillingworth, older than both Hester and Arthur. Hester's former husband.

Pearl Prynne, age undetermined. Hester's daughter. Described as an otherworldly "imp", "nymph", "demon".

SETTING:

A village in 1600s Puritan America

THE SCARLET LETTER received its world premiere at Plan-B Theatre Company April 12-22, 2012. The production featured the following cast and creative team:

PEARL: Claire Wilson

HESTER: Lauren Noll

DIMMESDALE: David Fetzer

CHILLINGWORTH: Mark Fossen

Director: Cheryl Ann Cluff

Stage Manager: Jennifer Freed, Sound Designer: Cheryl Ann Cluff, Costume Designer: Phillip R. Lowe,

Lighting Designer: Jesse Portillo, Props Designer: Jerry Rapier, Set Designer: Randy Rasmussen

Jenifer Nii has had five plays produced at Plan-B Theatre Company. They include **THE SCARLET LETTER** and **SUFFRAGE**, which garnered back-to-back nominations for the American Theatre Critics Association/Steinberg Award for Best New American Play Produced Outside New York. **THE WEIRD PLAY** will premier at Plan-B in 2018.

THE SCARLET LETTER Adapted for the stage from Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic American novel by Jenifer Nii 75 minutes, 2f2m. Simple setting. About 80 minutes. 1600s costuming. (**For Professional, College/University, and Community theaters.**) Evil, sin, nature, a scarlet letter, a punishing scaffold. Adulteress Hester Prynne must wear a scarlet A on her chest as a constant reminder of her shame. Her illegitimate daughter is truly the Pearl purchased at great price. Her lover remains unidentified and is wracked with guilt. Her husband seeks revenge. Highly theatrical, this play uses only four characters to completely capture the center of the story of inequality, prejudice, judgment. Nominated for the 2012 American Theatre Critics Association/Steinberg Award for Best New American Play Produced Outside New York. **ORDER #3215**

THE SCARLET LETTER

SCENE ONE: *Lights down. A whisper grows. "Hussy hussy hussy...whore whore whore...hussy hussy hussy...whore whore whore..." Lights up quickly on HESTER, standing alone on the scaffold. She wears a plain gray dress on which is pinned an ornate, lush, letter "A". At first HESTER is withdrawn and timid. Then slowly, she straightens her shoulders and looks out over the audience. PEARL enters.*

PEARL: *(To audience)* Isn't she beautiful? My mummy, up there on the high stage. See how regally she stands, and how smartly. The letter affixed to her gown is an "A", that she embroidered from the most luxurious scarlet and gold. With her own hands she stitched the emblem there, just as you see it now.

(Short beat.)

She is beautiful...my mummy.

(Examines audience.)

Why do you look at her so? Why do you look at her so? You! Who are *you*? Through sideways glances you gaze at her and hiss with slick forked tongues your judgment and condemnation...I can see, you know. I can see your heart, the slime and the ooze and the darkness in each of you. I can see.

(CHILLINGWORTH enters from dark. HESTER, scanning the audience, sees CHILLINGWORTH. A moment of recognition, then CHILLINGWORTH puts his finger to his lips to signal "Shhhhhhh..." Lights up further to include DIMMESDALE.)

HESTER: *(Beat. To Dimmesdale)* You have asked, and I have answered.

DIMMESDALE: Hester Prynne, if indeed I am responsible for the soul of all who seek solace in this congregation, I am compelled to speak: if revealing the name of the man who shares your shame brings you nearer your God and your salvation, I charge you do not pity him or shield him from that which is his. Speak!

CHILLINGWORTH: *(Softly)* Speak, woman! Give the child her father.

HESTER: I will not.

DIMMESDALE: What can your silence do for him, except compel him to add hypocrisy to sin?

(Beat. HESTER is unmoved. DIMMESDALE pleads)

Woman, please!

HESTER: I will not speak, sir. I will stand here three hours as my sentence requires. But I will not speak.

DIMMESDALE: You would rather the prison walls? You, with the infant child?

HESTER: I will pay for my sin.

DIMMESDALE: You will wear the adulteress' mark all the days of your life, Mistress Prynne! You would choose such a life of hardship, such ignominy, when disclosure and repentance may avail to take the scarlet letter from your breast?

