

"The Five Impediments"

A musical in one-act

by

Amelia Ray

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CHARACTERS

ANNABEL, mid-50s, white, she/her

ANNIE, 8, African-American, she/her

ANA, 17, Mexican-American, she/her

HANNAH, 20, Vietnamese-American, she/her

ANAH, late-30s, Afghan-American, she/her

TIME

2008-2060

NOTES

"The Five Impediments" utilizes the 19th century art of pantomime, in which a performer lip syncs vocals that are being sung by another onstage performer. The characters appearing onstage together are never to address or acknowledge each other. It is recommended that characters wear costumes that share a color scheme.

Script contains lyrics from the following songs in the public domain:

"America, The Beautiful"

(music by Samuel A. Ward, lyrics by Katharine Lee Bates)

"Blessed Assurance"

(music by Phoebe Knapp, lyrics by Fanny Crosby)

"Marines' Hymn"

(music by Jacques Offenbach, lyrics by anonymous)

"The Star-Spangled Banner"

(music by John Stafford Smith, lyrics by Francis Scott Key)

"When Johnny Comes Marching Home"

(music and lyrics by Louis Lambert)

Alternative lyrics and arrangements by Amelia Ray.

SCENE 1

(Evening. Living Room. Upscale, simple taste. A painting of Lady Trieu riding an elephant hangs on a wall. ANNABEL - a stylish, pint-sized Patton of a white woman in her mid-50s who sleeps with a body pillow - paces, television remote in one hand, phone in the other to her ear, mid-conversation.)

ANNABEL

How do we kill this story?

(Points remote at television and shakes it.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

I was looking this reporter right in the eyes at the press conference and he still misquoted me! On top of that they edited the footage to make me sound like the head of a lynch mob.

(Mutes television.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

I can't imagine it's anything but. I never called the precinct a "butcher shop". Sue this two-bit network. They're probably in bed with the Commissioner. Speak of the devil.

(Unmutes television. Lowers phone.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

Naturally.

(Raises phone to ear again.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

Well, I expect him to defend his staff. Let's just see if it will cost him his job. I know he's going to throw me under the bus, it's just a question of how far.

(Moves phone away from mouth.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

(to television) Maybe if you had trained your pack of trigger-happy tyrants there wouldn't be a community up in arms!

(Brings phone to mouth again.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

What a cop out. He's transferring the blame to the resid --

(Lowers phone.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

(to television) "Pandering"? "My people"? Of course, I speak for the African-American community. That's my job!

(Raises remote to ear.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

I want his --

*(Looks at remote. Mutes television.
Raises phone to ear again.)*

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

I want his badge. Yes, I did refer to the officers involved as "killers" because that's what they are! Well, maybe I'm tired of toeing the line. I'm not going to recant the truth. No, this is more than a personal vendetta. That precinct has the highest number of officer-involved shootings in the city. I should have called it a "slaughterhouse"! Wait.

(Lowers phone. Unmutes television. Raises phone to ear again.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

Yes, that's what the shirt says. I was in college! Attorney-client privilege? Yeah, I wear it to my kickboxing class once a week. No, I don't still have it! Hang on.

(Lowers phone. Checks app. Raises phone to ear again.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

They're already tweeting about it. Yep. "Hashtag Mayor N.W.A." Seriously? You're asking me how a network bent on taking me down got their hands on a photo of me from 30 years ago? They wouldn't have to go far in this town to find somebody who doesn't like the fact that I'm in charge. Yeah, I'll get to the bottom of it. Give you another name to add to your to-sue list. Mmm-hmm. Thanks.

(Hangs up. Paces. Stares at television. Raises phone in anger. Stops mid-throw. Notices remote in other hand. Looks at phone. Lowers phone. Throws remote at television. Walks to bar. Sets phone down. Pours whiskey into a glass. Takes a large sip. Stares off. Takes another large sip. Slams glass down, picks up phone and dials.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

Pickup, pickup. *(To answering machine)* Hey. It's me. I hope you're doing well. Listen, I need to know if you leaked that photo to the press. I know we said "let bygones be". But I also know how much you love a good scandal. And maybe you needed the money? I don't know. But what I do know is that I play to win. And there will be no kid gloves, no spousal privilege, no amicable, discreet civil proceeding like last time. I'll slap an injunction on you so fast it'll straighten your perm. It'll be the end of your so-called career. No agency will touch you! You might as well burn your portfolio, 'cause the only photos you'll be shopping around town will be the ones laminated on an Applebee's menu!

(Takes a deep breath.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

Anyway, if it wasn't you, feel free to ignore this message. Give my love to Deb.

(Hangs up. Walks to bar. Pours another drink. Raises it to drink. Sets it down with out drinking. Calls back.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

Just in case you were thinking of sharing that last message with your friends at TMZ, let me spell it out for you:

(Lowers phone from ear to mouth to speak directly into microphone.)

ANNABEL (CONT'D)

I-N-J-U-N --

(Music begins as stage goes black with the exception of a spotlight on Annabel and another on ANNIE, a fidgety firecracker of an eight-year-old African-American girl, who enters. Unaware of each other's presence, both begin to dance in unison. Annie sings out loud with all the confidence and passion of a full-grown woman while Annabel cantomimes, or lip-syncs, what Annie is actually singing.)

ANNIE

SLANT OBSERVATION, SCARCELY INSIGHT
DEPICTED IN COLOR, NOT JUST BLACK AND WHITE
THROUGH REPETITION, PICKING UP CLUES
PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS, BID THEM ADIEU

THIS IS MY STORY, THIS IS MY SONG
ONE MINUTE YOU SEE IT, THE NEXT IT IS GONE
THIS IS MY STORY, THIS IS MY SONG
NOT JUST IMITATION 'CAUSE THAT WOULD BE WRONG

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 2

(Day. Grade-school classroom. Annie reads presentation from her notebook. She goes off-script a lot.)

