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## Am I Blue

Beth Henley

**Characters:** John Polk (17), Ashbe (16)

**Setting:** New Orleans French Quarter: Street, bar, Ashbe's apartment

**Premiere:** Circle Repertory Company, New York City, 1982

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It is around 10:00 P.M. on a rainy blue bourbon night in the New Orleans French Quarter. John Polk sits alone at a table in a sleazy bar. He is a bit overweight and awkward. In two hours it will be his eighteenth birthday. He belongs to a fraternity at school. Membership in the frat has not solved all his problems, as he had been told it would. He is slightly drunk.

Ashbe enters wearing a flowered plastic rain cap, red galoshes, a butterfly barrette and jeweled cat-eye glasses. She carries a bag full of stolen goods. She sits at John Polk's table and hides under his raincoat because she is afraid the manager from the Screw Inn may have seen her take two ashtrays. Ashbe sees herself as a modern-day Robin Hood, telling John Polk she plans to give the goods away to a neighbor.

Before sitting, she saw John Polk hide a red-and-black card in his pocket. It's from the whorehouse down the block, where he has a midnight appointment. John Polk and Ashbe are thrown out of the bar for being underage. It is raining. John Polk still has two hours to kill and needs to get drunk. He reluctantly accepts Ashbe's invitation to her apartment.

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ASHBE: A lot of jerks live around here. Come on in. (*She opens the door. Lights go up on the living room of a run-down apartment in a run-down apartment house. Besides being merely run-down the room is a malicious pig sty with colors, paper hats, paper dolls, masks, torn up stuffed animals, dead flowers and leaves, dress up clothes, etc., thrown all about.*) My bones are cold. Do you want a towel to dry off?

JOHN POLK: Yes, thank you.

ASHBE: *(She picks a towel up off of the floor and tosses it to him.)* Here. *(He begins drying off, as she takes off her rain things, then she begins raking things off the sofa.)* Please do sit down. *(He sits.)* I'm sorry the place is disheveled, but my father's been out of town. I always try to pick up and all before he gets in. Of course he's pretty used to messes. My mother never was too good at keeping things clean.

JOHN POLK: When's he coming back?

ASHBE: Sunday, I believe. Oh, I've been meaning to say—

JOHN POLK: What?

ASHBE: My name's Ashbe Williams.

JOHN POLK: Ashbe?

ASHBE: Yeah, Ashbe.

JOHN POLK: My name's John Polk Richards.

ASHBE: John Polk? They call you John Polk?

JOHN POLK: It's family.

ASHBE: *(Putting on socks.)* These are my favorite socks, the red furry ones. Well here's some books and magazines to look at while I fix you something to drink. What do you want in your rum?

JOHN POLK: Coke's fine.

ASHBE: I'll see do we have any. I think I'll take some hot Kool-Aid myself. *(She exits to the kitchen.)*

JOHN POLK: Hot Kool-Aid?

ASHBE: It's just Kool-Aid that's been heated, like hot chocolate or hot tea.

JOHN POLK: Sounds great.

ASHBE: Well, I'm used to it. You get so much for your dime it makes it worth your while. I don't buy pre-sweetened, of course, it's better to sugar your own.

JOHN POLK: I remember once I threw up a lot of grape Kool-Aid when I was a kid. I've hated it every since. Hey, would you check on the time?

ASHBE: *(She enters carrying a tray with several bottles of food coloring, a bottle of rum, and a huge glass.)* I'm sorry we don't have Cokes. I wonder if rum and Kool-Aid is good?

Oh, we don't have a clock either. *(She pours a large amount of rum into the large glass.)*

JOHN POLK: I'll just have it with water then.

ASHBE: *(She finds an almost empty glass of water somewhere in the room and dumps it in with the rum.)* Would you like food coloring in the water? It makes a drink all the more aesthetic. Of course, some people don't care for aesthetics.

JOHN POLK: No thank you, just plain water.

