

THE PASSION OF OLYMPIA BROWN

A One-Act Play by FRED KEEFE

“Reformers are often deceived by a kind of mirage and see distant things near and suppose that victory is at hand, when in reality, generations, are yet to pass before it can be realized.”

-Olympia Brown

Cast of Characters (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**Old Olympia
Reporter
Lephia Brown
Young Olympia
Horace Mann
Lucy Stone
Susan B. Anthony
Phineas T. Barnum
James Staples
Theodore Roosevelt
Woodrow Wilson
Woman
Voices in Congregation**

OLD OLYMPIA

Your face is very familiar? Have we met somewhere before?

REPORTER

Well, you probably saw me at that protest against President Woodrow Wilson.

OLD OLYMPIA

Oh, the one on Lafayette Square.

REPORTER

Yes, that one—In 1917.

OLD OLYMPIA

You were one of the reporters there, weren't you?

REPORTER

Yes, ma'am, I was.

OLD OLYMPIA

What did you think of the protest?

REPORTER

I thought it was very prescient.

OLD OLYMPIA

Were you able to hear what I said? Was my voice loud and clear?

REPORTER

Your voice has always been loud and clear.

OLD OLYMPIA

When people can't hear what you're saying, there's no use talking, my mother always used to say.

REPORTER

People had no trouble hearing you.

OLD OLYMPIA

I'm glad of that. I managed pretty well for a sly, 84 year old rabble rouser, didn't I?

REPORTER

You certainly did, ma'am.

OLD OLYMPIA

Were you upset by that demonstration?

REPORTER

No ma'am.

OLD OLYMPIA

My daughter in Baltimore told me that quite a few people took offense at what I said and did.

REPORTER

Yes, there were many who were shocked.

OLD OLYMPIA

Good! That's what reformers are supposed to do—to shock people, shock them into taking action, to righting wrongs.

REPORTER

Well, you left your mark.

OLD OLYMPIA

Well, I did, didn't I? My mother used to talk about "leaving my mark," –how important it was to push myself forward. Poor mama, she was the first reformer I ever knew. Living on our little farm in Michigan, doing all the washing, cooking and spinning, and yet, was able to keep abreast of the times on every question. I don't know how she did it.

LEPHIA BROWN

It wasn't easy, Olympia, and I didn't want you to go through the same thing. Do you remember what your Aunt Pamela used to tell you?

OLD OLYMPIA

(Mimicking her aunt) "Women get very little credit for what they do in this world" –(Here Lephia joins in with daughter, and they recite in unison)

OLD OLYMPIA and LEPHIA

"Which is something you'll have to accept when you grow up and start marking your way through life." (They laugh)

LEPHIA

(Suddenly stern) The trouble with Pamela was that she liked to complain about things instead of doing something about them.

OLD OLYMPIA

You certainly had no trouble on that score. I remember the readings you and father used to have almost every evening. There were books, of course, --all kinds of books— but what I remember especially was the *New York Weekly Tribune*.

LEPHIA

Horace Greeley's paper. He was the farmer's authority for just about everything.

OLD OLYMPIA

Hearing what he had to say about what was going on in the world used to excite me so. Progress, progress, he was always saying. He made me want to get out and do something, put his words into action.

LEPHIA

Yes, he had that effect on people.

OLD OLYMPIA

There was that wonderful story about the woman preacher, Antoinette Brown. That really stirred my imagination – and my ambition, too. If he could do it, I thought, why couldn't I?

LEPHIA

Yes, your father and I saw the way you were leaning, and we did what we could to help you. You had a mind of your own –I’ll say that much.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

(Rising from the congregation) Mama, that’s what I want to be – a preacher. I want to change people’s minds about so many things.

LEPHIA

It won’t be easy, Olympia.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I know that, but I want to try.

LEPHIA

You’ve got so much to learn first.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

If I could only go away to college—like the University of Michigan.

LEPHIA

You know how your uncle feels about that. Women have no need for a university education, he says. Anyway, I don’t know of any college that admits women.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I’ll find one.

LEPHIA

You’ll have to make a good first impression.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I will. I know I will.

LEPHIA

Remember what I told you about your voice. You’ve got to pitch it lower, Olympia. People, especially men, hate shrill voices. And try not to talk too fast.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I’ll try, Mama.

LEPHIA

Speak loudly and clearly. If people can’t hear what you’re saying, there’s no point in saying it.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Yes, Mama.

LEPHIA

And don't be afraid to enunciate important words. Develop a style that draws attention.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Yes, Mama.