HESTER: The scarlet letter is mine, and its fire leaves a scar too deep that even if I could take it off, I would still bear the mark of my sin, and his. My child must seek her father in Heaven, for she will never have one while she lives on earth.

PEARL: *(To audience)* Now do you see? Is she not...beautiful?

(LIGHTS crossfade)

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SCENE TWO: *A prison cell. PEARL sleeps. HESTER watches over her, concerned. CHILLINGWORTH also, holding a cup. Nearby are containers for tonics and medicines.*

CHILLINGWORTH: She quiets.

HESTER: Thank you.

CHILLINGWORTH: *(Mixing another tonic)* I am sad that you thought so little of me, Hester Prynne. If the child were ours together, I would provide the same attention and care.

(Hands her a flask)

Here. No tonic can heal the torment of sin, but this will provide some measure of physical comfort.

(HESTER hesitates)

Do you know me so little, Hester? Do you think me so petty? If I dreamt of revenge, I could not do better than to let you live.

(Short beat)

So live. Carry your doom with you, before them, and the man you called your husband, and that child.

(HESTER drinks, gives CHILLINGWORTH the flask.)

I had no right to believe that someone like you might long remain with a creature like me. That men called me wise...how could I believe that that could mask the truth of my deformity in a true woman's fantasy?

HESTER: I was frank with you from the start. I felt no love.

CHILLINGWORTH: Yes. It was my folly, and I have said as much. But was it so wild a dream—cold as I was, somber as I was, misshapen as I was—to want the happiness so many others feel and have felt? I gave you my heart, and I hoped. And it was folly.

HESTER: I have wronged you.

CHILLINGWORTH: *(Beat)* I did not wish for you to be alone.

HESTER: I know.

CHILLINGWORTH: It should have been I who—

HESTER: If I did not believe I could establish a home, I would not have tried. *(Beat)* I am glad you are well.

CHILLINGWORTH: *(Softer)* Thank you.

HESTER: Let us have peace between us.

CHILLINGWORTH: In my eyes the scales are balanced.

(Short beat)

But Hester, I cannot...the man who wronged us both still lives! Who is he?

HESTER: Do not ask me. I did not betray him in public. Nor will I in private.

CHILLINGWORTH: No?

HESTER: No.

CHILLINGWORTH: Woman, do not underestimate a man who is willing to give everything, devote everything, do anything to find the truth.

HESTER: Why can you not leave it be? You say yourself that I am punished. Is that not enough?

CHILLINGWORTH: For you, yes. Not for him.

HESTER: But you are free, Roger! You can begin your life anew—

CHILLINGWORTH: *(Scoffs)* Life? What life can a man live in the face of such betrayal? You can keep your secret from the whole of everyone else, but make no mistake: I will seek this man as I have sought truth in

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books, and gold in alchemy. I will find him, and I will see him tremble.

HESTER: Roger...

CHILLINGWORTH: Oh, do not worry. I have no desire to interfere with Heaven's retribution, or to damage his precious reputation. Clearly he *is* a man of reputation, else you would have none of this...

(Motioning around him.)

So. As you once called me "husband," and as you say you want for peace between us, do this: Keep my secret as you keep his.

HESTER: Why are you doing this?

CHILLINGWORTH: Why? Why, why, why, why, why... These people know of me what I have told them, nothing more. The man you called your husband is dead. The empty vessel that remains *will* be filled, and *you* have no right... Do not fail me in this, Hester. Your man's career, his reputation, his life are in my hands.

HESTER: I will keep your secret.

CHILLINGWORTH: Swear to it.

HESTER: I swear.

CHILLINGWORTH: Louder.

HESTER: I swear!

CHILLINGWORTH: Good.

(Beat. He turns to go. Motioning to PEARL)

She is lovely. A beautiful girl, like her mother.

(LIGHTS Crossfade)

SCENE THREE: *HESTER and PEARL have been released from prison. Now at home, a spare space, HESTER doing needlework. PEARL playing beside her.*

PEARL: These are for?

HESTER: Governor Billingham.

PEARL: Why is it that the roundest men desire such womanly gloves?

HESTER: Would that I knew, dear Pearl.

PEARL: Does he thank you for his glimmering hands? Do any of them?