ASHBE: Are you sure? The taste is entirely the same. I put it in all my water.

JOHN POLK: Well—

ASHBE: What color do you want?

JOHN POLK: I don't know.

ASHBE: What's your favorite color?

JOHN POLK: Blue, I guess. *(She puts a few blue drops into the glass—as she has nothing to stir with, she blows into the glass, turning the water blue.)* Thanks.

ASHBE: *(Exits. She screams from the kitchen.)* Come on, say come on cat, eat your fresh good milk.

JOHN POLK: You have a cat?

ASHBE: *(Off.)* No.

JOHN POLK: Oh.

ASHBE: *(She enters carrying a tray with a cup of hot Kool-Aid and Cheerios and colored marshmallows.)* Here are some Cheerios and some cute little colored marshmallows to eat with your drink.

JOHN POLK: Thanks.

ASHBE: I one time smashed all the big white marshmallows in the plastic bag at the grocery store.

JOHN POLK: Why did you do that?

ASHBE: I was angry. Do you like ceramics?

JOHN POLK: Yes.

ASHBE: My mother makes them. It's sort of her hobby. She is very talented.

JOHN POLK: My mother never does anything. Well, I guess she can shuffle the bridge deck okay.

ASHBE: Actually, my mother is a dancer. She teaches at a school in Atlanta. She's really very talented.

JOHN POLK: (*Indicates ceramics.*) She must be to do all these.

ASHBE: Well, Madeline, my older sister, did the blue one. Madeline gets to live with Mama.

JOHN POLK: And you live with your father.

ASHBE: Yeah, but I get to go visit them sometimes.

JOHN POLK: You do ceramics too?

ASHBE: No, I never learned . . . but I have this great potholder set. (*Gets up to show him.*) See I make lots of multi-colored potholders and send them to Mama and Madeline. I also make paper hats. (*Gets material to show him.*) I guess they're more creative but making potholders is more relaxing. Here would you like to make a hat?

JOHN POLK: I don't know, I'm a little drunk.

ASHBE: It's not hard a bit. (*Hands him material.*) Just draw a real pretty design on the paper. It really doesn't have to be pretty, just whatever you want.

JOHN POLK: It's kind of you to give my creative drives such freedom.

ASHBE: Ha, ha, ha, I'll work on my potholder set a bit.

JOHN POLK: What time is it? I've really got to check on the time.

ASHBE: I know. I'll call the time operator. (*She goes to the phone.*)

JOHN POLK: How do you get along without a clock?

ASHBE: Well, I've been late for school a lot. Daddy has a watch. It's 11:03.

JOHN POLK: I've got a while yet.

ASHBE: (*Twirls back to her chair, drops, and sighs.*)

JOHN POLK: Are you a dancer too?

ASHBE: (*Delighted.*) I can't dance a bit, really. I practice a lot is all, at home in the afternoon. I imagine you go to a lot of dances.

JOHN POLK: Not really, I'm a terrible dancer. I usually get bored or drunk.

ASHBE: You probably drink too much.

JOHN POLK: No, it's just since I've come to college. All you do there is drink more beer and write more papers.

ASHBE: What are you studying for to be?

JOHN POLK: I don't know.

ASHBE: Why don't you become a rancher?

JOHN POLK: Dad wants me to help run his soybean farm.

ASHBE: Soybean farm. Yikes, that's really something. Where is it?

JOHN POLK: Well, I live in the Delta, Hollybluff, Mississippi. Anyway, Dad feels I should go to business school first; you know, so I'll become, well, management minded. Pass the blue.

ASHBE: Is that what you really want to do?

JOHN POLK: I don't know. It would probably be as good as anything else I could do. Dad makes good money. He can take vacations whenever he wants. Sure it'll be a ball.

