

THE SPLENDID WREN

A play by Doug MacKenzie
(Debuted at the Santa Fe Playhouse, November 29, 1996)

For the brave men and women who defended our beloved South (1861-1865)–
Especially Mosby's Rangers, John and Richard deButts

THE PLAYERS

PROFESSOR EVERETT C. FRISKIE

CHRISTOPHER BENTWOOD

GAY OGILVIE

SKIP MEADOWS

CAROLINE PETERSON

HANK LATROBE

THE GHOST OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

THE SPLENDID WREN

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

The curtain comes up on Portable Classroom #6. Portable Classroom #6 is situated on a lonely corner of the Afton College campus in rural Afton, Indiana. Professor Everett C. Friskie is seated at his desk CENTER RIGHT. He has arrived early so he can eat a McDonald's double cheeseburger. Professor Friskie starts the action by tearing apart the take-out bag and wolfing down its contents with a beastly abandon. CHRISTOPHER BENTWOOD enters the room from the only door UP LEFT.

CHRISTOPHER

(Liltingly) It smells like a hamburger in here.

MR. FRISKIE

(Swallows with some difficulty and holds up his hand. Christopher sashays up and pilfers some French fries)

CHRISTOPHER

(Nibbling fries) Oh, *les pommes frites*. France's only enduring gift to the world.

MR. FRISKIE

What about Catherine Deneuve?

CHRISTOPHER

Touche.

MR. FRISKIE

Mmm. There's nothin' like a good cheeseburger. I git mine made to order. I refuse to take the dried-up, crusty ones that have been baskin' under the heat lamp. That's my secret.

CHRISTOPHER

Why go all the way out to McDonald's when there's a Burger King next door?

MR. FRISKIE

Oh, I prefer the red, white and gold of McDonald's to the red, white and brown of Burger King. But, then, I have the Italian eye for beauty.

CHRISTOPHER

Eating hamburgers is so *declassé*. You should come dine with me at the new Taco Bell. I always come out of Taco Bell feeling like Rita Hayworth. It must be the authentic Mexican atmosphere.

MR. FRISKIE

Maybe they put Spanish fly in the tacos.

CHRISTOPHER

(Laughing) Oh, you are wicked.

MR. FRISKIE

That's what they pay me for.

CHRISTOPHER

You're not Everett C. Friskie?

Mr. FRISKIE

I was the last time I looked.

CHRISTOPHER

(Angrily) They put Everett Friskie in a portable classroom?

MR. FRISKIE

I'm afraid I don't follow you.

CHRISTOPHER

A portable classroom is the kiss of death. It means they're about to give you the axe.

MR. FRISKIE

Don't be absurd.

CHRISTOPHER

They always put the throw away teachers in portable classrooms.

MR. FRISKIE

That's preposterous.

CHRISTOPHER

Is it? Then, what happened to the other five portable classrooms and the teachers that taught in them?

MR. FRISKIE

How should I know?

CHRISTOPHER

They were fired, and their classrooms were sold for scrap. They'd have sold this one, too, but they found out they could make more money renting it to that massage parlor for hootchie kootchie shows.

MR. FRISKIE

(Haughtily) That is a wanton prevarication and a calumnious aspersion against the good name of Afton College.

CHRISTOPHER

They sold you down the river.

MR. FRISKIE

(Drawls) Why, I'm on the fast track to becomin' a tenured professor.

CHRISTOPHER

In a portable classroom? Out in the middle of a cow pasture?

MR. FRISKIE

Oh, put away your worry beads.

CHRISTOPHER

Jean-Paul Sartre was right: "We're all condemned to be free in an alien universe."

MR. FRISKIE

In the dull catalogue of common things. Philosophy will clip an angel's wings.

SKIP MEADOWS

(Enters UP LEFT with GAY OGILVIE in tow. SKIP comes to a sudden stop and GAY plows into him from behind)

Did you say "Philosophy"? Whoa, dude. I thought this was Novel Writing with Mr. Lively.

GAY

(Out of breath) This campus is weird. I'm lost half the time. It was like Lewis and Clark getting here.

SKIP

Where's the men's room? Turn left at Botswana Land.

(Laughs moronically)

MR. FRISKIE

(Tittering affectedly) Oh, I know what you mean. You have to go through the gym to get to the cafeteria.

SKIP

Hey, does anyone know if there's gonna be any homework?

MR. FRISKIE

No, I'm afraid there's no homework in here.

