

Michael Martin

Madeleine Remains: In Memory, A Wife of Genius

A One-Act Play

A COMFORTABLE, PERHAPS FUSSILY OVER-STUFFED, DRAWING ROOM OR PARLOR. A WELL-UPHOLSTERED CHAIR WITH A BASKET OF KNITTING BESIDE IT. ALSO A SIDE TABLE WITH A VASE OF FLOWERS. A BOOKSHELF, PACKED WITH HARDCOVERS.

[MADELEINE ENTERS, LOOKS AT THE AUDIENCE...]

Oh! Just look at you! This is ridiculous.

[...AND EXITS. SILENCE. OFFSTAGE:]

Really just ridiculous. I should never have agreed...

I simply can't. It's too vulgar.

[SILENCE. OFFSTAGE, CALLING:]

Have you eaten?

[SHE RE-ENTERS WITH A TRAY OF COOKIES, DISTRIBUTES THEM TO AUDIENCE.]

Why anybody would go out for a show without eating is beyond me.

[TO SELF:]

Why anybody would go for out for a show is beyond me.

[TO AUDIENCE MEMBER:]

Just one, please. Geniuses are not made of money.

I meant M'sieur Gide. [OF TRAY OF COOKIES:] Here. Just one, please. Pass the rest back, please.

[RETURNS TO STAGE, SITS. STARES AT THEM.]

I am unaccustomed to talking about myself. [SILENCE.] This is going to be a difficult evening.

André would call it my shyness. But then André was a genius, hardly the same thing as intelligent.

[SHE TAKES UP HER KNITTING]

[SHE PAUSES, EXAMINES THE AUDIENCE:]

You're here because of him, are you not?

Fine.

I was born Madeleine Rondeaux, two years before André was born in Paris, France, in November 1869. I was one of three sisters, the Rondeaux sisters, and André and I became very close while still young, though the first time he asked me for my hand I refused him. My family didn't care for him, for one, which shows what a good upbringing I enjoyed. I agreed to marry him when he proposed again, four months after the death of his overpoweringly austere mother. She devoted herself to her boy. Much later, I passed away a full thirteen years before he did so in 1951, also in Paris, France...which was fortunate for him, the accident of his place of birth and of work, for Paris is the correct city for men such as André – by which I mean intellectuals, of course, men of letters, and about that I will have more to say, I think – that is, about letters, men with letters; I must organize my thoughts more carefully, this is abnormal...

What is this?! [SHE STARES AT HER HANDS, SETS THE KNITTING ASIDE.] I don't knit.

[SILENCE AS SHE GLARES AT THE BASKET.]

This won't do. I must think of something to say about myself that is not also about André. Whether or not he is the actual reason you came, as I know he is. Otherwise this is too aggravating.

Humph. There must be something...!

When I was in youth, a child, long ago now of course, a little girl I mean...oh I'm sorry, so sorry, let me... [SHE COLLECTS HER THOUGHTS.] ...when I was a girl, I believed it all to be measured in dolls. Porcelain dolls.

Life I mean, of course. This Life itself. One's time on earth, which is not the same thing as one's life. For after my dolls I discovered the Word, and Life grew infinite. And André, who made Life take forever.

But before the Word of God, before André...Dolls. Flawless glowing beauties, one after another, to arrange and re-arrange by hair or dress or size or secret little smile. The more dolls I had, the happier I was. That is correct for childhood, you see. Children adore beauty.

The emphasis in that sentence is to be placed upon "children." Yes? Yes.

I freely acknowledge that those were good days, that I miss my dolls. But to worship beauty in adulthood is callow and spoiled, or worse. When I agreed to marry André, I put away childish things. You would have too.

He called me his muse. I inspired many of those works that I declined to read.

Although...! I don't know that I grasp how inspiration works. His earliest prose work, which they say was Symbolist in nature...and that, that means precisely nothing to me...was begun when he was eighteen and told the story of an unhappy young man and his pure love for his cousin Emmanuèle. Yet he says he fell in love with me in his twenties, before his trip to Algiers.

Gentlemen! Never go to Algiers!

André traveled to North Africa, learning foreign...customs which enabled him to produce novels with titles like *L'Immoraliste*. The title says it all. In Algiers he met the unspeakable [Oscar Wilde](#) and his little catamite, who shocked him, as they shocked just everybody. They were so bold with Algerian boys! So free, so warm, so

uncomplicated, those dark sweet little ones. He mentioned an Ali. Forever after Algeria André was at sixes and sevens, never knowing what to do with himself. He returned from Algiers for his mother's final illness, then proposed. Ours was a spiritual union. I was to be his muse, his rock. I was to keep him true.