LEPHIA

Remember to stand straight. And look people in the eye. Especially men.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I will, Mama. (Lephia sits down)

REPORTER

Thanks to the help of both her mother and father, Olympia finally enrolled at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, one of the first colleges in the country to try what was called "the great experiment" of co-education. Horace Mann was president.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

He was a fine man as far as women's rights were concerned, but he had his limitations. I remember him speaking to us one day about co-education.

HORACE MANN

Miss Brown, do you really believe that the education of women will lead them to enter the professions?

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Of course, it will. Why else would we be getting an education, if not to prepare ourselves for our future life and work?

HORACE MANN

I simply thought an educated wife would be an asset to her husband.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I'm sure she would be, but we don't all plan to get married and raise families, and we ought to be able to support ourselves, don't you think?

HORACE MANN

I wasn't thinking of women joining men in the workaday world, Miss Brown. Is this what you have in mind?

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Why not? Don't you think women should develop all their capabilities?

HORACE MANN

I don't consider it necessary, Miss Brown. If that is what women want, perhaps I am wrong to remain at the head of a co-educational school. (He sits down)

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Horace Mann's attitude was discouraging, but it made me more determined than ever to see that women were given the rights they deserved. I told my parents that, after graduating Antioch, I wanted to become minister—a fully ordained minister – which would mean two years at a theological school. My father said getting accepted in such a school wouldn't be easy, and he was right. I got rejection after rejection in answer to my letters. "We do not believe ladies are called to the ministry" was the stock reply.

REPORTER

Finally, there came a letter from St. Lawrence, the all-male Universalist Theological School in Canton, New York. Olympia Brown had been accepted as the first female student to be enrolled there. The Civil War had just begun, and perhaps there were fewer male applicants. Whatever the reason, she was accepted and started her studies in Canton in the fall of 1861.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I was prepared to be discriminated against, but the faculty members were all patient and understanding and treated me as an equal with the male students. Most of the students were friendly, too, but there were a few who took great pleasure in belittling me.

VOICE (in congregation)

Who wants a woman preacher?

ANOTHER VOICE

What's the point of listening to a woman giving a sermon?

YOUNG OLYMPIA

One of their favorite tricks was to get under my window at night and imitate my way of speaking in class.

VOICES (mimicking her)

Why should only men be ministers or doctors or lawyers?

YOUNG OLYMPIA

My voice wasn't that bad. In fact, professors said I had a natural flair for speaking in public, and I did everything I could to make my voice stronger. During the summer between my first and second year at St. Lawrence I stayed in the Canton area, instead of going back home, and preached wherever I could find a welcoming parish.

REPORTER

Olympia's second year at St. Lawrence was marked by continued improvement, and she felt confident about being qualified for ordination. The president and faculty members, however, were strongly opposed.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

They refused to ordain me because I was a woman. So when I hear that the Northern Universalist Association was meeting not far from Canton, I decided to attend the gathering and ask for ordination there.

REPORTER

Olympia asked only that the ordaining council members be fair and impartial, to judge her solely on her merits, not on her sex. They knew that they would be setting a precedent if they decided to ordain her, but they took the risk, and she was ordained on June 25, 1863.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I started preaching at various churches in Vermont, while I took elocution lessons in Boston, always hoping for a parish of my own. I finally got one in Weymouth, Massachusetts, where I made a good first impression and where I remained for five years.

REPORTER

It was a while she was at Weymouth that Olympia Brown became involved in the suffrage movement. Having heard her speak and knowing how she felt about women's rights, Susan B. Anthony invited her to attend a Women's Rights Convention in New York City. This, in turn, led to her becoming a charter member of the American Equal Rights Association.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

It was at its first convention in Albany that I met Lucy Stone for the first time. Although she was a married woman, she refused to take the name of her husband, and I asked her why.

LUCY STONE (getting up)

My own name is part of my identity, and I won't give it up or change it. Taking the husband's name means ownership. I refused to bear such a stigma.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

And your husband doesn't object?

LUCY STONE

I'm pleased to say he doesn't. Why should he? There is no law requiring a woman to take her husband's name.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

It's a matter of custom, I suppose.

LUCY STONE

A custom going back to the time when women were considered property.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

You do have a point.

LUCY STONE

Another thing—this notion of calling an unmarried woman “Miss.” A woman should be called “Mrs.” As soon as she reaches maturity. Unmarried men aren’t designated by a special prefix. Why should women? Because it is a custom? Rubbish!