HESTER: They pay me sufficient to pay our debts. That is enough.

PEARL: Is it?

HESTER: Do you want for anything, little girl?

PEARL: Candy. And a puppy to call my own.

HESTER: Were we as wealthy as Governor Billingham himself, you would still not have a puppy.

PEARL: *(Snorts)* Governor Billingham. Round as a hog, voice of an ass. *(Makes donkey sounds.)*

HESTER: Hold your tongue, Pearl.

(PEARL grabs her tongue.)

Listen to me.

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(PEARL sighs, positions herself dramatically to listen)

You mustn't speak ill of the governor.

PEARL: You said I mustn't lie.

HESTER: There is a difference between knowing the truth and speaking it.

PEARL: What good is knowing, then?

HESTER: (Exasperated) Pearl...

(PEARL has already returned to her playing, enacting a battle scene)

PEARL: Oh yes? You dare speak such to *me*, dragon? Whore, you say? You pea-brained, smoke burping ignoramus. Who are you to call anyone a whore, or a bastard?

HESTER: Language!

PEARL: Do you know to whom you speak? I will tear your limbs from your scaly body. I will deliver you in pieces to your own slobbering mother, whose idiocy makes her worse than a whore.

HESTER: (Warning) Pearl...

PEARL: (Overlap) Her shriveled heart could not bear up under a wisp of wind, let alone the weight of a gold-enameled scarlet letter.

(Battle sounds, screaming death, etc.)

Ha! Fly away, coward. That's right. Fly away.

HESTER: What are you, child?

PEARL: I am your little Pearl, mummy.

(Gets up, begins to dance and twirl)

HESTER: You are not my child, You are no Pearl of mine!

(Semi-playfully)

Tell me what you are, and who sent you!

PEARL: Tell *me*, mother! Tell me!

HESTER: Well, if you were my Pearl, I would say that your Heavenly Father sent you.

PEARL: Silly!

HESTER: (Stops PEARL from dancing. Seriously now) You mustn't ever say that. Do not let anyone hear you say that.

PEARL: Then what would you have me *say*?!

HESTER: What I have taught you to believe!

PEARL: "God sent us all into the world, and I am his child."

HESTER: That's right.

PEARL: *This* is what I should believe?

HESTER: Yes!

PEARL: (Beat.) God must not be well. To have sent such horrible, unfinished children into such a world. He must not have been well at all.

(LIGHTS crossfade)

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SCENE FOUR: DIMMESDALE and CHILLINGWORTH are out on a walk. They stop to admire some foliage.

CHILLINGWORTH: *Scutellaria lateriflora*. A mild relaxant, used to treat nervous headaches, neuralgia and sleeplessness, among other things

DIMMESDALE: Remarkable.

CHILLINGWORTH: My study of alchemy distinguished me as an intellectual, but it pales in comparison to the many secrets I learned during my captivity.

DIMMESDALE: I have heard stories of dark magic among the natives.

CHILLINGWORTH: From the so-called civilized townsmen, no doubt.

DIMMESDALE: *(Smiling)* Well. We are pleased and blessed that you have come. We have done what we could to care for our own, but I fear it was woefully little. It is grace indeed to have a true physician among us.

(Beat)

Is it very strange, all of this, after so long in the wild?

CHILLINGWORTH: At times... There were many days when it was quite... when one might be tempted to forget his better self and resign to the more primitive one. Kill them? Join them? Believe them? Despise them? Is there a place for charity in the soul of a man reduced to such?

(Beat. Regaining composure.)

But who am I to speak of such things, as if I alone experienced hardship? How commonplace it must sound to you who hears the secrets of an entire people!

DIMMESDALE: Not at all. I am sorry for your suffering

(Embarrassed laugh)

Such touching words of comfort. Forgive me.

CHILLINGWORTH: No need.

DIMMESDALE: *(Beat)* Master Chillingworth, may I ask—

CHILLINGWORTH: Anything.

DIMMESDALE: Not as your pastor, not before God, but solely—

CHILLINGWORTH: --a friend.

DIMMESDALE: Thank you.

(Beat)

In those moments you spoke of, when circumstances bade you choose, how did you do it?

CHILLINGWORTH: Choose?

DIMMESDALE: Between your better and weaker self.