M'sieur Wilde is the only one of God's creatures I would knowingly harm.

[SILENCE.]

In my later years, during our estrangement, I determined that Life, earthly Life, is most accurately measured in attention. I don't know what I mean by that, exactly, but I know that I'm right.

This is a lot of attention for me.

[SILENCE.]

I also put away any desire to be interesting. Making this evening difficult.

To strive to be interesting is the same as vanity, and vanity is sin in the eyes of the Lord, because it places your own ability to command attention ahead of His own. To my way of thinking it may even be the first sin. What was Eve trying to do with that apple except make herself more interesting to Adam?

Also, the effort to be interesting deforms the soul, making good or at least salvageable people weak or dangerous. Or both. Only the dull are assured their seat in Heaven.

I do not sit for photographs. I left no writing behind save a few letters André kept and shouldn't have done. If I were trying to be interesting, it is at this point that I would

coyly remark, “Oh, the stories I could tell you!” but in point of fact I pride myself on having no such stories to tell – this pride, it is not deadly – and actually strove during my earthly life to learn as little about André’s as possible, as I’ve indicated. Believe me, staying innocent of him was not easy.

Now I’m repeating myself. Boring.

Please note: Being dull is not the same thing as being boring. Boring is active, aggressive; dull is still and serene. When the dull on occasion falter and attempt to call attention to themselves, that is when they become boring, and then you may feel justified in shunning them, provided that you are dull yourself. If you are interesting you should just put up with it. Though of course you won’t.

I have done one interesting thing, I’m ashamed to admit, almost without thinking about it. But only one. I should be safe.

[SILENCE.]

I burned all of his letters. André’s love letters. Every last one. One afternoon when he has away, I went to the cupboard where I kept them...in nothing special, a plain box...removed them, burned them. Of course I made no fuss about it. I didn’t even tell him I’d done so until weeks later, when he asked to see them, I suppose because some one of them contained golden phraseology that he wanted to retrieve. Now I only guess that to be his reason –certainly writers are prone to enjoy re-reading their interesting words without specific goal – because he always said that he counted his love letters to me among his finest work, the finest work of his genius career. The flights of language and imagery to which declaring his pure spiritual love for me propelled him! Such fancies were rapturous, I guess.

“André, your letters? Oh, yes. I burned them.” He wept for a week. Inconsolable. So delicate.

The letters were the only work of his I read. I wouldn't go near his novels or plays or, good heavens, his journals. Lord, no. Just laying eyes on them, you run some risk of becoming more interesting. [SHE RISES.]

There. Good. We may go?

It's been a pleasure?

[SILENCE.]

Fine.

Those extra thirteen years of life he enjoyed after I passed away? He was not inconsolable then, you see. He was able to carry on. Those extra years gave him time to win a Nobel Prize for literature. And an honorary degree from Oxford. To win worldwide acclaim for the honesty of his revelations.

How wonderful. There are days – today is not one of them, but yes, there are days, or nights really; nights when I'd pray for that which God in his wisdom and mercy would never grant – when I'd wish, pray, for the fortitude, the character, to sit down and read his work. The wifely devotion. He must have been quite good. Everybody said so.

Not to my face. But it always got back to me, how good his work was.

How his work was so interesting.

André was buried at Cuverville, our *commune*, our home, which once he told me he had to leave, leave at once, with Marc, young Master Allégret, because in Cuverville he was...oh dear!...“rotting away.” Such could not be the fate of a man like André. I understood!

“You are not going away alone, are you?” I asked. I thought I had the right to know. It didn’t seem to me presumptuous.

“No,” he stammered. I always hated it when André stammered. He could be so delicate about serious matters.

“You are going with Marc?”

“Y-y-yes.”

“Don’t say anything. Never tell me anything again. I prefer your silence to your dissimulation.”

I think that was fair. I could have told him, Don’t you dare. I could have told him, I will leave you if you do.

How funny! “I will leave you”! That’s very nearly a lie. Forgive me, Lord. To do what exactly? Knit?

They did wait, a bit. I’ll give them that. A little over a year, until June of 1918. Young Master Allégret was actually all of sixteen – fully one-third the age of my husband – when the pair of them eloped, for the summer and fall, to England. As if England was, then or now, a place to save oneself from rot!