SKIP

(Stretching and flexing) Excellent. (Yawns) I can kick back and catch some rays. Watch the old tube. That's the ticket, babe. Hoist some brewskis and stay in a stone groove. This summer's gonna wail—big time! (Looks around apprehensively) Hey, we better keep an eye out for this Mr. Lively dude. I hear he can be a real tube.

MR. FRISKIE

(Meekly) That's "Friskie," not "Lively."

GAY

Marge Wilson told me the guy's a real *loser*. He was like this big honcho writer back in the Sixties, who totally dried up. I heard the guy hasn't written a line since the fall of Saigon. No jive.

MR. FRISKIE

(Getting up and sitting on the front of his desk)

Believe half of what you see and none of what you hear. Do you know the poet Wystan Hugh Auden? Auden said that "teaching has ruined more good writers than alcoholism." But teaching hasn't hurt me. That's for sure.

GAY

(Surprised and embarrassed) You're Everett C. Friskie?

MR. FRISKIE

In the flesh.

GAY

(Bewilderedly) But...but I thought you were a Negro.

MR. FRISKIE

No. Not lately.

GAY

But in the catalogue you're touted as being black.

MR. FRISKIE

No. I'm white as the jack of diamonds.

GAY

But weren't you best friends with James Baldwin? Didn't you lunch with Jack Kennedy and Gore Vidal?

MR. FRISKIE

(Amiably) I plead "guilty" on all counts. Perhaps you've read my column in *Semiconductor News*? "Paw prints"?

GAY

(Rolling her eyes) Uh, no, man. Not hardly.

CAROLINE PETERSON

(Enters UP LEFT)

MR. FRISKIE

Well. Glad you could make it.

CAROLINE

(Puffing) Broke my damn butt getting here. (Groans) Who slapped this Mickey Mouse campus together?

MR. FRISKIE

(Closing the classroom door) It does take a bit of getting used to. Why, my first day I was as lost as the Minotaur in the labyrinth. Good thing I had my Boy Scout compass.

CHRISTOPHER

(Marilyn Monroe voice) I fell down in the swamp and twisted my ankle. Like Lana Turner in *Jungle Queen*. (Quaveringly) I could've fallen in quicksand, and no one would've missed me.

GAY

Someone should check you for ticks. I found one crawling in my hair.

CHRISTOPHER

(Camping it up) Aargh! Ticks! Oh, please!

MR. FRISKIE

(Reading from his notes) Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Everett Friskie. You can call me "Skeeter." Some of you are no doubt familiar with my a-hem much celebrated first novel, *Eden in My Rear-View Mirror*.

CAROLINE

Never heard of it.

MR. FRISKIE

In certain eccentric literary circles I am known as the Delta Dante. (Laughs) Let me put to rest any rumors that I am still that lionized man-child who left Mississippi with clouds in his head and poetry on his lips. I'm not. the young man who rode that Greyhound to New York so he could write the Great American Novel was a dreamer who lived off Flaubert and pixie dust.

GAY

I just love your accent.

MR. FRISKIE

I am not here at Afton to nurture dreams. I am here to teach the cold, hard business of novel writing.

SKIP

So you can teach us to write if we've never written before?

MR. FRISKIE

I'm not a miracle worker. But I can help you recognize fine prose before it bites you on the ankle.

CAROLINE

You wanna read fine prose? Read Theodore Dreiser. Nobody ever wrote better than him.

GAY

(Ardently) Oh, baloney. He wasn't as great as Kerouac. Jack Kerouac was the bitchiest writer that ever breathed. Everything he touched was pure poetry. Can I read a passage

from *Visions Of Cody*?

MR. FRISKIE

Before we go off on a tangent, could I please get your names? (Reads) Christopher Bentwood?

CHRISTOPHER

(Campily) In the pink.

MR. FRISKIE

I see you, Chris. Chris is Afton's man of the hour. He's one of the finest actors to come down the pike in a coon's age. Christopher's Hamlet is being compared to Gielgud's.

CHRISTOPHER

I have a question. Who's the greatest American playwright?

MR. FRISKIE

Oh that's an easy one. Tennessee Williams. With Eugene O'Neill a distant second. Tennessee was a fanatic about his craft and a fanatic about his art. Donald Windham said that Tennessee "put writing before knowing where he was going to sleep or where his next meal was coming from." (Quaveringly) There's a divine purity that can only come when a man is ready to sacrifice his life for art.

CHRISTOPHER

(Fatuously) I have another question, Mr. Friskie—

MR. FRISKIE

Skeeter.

CHRISTOPHER

How long will it take me to write a bestseller? I only have six weeks before—

MR. FRISKIE

(Exploding) How long? You dare to ask me, "how long?"