CHILLINGWORTH: I suppose the answer depends on which you believe I chose.

DIMMESDALE: Oh, I would not presume...

CHILLINGWORTH: *(Waves him off.)* Quite all right.

(Short beat)

For better or worse, minister, I chose then what I have always chosen.

DIMMESDALE: Which is?

CHILLINGWORTH: What I wanted most.

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(Short beat)

Now. Tell me: Is there nothing I can do for you?

DIMMESDALE: No, no.

CHILLINGWORTH: You grow thinner and more ashen each day. Each day more weary. I see it, you know, and I am not the only one. The young women of the town let forth a collective wail for their beloved, dashing minister.

DIMMESDALE: *(Clutches his chest)* Please, do not make me laugh.

CHILLINGWORTH: See? When even joy compounds one's pain, this is not good, sir. You must rest. There is perhaps a poultice...

DIMMESDALE: Thank you, but I want for nothing.

CHILLINGWORTH: You are heavy laden.

DIMMESDALE: Were it God's will, I could be content if my labors and my sins and pains shortly ended with me. I pray let them soon bury what of me is earthly, and let the spiritual go with me to my eternal state.

CHILLINGWORTH: Such saintly men, you ministers! So eager to shrug off this mortal coil and stroll the golden streets of the New Jerusalem arm-in-arm with your God.

DIMMESDALE: Would that I was such a man.

CHILLINGWORTH: Why is it good men who think so little of themselves, and so much of their "sins"? Stupid men everywhere see such handsomeness in themselves! Never the good men.

DIMMESDALE: *(Short beat)* Shall we continue our walk?

CHILLINGWORTH: You have rested enough?

DIMMESDALE: *(Fakes enthusiasm/strength)* You were right, doctor. The fresh air does me good. *(Quieter)* And, I do enjoy our conversations.

CHILLINGWORTH: As do I.

DIMMESDALE: My position among men can be quite lonely, you know. 'Tis true I am a minister first, and it is a blessed calling to help and comfort wherever I can. But I am also a man. I am— It can be quite lonely.

CHILLINGWORTH: I would like to know this man. Of course, I wouldn't presume the same power to help, and comfort that God grants his chosen, but perhaps I may serve as a kind of...worldly confidante.

(Touches his arm gently)

Let me tend to you.

DIMMESDALE: *(Pulling away uncomfortably)* You have been too generous already. Spending so much time with this tedious, sickly man of God.

CHILLINGWORTH: Oh, my motives are purely selfish.

DIMMESDALE: Really?

CHILLINGWORTH: Yes indeed. You intrigue me.

DIMMESDALE: Ha! I?

CHILLINGWORTH: *(Clapping him across the back)* Of course, minister. We are men of intellect! Who else would engage with me about life and death, and theology and philosophy? The others would sooner discuss cattle or the state of the wheat. Yes. I have found our companionship quite edifying.

(DIMMESDALE does not hold up well under the back-clapping. CHILLINGWORTH directs him to sit down again.)

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There, there.

DIMMESDALE: Thank you.

CHILLINGWORTH: Sit and breathe.

DIMMESDALE: I should not be so delicate.

CHILLINGWORTH: (*Beat, while DIMMESDALE recovers*) Are you any better? The women will kill me if I have broken the minister.

DIMMESDALE: I am fine. And no more talk about the women.

CHILLINGWORTH: Why? You are an elegant young man in a town brimming with inelegant ugly people! Look at me! It is only natural that our maiden folk are drawn to you. You could have your pick, you know, were you to choose.

DIMMESDALE: My calling must take precedence. Always. No, for me, my calling must rise above all. To serve, and do the will of God, there must be a singularity of focus...

CHILLINGWORTH: You are enigmatical, sir! So charitable and well-disposed...and yet there is mystery about you. At the same time there is something hidden, is there not?

DIMMESDALE: (*Short beat. Taken aback*) I suspect that all men are hidden to one extent or another.

CHILLINGWORTH: True, true. We must all keep our secrets, mustn't we? Here, where we are all so committed to ensuring the uniform, righteous exaltation of all. Lest the secret sin of one reveal the naked iniquity of all, God forbid.

(*Beat*)

Come. Let us walk.