I knew immediately. I would like to say that it was all thanks to my sensitive wifely devotion to my own beloved genius that I realized the affair- the liaison more or less the moment it began, that I felt Marc crawling up my bones, thrumming along the surface of my skin – I am being vulgar! Is it not possible to satisfy you people without being vulgar? – but honestly, a blind and deaf fool, like Pastor Allégret, would have known. Elie gave up his son to André for adoption. That is all you need to know about the pastor.

André was so joyful. I witnessed how happy he was in wonderment, and in disgust, realizing the sin of it at once.

Joy has purity beat all hollow.

So I released him. “I have had the best part of your soul, the affection of your boyhood and youth,” I wrote him. “And I know that, alive or dead, I shall have the soul of your old age.” Alive or dead...the soul of his old age...!

Was there ever a less romantic declaration of marital troth?

We had pledged to each other a love of our spirits. As children! I was his muse! I was his rock! Yes he was delicate, always delicate, but if you dare say I knew, or should have known, I will strike you!

[SILENCE.]

How I wish I could knit.

Marc was...not even pretty. Not even that. Not to my undiscerning eye, at least. Just young. Affectionate. Possessed of the requisite genitalia. And, I suppose, bright. His

father was a pastor, after all, and Marc studied the law. Perhaps none too closely. One would guess the Allégret family to be good people. Marc lived until 1973, having left behind his education in the law to become a screenwriter and director, a most interesting line of work. He and André remained close even after Marc grew into adulthood and found that he actually preferred the company of women to that of geniuses three times his age. This he learned when my husband treated him to a special trip to the Congo in 1927, a journey which Marc filmed, and during which he discovered the pleasures of Congolese women. Oh, was André mad! Then happy for Marc, much worse. But you see, don't you, how intimately liberating excursions into exotic (Third World seems too modern) countries to savor the locals can cut both ways? I stay in Cuverville. So many grand old houses nestled within thickets of trees. Every one, enclosed by a fence or a hedge! Lovely. But, always, also a double-door gate. Lest you get the wrong impression.

Before that unexpected revelation, or so I have been given to understand, Master Allégret fell, for a time, under the spell of Jean Cocteau, another seducer of children. Perhaps I didn't have had the eye to appreciate young Master Allégret's physical charms. Mister Cocteau was quite the connoisseur of beauty, I believe.

And André! ...André actually feared that his fellow genius – there are far too many geniuses running amok for this poor good world to support, don't you agree? – would “corrupt” poor Marc. He was so worried. It was too funny.

Or so I've been told. We didn't discuss Marc, no more than we discussed young Elisabeth van Rysselberghe, the daughter of his closest woman friend, both of whom he had known since childhood. To be female and an intimate of M'sieur André Gide, one apparently had to have known him since childhood.

Catherine. The daughter, the only descendant, of my husband goes by Catherine. Pretty name. She was born in 1923, but was not acknowledged by her father until after my death in... in... 1938, yes, thank you. Yet a girl growing up needs her father, don't you agree? So that was cruel of André, to attribute his discretion about Catherine to consideration of me, not to say insulting. We were estranged. And what additional insult was possible?

He also waited until after 1938 to publish his memoir about our marriage. It is often overlooked. Thirteen copies to start, privately printed. That is not discretion, that is vanity.

She became a writer like her father, Catherine did, not a painter like, say, her mother Elisabeth's legal husband. Poor fellow. What was his name? [PAUSE] That I cannot recall his name does not bode well of the chance of anybody remembering mine.

It's just as well. Spouses are never interesting.

Thirteen copies. Enough for confession, not remembrance or tribute.

André liked to call Elisabeth La Dame Blanche. He liked to call women by names other than those given them at birth. He liked to call me Emmanuelle – the feminine of Isaiah's foretold name for Jesus, and isn't he just lucky I never realized that! – or simply Em. In mythology Emmanuel was the name of the angel of the fiery furnace. [A TINY LAUGH.] If that is the Emmanuel he was referencing, he had a more subtle mind than I credit him for.

Of all the geniuses running about this poor good world, writers must be the worst. Painters have merely to see to find their inspiration, musicians but to listen. Writers?

Writers must use the stuff of their lives, which would be fine, just fine, save that those lives are never their own. Because they are writers! They have only the lives of others. They have to have their muses.

Awful creatures.

[SILENCE.]

Perhaps it's not their fault entirely. Unlike a devotion to paint or make music, the urge to write is unnatural. Harboring such a wormy desire must deform the spirit.

Even acting is less perverse.