CHRISTOPHER

(Meekly) Sorry.

MR. FRISKIE

Great art takes time, boy. Quit thinkin' like an American. Americans! We're the Jiffy Pop people. We want enlightenment in a can. We want immortality in twelve easy lessons. We want the Holy Grail by Ronco. Well, let me tell you somethin', son. Great art means sweatin' blood.

CAROLINE

Blah, blah, blah. Woof, woof, woof.

MR. FRISKIE

Skip Meadows? Is there a Skip Meadows? (Pauses as Skip's snoring is heard)

GAY

(Reproachful preppie voice) Skipper! (She throws a small notepad at Skip) Wake up, you big putz!

SKIP

Hey, watch it! I'm awake. (Sotto voce) Crazy bitch.

MR. FRISKIE

(Pointing at Gay) You must be Gay.

CHRISTOPHER

(Starting when he mistakenly thinks Friskie means him)

I happen to enjoy moonlight strolls in my lounge pajamas. Since when is that a crime?
(Embarrassed, Christopher opens a book and pantomimes reading it)

GAY

I'm Gay Ogilvie. I go out with this campus collie. (She points at Skip, who rubs his eyes)

MR. FRISKIE

Caroline Peterson?

CAROLINE

That's the handle they gave me.

MR. FRISKIE

Is it Miss Peterson, or Mrs.?

CAROLINE

Fuck if I know.

MR. FRISKIE

Excuse me?

CAROLINE

Am I Miss or Mrs.? You tell me. It depends on whether that two-timing dog of a husband I had wants to go through another plate glass window. (Sharply) Tell you the goddamned truth, I don't give a fuck. I've been up to my keister in pigs since that creep got out of the joint.

MR. FRISKIE

(Awkwardly) I know what you mean. I think.

CAROLINE

(Snarling) You don't know shit.

MR. FRISKIE

(Primly) Well, I've been around the old block a few times. Without my mother.

CAROLINE

The motherfucker totals my new car and maxes out my Master Card, buying dope for his latest bimbo—who's underage, I might add. Then (Emphatically) then, the crazy son of a bitch gets in my brother's Camaro and hits the fire hydrant in front of my house, doing ninety in a thirty-five. Water is shooting everywhere. Unreal. The neighborhood kids went nuts. They all start showing up in their little bathing suits. It was great. We had a party. So I'm out there butt naked, running through the water when this retard rookie cop tries to arrest me. Next thing I know, he's wailing into me with his nightstick like I'm Multiple fucking Miggs. All my neurons are firing impulses that scream GET YOUR GAUGE AND SMOKE THE PIG! I made a vow right then and there. I said to myself in no uncertain terms: STOP PICKING UP EX-CONS AT THE TRUCK STOP.

MR. FRISKIE

So, then it's okay to call you "Caroline"?

CAROLINE

Hell, no. Call me "Dotty" unless you're that three-time loser of a shrink my parole officer made me see.

MR. FRISKIE

None of it is a cardinal concern of mine.

CAROLINE

Easy for you to say. You ever see a three-bedroom Cape Cod blow up?

MR. FRISKIE

Not lately.

CAROLINE

Then, you never had to live in a damn PCP lab. You can't even smoke a cigarette or turn on the stove. All it takes is one teeny spark and KABOOM! They pick up your adenoids in Muncie.

MR. FRISKIE

Well, I hope you're incorporating some of these colorful adventures in your novel.

"Sleep with pigs, wake with truffles." That's what I always say. (Chuckles) Is there a Buster Suzuki? (Looks around) Buster Suzuki?

SKIP

Er...uh Mr. Friskie—

MR. FRISKIE

Why, what is it, Skip?

SKIP

Buster's no longer with us.

MR. FRISKIE

Is he tardy, or did he transfer to another school?

GAY

Buster's not coming in at all, Mr. Friskie. Ever.

MR. FRISKIE

The little prick. He's probably gallivantin' around the swimming pool. Or sunnin' himself like a cat.

GAY

You don't understand. Buster Suzuki sleeps with the sushi.

MR. FRISKIE

Why, Gay, whatever on earth do you mean?

GAY

Buster bought the Big Weenie. He is like Croaksville.

MR. FRISKIE

Oh, hard cheese. Buster had the luck of a vegetarian's dog.

CAROLINE

Was this that little Jap in the wheelchair who got run over by the Good Humor man?

(Laughs) What a spaz.

CHRISTOPHER

(Maudlin) Buster died a hero's death. Like Rupert Brooke. The death of a poet. (Sobs)

GAY

Buster was going to be a dermatologist. (Sobbing) He didn't know he was going to die.