SCENE FIVE: *DIMMESDALE calls on a panicked HESTER. PEARL plays quietly by herself.*

HESTER: Oh thank God.

DIMMESDALE: What is it?

HESTER: You must not let them do this.

DIMMESDALE: I cannot—Mistress Prynne...

HESTER: They can do what they want to me. Prison. The pillory. The scarlet letter on my breast. They can mock and shun and condemn. Let them! These are the wages of my sin, which I willingly pay. I have never asked for absolution, or mercy or even lenience.

DIMMESDALE: It is true, you have not.

HESTER: Then *help* me!

DIMMESDALE: But...Do you not think it better for your little one if she were dressed conservatively, disciplined strictly, and taught the true way to live?

HESTER: Have I not done as much? Do you not think me a fit mother for my only child?

DIMMESDALE: Of course. But her life might be easier if—

HESTER: Easier! We have both seen what becomes of those who choose a life of "ease".

(*Grabs at the scarlet letter*)

I alone, I can teach her what is to be learned from *this*! What this badge of shame teaches me every day

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and is teaching me right now! These lessons will – *must* – make my child wiser and better, even if they can do me no good. Even though I have fallen, yet she may not!

(Desperately, to PEARL)

Pearl! Tell this man who it is that made you. Tell him all you have learned.

(PEARL does not respond. She is playing)

Pearl! Listen to me!

PEARL: *(She speaks when she wants to speak, in her own due time)* I will say all that you want to me to say, mummy, if Mister Reverend Dimmesdale will tell *me* why there is a shadow always and ever so close about him, and why he holds his hand always over his heart.

HESTER: Not now!

PEARL: *(Not listening)* Tell me why he speaks so freely to you and me in secret, but never before Piggy Bellingham or anyone else.

(To DIMMESDALE)

Tell me, Mister Reverend, and like a good little girl I will tell you all that you ask.

DIMMESDALE: Child...

HESTER: God gave me the child—

PEARL: *(Interrupting)* I am a rose, plucked from the wild bush that grows near the gray prison door.

HESTER: *(Overlap)* Stop it this instant!

(To DIMMESDALE)

Do you not see? She is my compensation for all that has been taken from me. She is my Pearl, purchased at great price.

HESTER and PEARL: She is my happiness. She keeps me alive.

HESTER: She alone has the power to punish me for my sin, and *you will not take her from me!*

(Exasperated, she grabs his shirt)

Speak for me! You are my pastor! You know me better than all those who stand and judge me. You know what is in my heart, and what are a mother's rights. You of all men know how strong they are when she has nothing besides her and the scarlet letter. Do something, Reverend Dimmesdale. *Do. Something!*

DIMMESDALE: Do you not think I want to

(Motions to PEARL)

This child, born of its father's transgression and its mother's disgrace. Do you not see how this blessing was meant to keep the mother's soul alive, and the *miracle* God wrought when he sent the child to her care to raise in the path of virtue? To remind her of her sin, yes. But also to teach her that if she brings the child to heaven, the child will bring her mother there? Oh, woman, do you not see how the sinful mother is luckier than the sinful father?

PEARL: *(Short beat.)* I have no father.

(LIGHTS Crossfade)

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SCENE SIX: *DIMMESDALE enters his quarters. CHILLINGWORTH is seated at a table, mixing and grinding herbs. He does not look up when DIMMESDALE arrives.*

CHILLINGWORTH: *(Quick)* Forgive the intrusion, Reverend. I seem to have misplaced my key again, and our dear landlady is absolutely nowhere. Where does a woman like that go? I have no idea. Fortunately, I found your door unlocked.

DIMMESDALE: Yes, I—

CHILLINGWORTH: I simply could not wait forgive me but look here good man!

(Holds up a bunch of dark, flabby- looking herbs)

I found these growing I will have you guess where? No, you will never guess because it is really quite remarkable. I found them growing on a grave that had no tombstone. No cross announcing the dead before God.

(DIMMESDALE, exhausted, does not reply)

Just outside the door!

(Beat)

In the graveyard!

(Beat)

Are you quite all right?

DIMMESDALE: I *am* rather tired at the moment. It has been—

CHILLINGWORTH: I would not disturb you otherwise, but do you not find it miraculous that this blackness would spring from the dead man's heart, reaching up through all the weight of the earth? The hideous secrets that must have been buried with him! He would have done better to confess in his life. Then perhaps something a little pretty might have grown there instead.