Elisabeth eventually left her spouse to move to Paris and manage André's affairs, because writers who can balance a bank account or properly stock a larder are unheard of. It's simply not done! She even paid to have adjoining apartments built for them on the Rue Vavin.

So she worshipped him, but evidently her ceremonial offering was just...that once.

In his years beyond me, they say, he became a profound influence on an entire generation of young writers. As a [THAT LAUGH] moralist. Imagine that! Especially among Existentialists, who may as well be Symbolists so far as I'm concerned.

He tried mythology, anticolonialism, communism ...where all the best intellectuals were... traditionalism, agnosticism ...why not? make it official... introspection, but always always perversion, which he was not even skilled at. There's no reconciling the irreconcilable. Never Satan worship, at least. He advocated for greater kindness to prisoners. Prisoners! So far as I know the old crusader never agitated for the

rights of children, nor of wives. He must have believed their interests adequately represented.

Perhaps that's what he saw in me. Not a transcendent communion of pure spirits he claimed, but a plain uninteresting woman who would never deign to take inspiration from him.

[SILENCE.]

I burned all of his letters. His love letters to me. While he was away. With Marc.

Oh, he knew. André knew. This was not another Algerian boy, glowing and smiling. This was not another little doll. That joy! He took himself back!

[SILENCE.]

If I remember a'right, André was at work on something entitled *Pastoral Symphony* when, or actually before, the liaison began. So much of my husband's life was devoted to making his fantasias come to life. A kind of genius. In the story, a beautiful young innocent with whom a pastor is having an affair dies, as does the love of the pastor's wife for him.

The young innocent may have been meant to be Elisabeth, not Marc. Or both. 1917 was a busy year of liberation for André and his soul. But as it took him another six years to...rouse himself for her and, well, by then I was gone.

He actually believed that the more abstract, the more...disincarnate...his love for me was, the worthier of me it was.

It might have true, yes. But he never asked.

[SILENCE.]

It shames me to admit that I did attempt, alone, in my room, while they were away at play, more than once, to imagine myself into the body of that young fellow, imagine myself looked at with the adoration which I'm relieved to report I never witnessed my husband looking at him with. So you see I would have had to imagine both my incarnation in a foreign, inappropriate, disgusting...I'm sorry, gentlemen...body, and further imagine the look of...love...in my own beloved's eyes that such an atrocity would inspire, and all of that was quite beyond the limits of my imagination, thank God, because God in his kind wisdom did not grant me much such...I do not write, I am not interesting...and I certainly did not pray for same.

Sin enough in the attempt.

Well. Fine. Enough about all of that, yes? André was buried at Cuverville, and I suppose by this time his rotting away is quite complete.

The year after his death the Vatican placed every one of his works in its Index of Forbidden Books. Had I lived I might have considered conversion. Now, it just makes me angry, the cowardly insult to him. It's not as André's work became forbidden only after his death.

[SILENCE.]

Well. Well...

What better did I have to do with my life? I myself do not consider it of much import. The hereafter, that's what matters.

[SHE GATHERS HERSELF TO GO.]

Oh! My. There may be one other thing to tell you, about that one interesting thing I did...

I don't know...

Yes.

Before I burned them? André's letters to me? I memorized them.

Every one of them. I have a good mind. And he was away with Marc a long while. So I would practice them, every afternoon, for weeks, committing each word to memory. Once a month, until my death, I'd repeat them to myself, so as to keep them fresh, and safe. In memory they remain.

They really were quite moving, André's words, so far as I am qualified to judge. Lovely, even powerful. Once or twice, three times perhaps, I wept, memorizing them, my eyes welling above the paper. If each of them weren't a godforsaken delusion, I can see myself being swept up by André's words. [TAPPING HER TEMPLE:] So I keep them here.

It's just that – it's just that, when all is said and done, I believe that God intended for a wife...any wife, I suppose, the state of matrimony itself being sacred, but certainly a wife devoted and true...to get the best of her husband. Whatever that may prove to be.

Posterity will just have to get by.

Well! This has been lovely.

[SHE STARTS TO LEAVE, STOPS:]

I am being rude! Would you like to hear them? You would.

[AND SMILES.]

Perhaps another time. Perhaps we can do this again.

[END]

Author Bio

Michael Martin is a well-regarded actor and theatre writer currently based in New Orleans. He has been involved in too many productions to list here, though has been singled out for critical praise and special mention for much of his work. Martin describes himself as “a talented theater-maker. An adequate husband.... An amusing coffee date, though less so than once-upon. A man whose life proves the adage regarding the preferred paving material for the road to hell.” For more info:

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