ASHBE: I'd hate to have to be management-minded. (*John Polk shrugs.*) I don't mean to hurt your feelings but I would really hate to be a management mind. (*She starts walking on her knees, twisting her fists in front of her eyes, and making clicking sounds as a management mind would make.*)

JOHN POLK: Cut it out. Just forget it. The farm could burn down and I wouldn't even have to think about it.

ASHBE: (*After a pause.*) Well, what do you want to talk about?

JOHN POLK: I don't know.

ASHBE: When was the last dance you went to?

JOHN POLK: Dances. That's a great subject. Let's see, oh, I don't really remember it was probably some blind date. God, I hate dates.

ASHBE: Why?

JOHN POLK: Well, they always say that they don't want popcorn and they wind up eating all of yours.

ASHBE: You mean, you hate dates just because they eat your popcorn? Don't you think that's kind of stingy?

JOHN POLK: It's the principle of the thing. Why can't they just say, yes, I'd like some popcorn when you ask them. But, no, they're always so damn coy.

ASHBE: I'd tell my date if I wanted popcorn. I'm not that immature.

JOHN POLK: Anyway, it's not only the popcorn. It's a lot of little things. I've finished coloring. What do I do now?

ASHBE: Now you have to fold it. Here . . . like this. (*She explains the process with relish.*) Say, that's really something.

JOHN POLK: It's kind of funny looking. (*Putting the hat on.*) Yeah, I like it, but you could never wear it anywhere.

ASHBE: Well, like what anyway?

JOHN POLK: Huh?

ASHBE: The things dates do to you that you don't like, the little things.

JOHN POLK: Oh, well just the way they wear those false eye lashes and put their hand on your knee when you're trying to parallel park, and keep on giggling and going off to the bathroom with their girlfriends. It's obvious they don't want to go out with me. They just want to go out so that they can wear their new clothes and won't have to sit on their ass in the dormitory. They never want to go out with me. I can never even talk to them.

ASHBE: Well, you can talk to me and I'm a girl.

JOHN POLK: Well, I'm really kind of drunk and you're a stranger . . . well, I probably wouldn't be able to talk to you tomorrow. That makes a difference.

ASHBE: Maybe it does. (*A bit of a pause and then extremely pleased by the idea she says.*) You know we're alike because I don't like dances either.

JOHN POLK: I thought you said you practiced . . . in the afternoons.

ASHBE: Well, I like dancing. I just don't like dances. At least not like—well, not like the one our school was having tonight . . . they're so corny.

JOHN POLK: Yeah, most dances are.

ASHBE: All they serve is potato chips and fruit punch, and then this stupid baby band plays and everybody dances around thinking they're so hot. I frankly wouldn't dance there. I

would prefer to wait till I am invited to an exclusive ball. It doesn't really matter which ball, just one where they have huge, golden chandeliers and silver fountains, and serve delicacies of all sorts and bubble blue champagne. I'll arrive in a pink silk cape. (*Laughing.*) I want to dance in pink!

JOHN POLK: You're mixed up. You're probably one of those people that live in a fantasy world.

ASHBE: I do not. I accept reality as well as anyone. Anyway, you can talk to me remember. I know what you mean by the kind of girls it's hard to talk to. There are girls a lot that way in the small clique at my school. Really tacky and mean. They expect everyone to be as stylish as they are and they won't even speak to you in the hall. I don't mind if they don't speak to me, but I really love the orphans and it hurts my feelings when they are so mean to them.

JOHN POLK: What do you mean—they're mean to the orphans? (*Notices pun and giggles to self.*)

ASHBE: Oh, well, they sometimes snicker at the orphans' dresses. The orphans usually have hand-me-down drab ugly dresses. Once Shelly Maxwell wouldn't let Glinda borrow her pencil, even though she had two. It hurt her feelings.

JOHN POLK: Are you best friends with these orphans?

ASHBE: I hardly know them at all. They're really shy. I just like them a lot. They're the reason I put spells on the girls in the clique.

JOHN POLK: Spells, what do you mean, witch spells?