DIMMESDALE: They are—are they weeds?

CHILLINGWORTH: Growing on a grave, yes!

DIMMESDALE: And you find them...representative...

CHILLINGWORTH: A communicae from the netherworld!

DIMMESDALE: Master Chillingworth, you know of my deep respect for you.

CHILLINGWORTH: Inevitably followed by an “however”...

DIMMESDALE: Might it be that they are more representative of...a... lack of fastidiousness on the part of the gardener?

(Beat. Returning to CHILLINGWORTH's earlier supposition)

It might be that the dead man wanted to, but could not.

CHILLINGWORTH: Confess?

DIMMESDALE: Yes.

CHILLINGWORTH: What would prevent a man from confessing? The laws and powers of nature call for it, so much so that these black weeds have snaked forth from his heart to manifest his hidden crime.

DIMMESDALE: This is all fantasy.

CHILLINGWORTH: Fantasy!

DIMMESDALE: Weeds!

CHILLINGWORTH: A sign!

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DIMMESDALE: Of what? It is fantasy to believe that there exists a power other than the Divine that can disclose the secrets of a man's heart. And man must hold them until that day.

CHILLINGWORTH: This is the Reverend's reading of Holy Writ.

DIMMESDALE: It is. And at that day, Master Chillingworth, those who hold these miserable secrets will yield them up with unspeakable joy.

CHILLINGWORTH: Then why not reveal them *here*? Why not now, if there is such joy to be had?

DIMMESDALE: (*Beat.*) Some do.

CHILLINGWORTH: Says the grateful man of the cloth.

DIMMESDALE: But—but...suppose for a moment that—guilty as a man may be—he retains a zeal for God's glory and the welfare of man. He shrinks from revealing himself black and filthy because what good could he do then for men or for God? And so, in unutterable torment he finds he must go on appearing pure as new-fallen snow, while his heart is speckled and spotted with iniquity.

CHILLINGWORTH: The unutterable torment! His speckled, spotted heart! This man deceives himself, Reverend! He fears only the shame that rightfully belongs to him! This "zeal for God", these "holy impulses" may well throb in his heart, but if he truly seeks to glorify the Divine, let him *not* lift unclean hands toward heaven *or* his fellow man. If he truly seeks to serve his fellow men, let him do it by making manifest the power and reality of *conscience*, which commands him "Repent!" Would you truly have me believe, oh wise and pious friend, that this show of "unutterable torment" is better than God's own truth?

DIMMESDALE: (*Beat. Softer.*) You are a physician indeed, Master Chillingworth, confident in his ability to discern disease—of the soul as well as the body, it seems.

(Short beat. Offstage, the sound of a child's laughter. PEARL and HESTER appear. They are "outside", in the graveyard. PEARL is skipping from gravestone to gravestone, humming.)

PEARL: (*As she lands on each grave*) Dead, dead, dead.

(Stops and examines a grave stone)

Really dead.

CHILLINGWORTH: That child...Look at her!

DIMMESDALE: (*Envious*) Yes...

CHILLINGWORTH: What is she?

PEARL: (*Sees the men, stops short and runs back to HESTER*) Come away, mother! Come away or the devil will get you. He has the minister already, but he won't get little Pearl! Come away!

(PEARL pulls HESTER offstage)

CHILLINGWORTH: She runs with abandon, seemingly without the slightest capacity for shame or love or solemnity.

DIMMESDALE: (*Small beat*) She is free.

CHILLINGWORTH: Does it come from her mother, do you think?

DIMMESDALE: I'm sorry?

CHILLINGWORTH: Think what you will of her faults, but Mistress Prynne has none of the humiliation or hidden sinfulness you say is such agony for people to bear. Is Hester Prynne less miserable because of the scarlet letter on her breast? What do you make of it? Is *she* free?

DIMMESDALE: (*Small beat*) She has lived well, considering.

CHILLINGWORTH: (*Beat*) You asked my judgment regarding your health.

DIMMESDALE: I did.

CHILLINGWORTH: Do you wish me to speak plainly?

DIMMESDALE: I would know it, whether of life or death.