CHRISTOPHER

(Mawkishly) No one ever died at Afton College before Buster. Not unless you count that homeless guy they found in the women's sauna.

SKIP

He'd been in there for a week. Somebody said he looked like a Peking duck. We're

talking "mummified."

GAY

Oh, barf! Death is so disgusting.

MR. FRISKIE

It doesn't have to be. We could take this boy's tragic demise and transmute it into a lovely sonnet. As a writer you tend to look on sufferin' and death as just more grist for the literary mill. What is the end of the world except more material? Death is also a very effective literary device. It's called a *memento mori*—a reminder of death. Can anyone think of a *memento mori*?

CHRISTOPHER

(Waving his hand campily) I can.

MR. FRISKIE

Bravo, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER

In Act Five, Scene One of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare employs a memento mori brilliantly. I must say it is a monument to Shakespeare's genius that he can take a scene in a graveyard and turn it into a charming bit of comic relief. Do you want to hear the speech?

Mr. FRISKIE

(Operatically) Speak! I am bound to hear!

CHRISTOPHER

(Climbs up on his desk and poses, hamming it up. For Yorick's skull, he improvises with a Snoopy doll)

Let me see. (He examines the doll)

GAY

(Turning excitedly to Caroline) Isn't he a dreamboat?

CAROLINE

I wouldn't kick him out of bed for eating Wiener Schnitzel.

GAY

Girls follow him everywhere. I wonder if he likes blondes.

SKIP

I wonder if he likes girls.

MR. FRISKIE

The curtain is up. The footlights glow. And the spotlight is on the next Laurence Olivier.

(The lights dim and a spot comes on Christopher)

CHRISTOPHER

(Declaiming the lines with romantic ardor)

Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times: and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it.

SKIP

His gorge is probably bigger than the Grand Canyon.

CHRISTOPHER

Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft.

SKIP

Probably some guy's lips. (Laughs artificially)

MR. FRISKIE ET AL

SHHH!

CHRISTOPHER

Where be your jibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come; make her laugh at that. (Spot goes off. Stagelights come back up. Christopher bows neatly while his schoolfellows applaud him vigorously)

MR. FRISKIE

Bravo! Bis! Bis! Why that was worthy of the great John Barrymore himself. Thank you, Christopher.

CHRISTOPHER

(Plummily) I'll do anything for The Bard.

MR. FRISKIE

(Consulting his notes) Gay, do you have a question?

GAY

Are there any good books on novel writing?

MR. FRISKIE

Yes. *Aspects of the Novel*, by E.M. Forster. It's a compilation of lectures Forster gave at Cambridge in 1927. It was very popular when I was in college.

SKIP

Where'd you go to college?

MR. FRISKIE

Why I went to the Southerner's northern university, Princeton.

SKIP

Princeton! You must be smart. Did you play any sports?

MR. FRISKIE

I was quite a terror on the squash court.

CAROLINE

Princeton's a big party school. I'll bet you got drunk every night.

MR. FRISKIE

As a matter of fact, I was above all that. I was more of a bohemian, more of an angry young man. I used to haunt those dark, smoky coffee houses in Greenwich Village. You see, I was a poet. I also enjoyed some small renown as a translator of Paul Verlaine's poetry.

SKIP

Were you like a Big Man On Campus?

GAY

(Excitedly) Yeah. Did you go out with lots of college girls and try to get in their pants?

MR. FRISKIE

I am not on trial here, Judge Ito. (Picks up a book and fumbles through it wildly) If we might all turn to page fifty-seven in our textbooks—

CAROLINE

Textbooks! We don't have any textbooks. Hel LOO!

MR. FRISKIE

(Wildly manic) I knew that. Don't give me the bum's rush. I am perfectly all right. No

problemo.

THE GHOST OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

(Enters DOWN LEFT and marches slowly, in a measured cadence. He is wearing a safari outfit and carrying an elephant gun at port arms. The ghost is a coinage of Friskie's brain and exclusively visible to him)

MR. FRISKIE

(FRISKIE screams aloud in terror)

Hemingway! What do you want from me?

THE GHOST OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

(Keeningly) I am Death! Death!

MR. FRISKIE

You're not Death. I've already seen Death.

He is called "Writer's Block."

THE GHOST OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Friskie! You threw away your talent for beans.

(Keeningly) Beans! Beans!

MR. FRISKIE

Oh, look who's talking. You wrote all the lousy Nick stories. Bungalow Bill.

THE GHOST OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

(Moaningly) Whore!

MR. FRISKIE

Git out of my face, white boy.