ASHBE: Witch spells? Not really, mostly just voodoo.

JOHN POLK: Are you kidding? Do you really do voodoo?

ASHBE: Sure, here I'll show you my doll. (*Goes to get doll, comes back with straw voodoo doll. Her air as she returns is one of frightening mystery.*) I know a lot about the subject. Cora she used to wash dishes in the Moonlight Cafe, told me all about voodoo. She's a real expert on the subject, went to all the meetings and everything. Once she caused a man's throat to rot away and turn almost totally black. She's moved to Chicago now.

JOHN POLK: It doesn't really work. Does it?

ASHBE: Well, not always. The thing about voodoo is that both parties have to believe in it for it to work.

JOHN POLK: Do the girls in school believe in it?

ASHBE: Not really, I don't think. That's where my main problem comes in. I have to make the clique believe in it, yet I have to be very subtle. Mainly, I give reports in English class or Speech.

JOHN POLK: Reports?

ASHBE: On voodoo.

JOHN POLK: That's really kind of sick, you know.

ASHBE: Not really. I don't cast spells that'll do any real harm. Mainly, just the kind of thing to make them think—to keep them on their toes. (*Blue drink intoxication begins to take over and John Polk begins laughing.*) What's so funny?

JOHN POLK: Nothing. I was just thinking what a mean little person you are.

ASHBE: Mean! I'm not mean a bit.

JOHN POLK: Yes, you are mean— (*Picking up color.*) and green too.

ASHBE: Green?

JOHN POLK: Yes, green with envy of those other girls; so you play all those mean little tricks.

ASHBE: Envious of those other girls, that stupid, close-minded little clique!

JOHN POLK: Green as this marshmallow. (*Eats marshmallow.*)

ASHBE: You think I want to be in some group . . . a sheep like you? A little sheep like you that does everything when he's supposed to do it!

JOHN POLK: Me a sheep—I do what I want!

ASHBE: Ha! I've known you for an hour and already I see you for the sheep you are!

JOHN POLK: Don't take your green meanness out on me.

ASHBE: Not only are you a sheep, you are a NORMAL sheep. Give me back my colors! (*Begins snatching colors away.*)

JOHN POLK: (*Pushing colors at her.*) Green and mean! Green and mean! Green and mean! Etc.

ASHBE: (*Throwing marshmallows at him.*) That's the reason

you're in a fraternity and the reason you're going to manage your mind, and dates—you go out on dates merely because it's expected of you even though you have a terrible time. That's the reason you go to the whorehouse to prove you're a normal man. Well, you're much too normal for me.

JOHN POLK: Infant bitch. You think you're really cute.

ASHBE: That really wasn't food coloring in your drink, it was poison! (*She laughs, he picks up his coat to go and she stops throwing marshmallows at him.*) Are you going? I was only kidding. For Christ sake it wasn't really poison. Come on, don't go. Can't you take a little friendly criticism?

JOHN POLK: Look, did you have to bother me tonight? I had enough problems without—(*Phone rings. Both look at phone, it rings for the third time. He stands undecided.*)

ASHBE: Look, wait, we'll make it up. (*She goes to answer phone.*) Hello—Daddy. How are you? . . . I'm fine . . . Dad, you sound funny . . . what? . . . Come on, Daddy, you know she's not here. (*Pause.*) Look, I told you I wouldn't call anymore. You've got her number in Atlanta. (*Pause, as she sinks to the floor.*) Why have you started again? . . . Don't say that. I can tell it. I can. Hey, I have to go to bed now. I don't want to talk anymore, o.k.? (*Hangs up phone, softly to self.*) Goddamnit.

JOHN POLK: (*He has heard the conversation and is taking off his coat.*) Hey, Ashbe— (*She looks at him blankly, her mind far away.*) You want to talk?

ASHBE: No.

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## The Art of Dining

Tina Howe

Characters: Elizabeth Barrow Colt (30s), David Osslow (mid-50s)