CHILLINGWORTH: Plainly then. Your disease is a strange one. Looking at you, it is clear that you are sorely ill, though your symptoms are such that an educated man should have the wherewithal to see you cured. I am an educated man, and it seems at times that I know the disease. Then again, I do not.

DIMMESDALE: This is “plainly then.” Do remind me never to ask for subtlety.

CHILLINGWORTH: Minister, have you told me all a physician and friend should know of your suffering?

DIMMESDALE: What good would it do to seek a physician’s counsel only to hide the illness?

CHILLINGWORTH: Yes. Or no, Reverend Dimmesdale.

DIMMESDALE: Yes, yes!

CHILLINGWORTH: So be it. So be it, but let me tell you this: the disease of the body may only be half of the evil a doctor is called upon to cure. There is also the spirit. And you, sir, of all the men I have known, are one in whom the two are most tightly entwined.

DIMMESDALE: You know me so well?

CHILLINGWORTH: Enough to suspect that there is something other than physical disease that causes your pain.

DIMMESDALE: *This is your learned determination?*

CHILLINGWORTH: There is a *sickness* in your spirit!

DIMMESDALE: Well, what would you have me *do*?

CHILLINGWORTH: Confess! Lay open the wound in your soul.

DIMMESDALE: No! Not to you. Not to *you*! These many months I have walked beside you, and undertaken your cures, and heeded your counsel. Today, I have stood here with great patience and listened as you...No more! I will say this: If there is disease in my soul, then I commit myself to the soul’s only true physician, and let Him do with me as He will. But you...who are you attempt His role? Who are you to thrust yourself between a sufferer and his God?

CHILLINGWORTH: *(As DIMMESDALE rushes out)* Such passion, dear Reverend! All is not lost! You’ll see—we shall be friends again soon. Rest assured. We shall be friends again soon.

SCENE SEVEN: *HESTER and PEARL, returning from church.*

PEARL: *(Upon entering)* But—

HESTER: *(Removing coat, helping PEARL off with hers)* Ha! See? I was right! As mothers so often are, much to the dismay of their daughters, who should be able to remain silent for at least two minutes.

PEARL: Why? What good is silence when there is so much to say?

HESTER: What could be so important that you are compelled to speak?

PEARL: *(Beat)* I forget.

HESTER: *(To herself)* My dear Pearl...

(To PEARL)

PERUSAL SCRIPT -- THE SCARLET LETTER by Jenifer Nii

Well then—Tell me what lessons you learned from today’s sermon.

PEARL: I learned that sermons are too long, and that there is a reason the scriptures say that most people are sheep.

(Makes sheep sound)

HESTER: Pearl!

PEARL: It’s true!

HESTER: *(Suppressing a smile, interrupting)* Nevertheless...

PEARL: Besides, the minister’s sermon was so *boring*. Talk, talk, guilty conscience, talk. And he holds his hand up over his heart and all the congregation swoons and sighs and lifts their hands to God as if He Himself stood before them with wind-swept hair and trumpets sounding, instead of who’s really there: the frail fading minister.

HESTER: Do not speak that way about the minister, Pearl. You are a child, and children cannot know the affairs and afflictions of their elders.

PEARL: Oh mummy, how I wonder sometimes...

HESTER: What is it you wonder?

PEARL: Guess.

HESTER: Tell me.

PEARL: Guess!

HESTER: I am in no mood for this. Tell me, or let me work.

PEARL: You always work.

HESTER: I must keep my little Pearl adorned in finery.

PEARL: It is true, isn’t it? I am the prettiest, finest girl in all the village.

HESTER: You are indeed.

PEARL: And you are the prettiest mummy.

HESTER: Would that it were so, dear one. But it warms my heart that you think it.

PEARL: Mummy?

HESTER: *(Tiring of so much talking)* Yes, Pearl?

PEARL: Why do you spend such time stitching such finery for others? Surely you could find some time to make something for yourself.

HESTER: You don’t like this dress?

PEARL: Gray is the color of nothingness, mummy. You would never make anything gray for me.

HESTER: ‘Tis true, I would not. Little Pearl is much too mischievous for gray.

PEARL: Perhaps if you wore a frock like mine, or the one you made for horrible Mistress Hammerhead—

HESTER: --Haversham...