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Lucy Stone was a persuasive woman, I’ll say that, and she must have influenced me more than I realized at the time. When I married John Willis a few years later, I remembered what Lucy had said and told him I wanted to keep my maiden name. He made no objection.

LUCY STONE

I suggested to Susan B. Anthony that Olympia be sent as a speaker to Kansas in the summer of 1867. A suffrage amendment was going to be submitted to Kansas voters in the coming fall election. If the amendment passed, we felt, it would be a victory for women’s rights.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Would I go out there and campaign for the cause? I talked to the church trustees, and they gave their permission. Lucy Stone made it all seem so simple.

LUCY STONE

Advance notices will be sent out, of course. Everything will be carefully arranged—someone to meet you at each stopping place, transportation, place to stay, etc., etc. All you have to do is talk.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I should have known it wasn’t going to be that easy—and it wasn’t. First, the weather. The blistering heat of that summer in Kansas was overwhelming. Then there was the territory itself. Thinly settled. Still subject to attacks by Indians. No paved roads. No quick means of communication from town to town. I was passed from one family to another by way of lodging. Men often drew lots, with the loser taking me by horse-and-wagon to my next engagement.

Again and again I arrived at places that hadn’t been told I was coming. Once, when I got to one place where I’d been scheduled to speak, I found it already claimed by a man who was going to hold forth against women’s rights. I suggested that we both speak, make it a debate, and he agreed. In an informal vote at the end I was declared the winner by a huge margin. One moment like that made up for all the hardships of that summer.

REPORTER

By the time October came, Olympia had given over 300 lectures in Kansas. She was bitterly disappointed when the amendment failed to pass, but Susan B. Anthony was undismayed and had nothing but praise for her work in a letter she wrote to her.

SUSAN B. ANTHONY

Never was a defeat so glorious a victory. Don’t despair. We shall win. The day breaks. Depend upon it—there is a wise destiny in our delay—**it is not defeat**. So let us hope

and work to the brighter day. God bless you and keep you safe and alive to see the glory of our work accomplished.

REPORTER

There were other letters, too, praising Olympia's work in Kansas campaign, but she was more than happy to return to her parish in Weymouth. She hadn't been there long before receiving letters from Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, both asking her to give up her ministry and devote herself completely to the cause of woman's suffrage.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I told them I would do all I could for women's rights, but I had fought too long for my ordination, and the church came first.

REPORTER

Before long, however, Olympia became restless. She had been at Weymouth for five years. A church that had been having problems when she took over the parish now had a growing, healthy congregation. It was time to turn it over to another minister, she felt, so that she could continue her work elsewhere. That was when she read about the Universalist church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. It had no minister, so she applied for the position and was invited to preach a trial sermon. The congregation, in spite of a small hostile faction, voted in favor of accepting her as minister, and she took up her duties there after moving to Bridgeport.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

If I had known the trouble that lay ahead, I might have stayed where I was.

REPORTER

One of her strongest supporters in the Bridgeport church was the great showman, Phineas T. Barnum.

BARNUM

I have nothing but the highest regard for the Reverend Olympia Brown. She is a woman who speaks her mind and can stand her own against any speaker, male or female.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

All well and good. But there was that hostile faction, led by James Staples.

STAPLES

The last thing this church needs is a woman preacher. A woman has no authority, whatsoever.

BARNUM

No authority? Remember your mother, Mr. Staples.

STAPLES

Don't mock me, Mr. Barnum. You know perfectly well how some of us feel.

BARNUM

Yes. I do indeed.

STAPLES

Having a woman preacher demeans religion, turns it into something frivolous.

BARNUM

Surely you don't long for old-time Calvinism, Mr. Staples.

STAPLES

You know perfectly well what I'm getting at, Mr. Barnum. Religion isn't a side-show.

BARNUM

And I don't consider it a side-show. What is wrong with making religion a joyful thing?

STAPLES

Do you think having a woman preacher makes religion joyful?

BARNUM

That depends on the woman, Mr. Staples. Olympia Brown, from what I've heard, has considerable force and energy, qualities we can put to good use in this church. Give her a chance.

STAPLES

I'll bring her down if it's the last thing I do. (Sits down)

YOUNG OLYMPIA

And bring me down, he did. The hostile faction Mr. Staples led seemed to grow steadily stronger, demanding at meeting after meeting that I be replaced as preacher. Even Mr. Barnum began to have doubts about me.