THE GHOST OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Twit twit twit. Jug jug jug jug jug jug.

MR. FRISKIE

(Holding his ears and panicking)

Make him stop!

THE GHOST OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop. Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop.

MR. FRISKIE

Now he's a coffee pot!

THE GHOST OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

(Repeating) Coco rico. Coco rico. (Exits DOWN RIGHT. Friskie is aghast, staring after him)

MR. FRISKIE

(Drops to his knees and prays intoningly)

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth. And in the Boston Red Sox, Bill Buckner *non compris*.

SKIP

Are you all right, Mr. Friskie? Should I call a doctor?

THE GHOST OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

(OFFSTAGE and resonant) Whore!

MR. FRISKIE

(In agony) What's happening?

SKIP

You were hallucinating there, bro.

CAROLINE

You were starting to foam at the mouth.

GAY

(Disingenuously) But you're fine now, Skeeter. Just fine.

CAROLINE

Yeah, he's Screwy Squirrel on acid.

MR. FRISKIE

(Mopping his brow with a handkerchief) Please accept my apologies. I don't quite know what came over me—

CAROLINE

You were seeing pink elephants.

GAY

It's a hot day. The heat affects people differently.

CHRISTOPHER

(Clearing his throat operatically for attention)

Could you give me the name of a writer's colony, preferably on Fire Island?

MR. FRISKIE

You don't need other writers to write. Writers are too chummy. They all talk and drink too dang much.

CHRISTOPHER

(Throwing his hands up) But what about Paris? What about Taos and Santa Fe? Nantucket and Sausalito? What about New York and the avant-garde?

GAY

Mr. Friskie. Did you see the movie *Babette's Feast*?

MR. FRISKIE

Honey bunny, I haven't been to the movies since *Gone With the Wind*.

GAY

There was one line in it I really liked: "An artist is never poor."

CHRISTOPHER

(Flapping his hands in protest) Never poor! What about Oscar Wilde in Paris after the big scandal? He was stone broke and reduced to cadging drinks from perfect strangers.

He died in squalor, a broken man. (Mawkishly) Oh, Oscar. Oscar!

MR. FRISKIE

(Violently tears up his notes and throws them about) Shut up! Shut up! You pack of nattering magpies!

(Everyone is shocked but Gay. She raises her hand)

GAY

What about "the wolf at the door"? In *A Moveable Feast* Hemingway wrote about the positive side of going hungry—

MR. FRISKIE

(In a roar that makes the rafters rumble) HEMINGWAY!

GAY

(Primly and unperturbed) He said that being hungry sharpened the senses—

MR. FRISKIE

Hemingway never missed a meal in his big fat frou-frou life. If he got hungry, all he had to do was go visit Gertrude Stein or some of his other rich American friends.

GAY

But Hemingway said—

MR. FRISKIE

Don't you get it? The wolf isn't just at my door. He's at my throat for a sit-down dinner. The fucker's in my bed wearin' silk pajamas. (Covers his eyes and sobs)

GAY

(Softly and imploringly) Skeeter.

MR. FRISKIE

(Weeping openly) I'm sorry. I'm just an old kangaroo.

CAROLINE

There's no crime in that.

CHRISTOPHER

Mr. Friskie, sir. You're one of my icons. Meeting you was like meeting Marcel Proust.

SKIP

Right on! Big fifteen for the coach.

CAROLINE

Hear! Hear!

GAY

(Singing) For he's the jolly good fellow. For he's the jolly good fellow. For he's the jolly good FELL-OW!

CHRISTOPHER

(Applauding) And so say all of us. Bravo!

MR. FRISKIE

(Dabbing tears) You're too kind.

(Skip, Caroline and Christopher reassure Friskie with a clap on the shoulder and exit

UPSTAGE RIGHT)

MR. FRISKIE

(SIGHS) Gay? (Pause) Will you take me to McDonald's?

GAY

(Bewilderedly) You eat red meat? (Quizzical pause) Why don't you just eat plutonium?

MR. FRISKIE

You don't understand. The night manager has my suitcase.

GAY

I'm not driving you all the way out to—

MR. FRISKIE

Oh, never mind. I'm an old crump. I deserve to die in a ditch.

GAY

Hey, don't say that. You've got plenty of options left.

MR. FRISKIE

(Pitifully) But I'll need help.

GAY

You're a high-maintenance dude. Where's this McDonald's?

MR. FRISKIE

(Cheerfully) You're my guardian angel. Just look for the golden arches. That's my secret. (Gay cradles Friskie's head from behind and kisses it. Both smile).

CURTAIN