PEARL: --you might not always trudge about so. It’s like you carry sacks of stones on your back, you know. If anyone should feel trudgy, it’s Mistress Hammerhead—

HESTER: Pearl!

PEARL: *(Rises, distracted dancing. Dreamy twirling at the end.)* Haversham, Haversham...Anyway, it’s awful people like that who ought to feel scorn. Not you. And perhaps if your closet were filled with gowns and jewels that gleam like the scarlet letter, you’d let yourself skip and fly and do whatever you will!

HESTER: Just as little Pearl does?

PERUSAL SCRIPT -- THE SCARLET LETTER by Jenifer Nii

PEARL: Yes!

HESTER: You will learn in time that in life there are some things one cannot do.

PEARL: I have learned that there are many things others say one ought not to do.

HESTER: (*Soft laugh at truth*) But it is *also* true that the heart dictates its own possibilities, and its own limitations. And if we cross against them, we choose the consequence as well as the path.

PEARL: Whose consequences?

HESTER: God's, and man's.

PEARL: Not your own?

HESTER: The *choice* is ours.

PEARL: (*Beat*) Mummy? What does the scarlet letter mean? And why *does* the minister hold his hand to his heart?

HESTER: (*Not knowing how to answer. The truth?*) Silly Pearl! What kind of questions are these?

PEARL: Good ones!

HESTER: What do I know of the minister's heart?

PEARL: Yay! Better one!

HESTER: Which I shan't answer.

PEARL: Boo.

HESTER: As for the scarlet letter, what do *you* think it means?

PEARL: I dunno. No one does, except you and the minister.

HESTER: How do you—

PEARL: At first the townspeople growled and pointed and I couldn't hear what they said the scarlet letter meant. But then because you are so nice to them, bringing food to all their sick and poor and making their babies and dead people such nice things to wear, they started using their puffed-up voices again. And now they say it means "able" and they puff up their chests and sing "Do you see that woman over there, with the beautiful scarlet letter? That is Hester, *our Hester...*" and suddenly the thing they growled at is like a shiny cross on a nun's bosom and they knew all along how wonderful mummy is. Boo on them!

(Punches the air)

Take that, townspeople!

HESTER: Why is there such violence within you, child?

PEARL: (*Distractedly*) I am your little Pearl.

HESTER: (*Short beat*) Are you really?

PEARL: Mistress Hibbins told me a story the other day. People say that she walks with shadows, but I think she tells such awfully good stories.

HESTER: And what story did Mistress Hibbins tell you this time?

PEARL: She said that in the forest there is a veeerrry powerful man who can lay curses upon anyone he chooses. And because he is so powerful people come to him and he offers them his book and an iron pen and they sign their name in their *own blood* and after they have signed he places his mark upon their chest which means that they are his forever and ever. Mistress Hibbins said that the scarlet letter is his mark on you, and that if you meet him at midnight it will glow like a red flame. Is it true, mother, and can we go to the woods and meet him? He sounds ever so interesting, and I have never seen the scarlet letter glow at nighttime. If you have met him, I want to, too! Can we, mother? Can we?

PERUSAL SCRIPT -- THE SCARLET LETTER by Jenifer Nii

HESTER: Will you leave me in peace if I tell you?

PEARL: Yes! I promise I will! Double promise!

HESTER: (*Short beat*) I have met him once—

PEARL: I knew it!

HESTER: -and the scarlet letter is his mark.

PEARL: How wondrous! Is he as Mistress Hibbins says?

(*Swept away*)

Dark and mysterious, his eyes burning red in the night, his branch-like hands and long, bony fingers with long, white fingernails, beckoning, beckoning...

HESTER: Pearl—

PEARL: --Has the minister met him, too? Is that why he holds his hand to his heart?

HESTER: What happened was not one of your adventures. Do you understand me?

PEARL: If the man in the woods put his mark on Minister Dimmesdale, I think he should have a scarlet letter, too!

HESTER: Stop!

PEARL: He should!

HESTER: Why?

PEARL: Because!

HESTER: Would you have all souls branded in the same way as your mother?

PEARL: Of course!

HESTER: And yours? Where shall we put yours?

(*LIGHTS Crossfade*)

14 MORE PAGES OF THIS TAUGHT DRAMA