BARNUM

Olympia, you know very well that I've been one of your strongest supporters. In fact, I was instrumental in getting you accepted here. These rumors you may have heard about—plans to hire a man in your place—disturb me greatly.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Rumors started by James Staples, of course.

BARNUM

He is planning to bring you up on charges of "unministerial conduct" at the state convention.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Because I'm a woman?

BARNUM

Not because of your sex, but because of your militant stand on behalf of woman's rights.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I do feel strongly about woman's rights, Mr. Barnum. You knew that when I was hired.

BARNUM

Yes, I knew. But many church members feel that you've gone too far. They think you're politicizing the pulpit.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

When you say "they", I assume you mean James Staples.

BARNUM

He is planning to seek a court injunction barring the church officers from re-hiring you.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

And you think he will succeed.

BARNUM

I'm afraid he will.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

And you feel I should step down?

BARNUM

Yes. Resign—while you can still do it honorably. For the good of the church, resign.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I've never backed away from anything, Mr. Barnum, and I don't plan to do so now.

BARNUM

I think you should know that the church will get no further contributions from me until a new state of affairs exists. You might keep that in mind in making your decision.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I will, Mr. Barnum.

BARNUM

Whatever happens, I wish you well, Olympia.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

Much as I resented Phineas T. for the way he seemed to be betraying me, I couldn't help liking him. He was right, of course—the Staples injunction was carried through, and I was forced out of my pulpit by court decree. I had married John Willis by now, and we continued to live in

Bridgeport for two years before leaving for Racine, Wisconsin, where I had been offered another pastorate.

REPORTER

While still in Bridgeport, Olympia continued to be as active as ever in the cause of woman's suffrage, on one occasion appearing before a Congressional committee in Washington.

YOUNG OLYMPIA

I will not insult your common sense by bring up the old arguments as to whether we have the right to vote. I believe every man knows we have that right—that our right is based upon the same authority as yours. Women from the rank-and-file desire the ballot, and they mean to have it. (She sits down, as Old Olympia comes forward)

REPORTER

Olympia could see that the congressmen were not moved by her appeal. They seemed more determined than ever to keep women in their place. And so the years went by with nothing being done. The amendment women wanted pass was being considered by a committee, they were told, and there it stayed.

OLD OLYMPIA

Convention after convention was held by woman's suffrage groups, and I went to them all to speak my piece. As the century ended and a new one began, the old fighters for women's rights began to die. Lucy Stone in 1893, Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1902, then the woman I admired most of all, Susan B. Anthony, in 1906.

SUSAN B. ANTHONY

Don't despair! Fight on! I see the dawn of a new day ahead!

OLD OLYMPIA

That dawn was still a long way ahead. With the old reformers dying off and new ones not forceful enough, the prospects were discouraging.

REPORTER

But you were still active.

OLD OLYMPIA

Indeed I was. I was still head of the Wisconsin Woman's Suffrage Association and still holding forth for woman's rights whenever I could. It wasn't easy. We needed new, younger leaders, and they weren't there.

REPORTER

And you had personal problems to contend with, too.

OLD OLYMPIA

Yes. First, my father died, then my mother had a stroke and was an invalid for seven years. Then my husband John died, and I had to take over the newspaper he published. My son and daughter were away at college, so I had my hands full for a while.

REPORTER

But you still kept busy with woman's suffrage.

OLD OLYMPIA

Of course I did. I never missed a chance to have my say.

REPORTER

I understand you didn't care much for President Theodore Roosevelt.

OLD OLYMPIA

No, I didn't. I couldn't abide the things he said about women.

ROOSEVELT

A man's prime duty is to work. A woman's prime duty is to bear children and be a good housewife. I think I speak for all the people in this regard.

OLD OLYMPIA

How could he speak for all the people when half of them were denied the right to vote?

ROOSEVELT

Keep women out of the workplace, and our economy will improve.

OLD OLYMPIA

Hogwash!

REPORTER

How did you feel about President Taft?

OLD OLYMPIA

Even though he was a Unitarian, he didn't do much to improve the status of women.

REPORTER

I know of course, how you felt about President Wilson.

OLD OLYMPIA

Yes, you saw me picketing the White House, didn't you?

REPORTER

You were very spry for a woman in her eighties.

OLD OLYMPIA

I was, wasn't I? It was time for action, I felt. Appearing before congressional committees had gotten us nowhere. By this time I had joined the Woman's Party, made up of women who advocated a more militant stance. Hundreds of us marched every day from ten o'clock in the morning until five-thirty in the afternoon. No matter what the weather.

REPORTER

Yes, I remember how cold it was that winter. That demonstration really made President Wilson angry.

WILSON

Having the White House picketed while our young men are overseas fight to save the world for democracy is more than I can stand. Arrest those women and put them in jail.

REPORTER

No laws were being broken by the women, but the presidential order was carried out. Some of the women were kept in jail in Washington, others were sent to a workhouse in Virginia where they were treated as common criminals. When newspapers ran stories showing the brutal treatment the suffragists received, women across the country stormed into Washington and joined the picket line in front of the White House. Men gathered on sidewalks, hooting in derision at the women as they marched.

OLD OLYMPIA

When I went back to Wisconsin later that spring, I found that I had been ostracized from the state suffrage association because of my picketing.

WOMAN

It is highly improper for ladies to march and protest.

OLD OLYMPIA

Is being proper more important than being able to vote?

WOMAN

In the Civil War we gave up suffrage work until the war ended.

OLD OLYMPIA

Yes, we did. As soon as the war was over, we were told, we'd be given the right to vote. But did we get it? No, we did not. Then we were asked to do the same thing in 1917. We knew if we gave in we'd have to begin the fight all over again.

WOMAN

Nevertheless, ladies should not be marching in the streets carrying signs. It's not dignified.

OLD OLYMPIA

We marched because we could see that being dignified was getting us nowhere.

REPORTER

As soon as the war ended, suffragists lost no time in demanding action on the Anthony Amendment. President Wilson responded with indifference.

WILSON

There are more important things to be done than taking care of noisy, demanding women. The Paris peace talks take precedence over anything else.

REPORTER

In response to Wilson's declaration, members of the National Woman's Party, including Olympia Brown, decided to light a fire in Lafayette Park on the day that the president was officially received in France and publicly burn all of his speeches on freedom and democracy. In the late afternoon 400 women walked in single file past the White House to the foot of Lafayette's statue.

OLD OLYMPIA

America has fought for France and the common cause of liberty. I have fought for liberty for seventy years, and I protest against the president's leaving our country with the old fight here still unwon.

REPORTER

The demonstration had no effect on the lawmakers. Once again, the Senate voted against the Woman's Suffrage Amendment. President Wilson, however, perhaps affected in some way by the stunned reaction of women to this rebuff, began to see that it was time to give his support to the Nineteenth Amendment and after returning from Europe, urged legislators to pass the measure. On August 25, 1920, the final state ratified the amendment, and women could at last vote.

OLD OLYMPIA

Which, of course, I did—on November 2, 1920. I was one of the first people to vote that morning. What a wonderful feeling it was!

REPORTER

The long battle was over.

OLD OLYMPIA

Not over. Just begun. We must start working toward an equal rights amendment now. That may take a long time.

REPORTER

Don't you ever get weary?

OLD OLYMPIA

Not for long. When I do get tired I think of what old Phineas T. Barnum once told me. Drive ahead, don't spare the horses, and make all the noise possible. I like that.

REPORTER

In other words, keep going.

OLD OLYMPIA

Yes, keep going.

REPORTER (to congregation)

Olympia Brown kept going until the age of 91. The following editorial appeared in *The Baltimore Sun* for October 25, 1926, a few days after her death:

Olympia Brown carried throughout her long and active life the dauntless courage and mental freshness of the frontier environment whence she came.

Queen Victoria had not been called to the throne of England when this pioneer American suffragist was born in a Michigan log cabin. Andrew Jackson was still President of the United States. Perhaps that helps to explain why there was so little of Victorian stodginess, so much of Jacksonian virility in the character of Mrs. Willis, to use the married name by which in accordance with her principles, she was seldom known.

It was a compliment to Baltimore when, at the age of 80, this interesting and charming lady decided to make her home there. At such an age no newcomer could be expected to write a name in current issues. But the Rev. Olympia Brown, though well past her allotted span, could not remain inactive.

Perhaps no phase of her life better exemplified her vitality and intellectual independence than the mental discomfort she succeeded in arousing, between her eightieth and ninetieth birthdays, among conservatively-minded Baltimoreans.

OLD OLYMPIA

Amen!

THE END

Written by Fred Keefe, Palm Beach Unitarian Church, FL who had retired as a staff member of THE NEW YORKER magazine, probably in the late 1980's or early 90's. Given to Patty Jantho who was then a member of the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore, MD. Jantho's sister was a member of the Palm Beach Church.