ANNIE

I come from a long line of queens and kings and powerful empires that ruled for centuries. My people came to this country a very, very long time --

(Is interrupted by classmate talking.)

ANNIE (CONT'D)

Be quiet, Danny Shipley! *(to entire class)* As I was saying: My people came to this country a very, very long time ago.

My grandma's named Annie just like me. She says it probably was her grandma's name, too, or maybe it was something hard to pronounce like "Annalululabellagram," and, and she had to change it to Annie when she got here.

When my people first came here other people thought the food we ate was weird and smelly and they probably wouldn't feed it to their pet hamster Mr. Nibblesworth but people eat it all the time now. You can thank my people the next time you eat rice and beans. You're welcome!

My people helped make America what it is today. Even though --

(Is interrupted again by Danny Shipley.)

ANNIE (CONT'D)

Stop interrupting me, Danny Shipley! I didn't talk when you were giving your presentation about the Mayflower! *(to entire class)* Where was I? Oh. Even though my people have been here for a gajillion years, sometimes people treat us like we don't belong.

Like, like the other day, my friend Melissa's big sister Tammy had to take us to the mall because Melissa's mom said we weren't allowed to stay in the house by ourselves so if Tammy wanted to go somewhere she had to take us with her. She made us follow her and her stupid friends all around the mall while they talked about boys. Ew! Then we ran into No-Nose Neil - we call him that because his nose is flat like this:

(Annie squishes her nose with the palm of her hand.)

ANNIE (CONT'D)

So, so Tammy gave us five dollars and told us to get lost so we went to Auntie Anne's to get some pretzel nuggets, and when we were there, Beyoncé came on so we were singing, "Halo! Halo!" And this boy came up to us out of nowhere and asked us why we don't go back where we came from, and I said, "'Cause we're from here, duh!" and we were speaking English so I don't know why he even thought we were from somewhere else in the first place!

Like I said, my people have been here for a looooooong time. We were here even before Danny Shipley's family, and his uncle's the mayor!

(sticks tongue out at Danny Shipley)

ANNIE (CONT'D)

But even after all this time we aren't treated like everybody else.

I hope that one day people will stop treating us different just 'cause of the color of our skin, and that we will be free and happy to eat our pretzels in peace!"

(Music begins as stage goes black with the exception of one spotlight on Annie and another on ANA - an unbridled 17-year-old, Mexican-American girl whose restlessness is only slightly tamed by her comically baggy clothes - who enters as Annie clears her throat. Ana sings out loud in all the awkward stop-and-start glory of an 8-year-old singing in front of her classmates while Annie cantomimes.)

ANA
FROM THE HOLDING CELLS OF YUMA
TO THOSE IN CORPUS CHRISTI
WE FIGHT DISCRIMINATION
SO THAT ONE DAY WE'LL BE FREE
FIRST TO FIGHT FOR RIGHT AND FREEDOM
TO PROTEST ON BENDED KNEE
THEN TO FIGHT FOR RIGHT AND FREEDOM
TO SHOP AT OLD NAVY!

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 3

(Downtown, late afternoon. Ana and her best friend and other half of her tagging crew, Tommy [unseen], are spray-painting a concrete wall near the bus depot.)

ANA
Yo, let me -- let me finish the story. So she was like, "Nah. I'm gonna fight when I grow up. I ain't got time for no marriage, housework." Straight-up, warrior. Like, a hundred percent. Goals. So, yeah. She's gonna be my masterpiece. Wait, no. My pièce de la résistance! French class, fam.

(Stands back to observe work.)

ANA (CONT'D)
Hey, how do you draw an elephant trunk?

(Looks at Tommy then back at wall.)

ANA (CONT'D)
Huh. Yeah, yeah, I got you.

(Shakes can, resumes painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)
Nah, that's why I'm painting her out here.

(Stops painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)

I turned in a sketch and that stupid art teacher freaked out. She was like, "No weapons allowed. School policy." And I'm like, "What are you even talking about! Like, what does a drawing of a sword have to do with bringing a real sword to school? Nothing! Like, at all!" Basic! I gotta stay true. Ha! Get it? I gotta stay -- So, yeah, I said, "If Lady Trieu rode into battle on an elephant with a sword in each hand, then that's how I'ma draw her." But still the teacher's like, "Sorry, school policy." And I was trying so hard not to punch her in her face right then but I didn't, I just, I just said. "Well, I'm not doing it then!" So, yeah. I got an F.

(Shakes can, resumes painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)

Are you really judging me right now? Mr. Let's-Organize-A-Student-Walkout-Until-They-Put-Bánh-Mì-On-The-Cafeteria-Menu?

(A passing police car chirps.)

ANA (CONT'D)

(quietly) Shit. Get down!

(Ana falls to the ground. Chirps fade. She gets up. Brushes herself off.)

ANA (CONT'D)

All right, it's cool. Damn, Tommy, you ain't gotta be extra! Pop a zannie, they're gone.

(Shakes can, resumes painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)

But you were right, though. I mean, it's a lot of us at that school! And they never thought we might want to eat more than just burnt veggie burgers and cheese pizza? Damn, give us an empanada every once in awhile. Something! Right? But for real, I'm sure in a couple of years the cafeteria menu will look like, like something outta the UN.

(Stops painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)

Well, I mean. It's like gentrification, right? First the white people don't want to touch our food. Too afraid of shit they can't pronounce. They're all like, "That smells. That's funky. What do you put in that?" Then some woke white chef takes a trip to "The Orient" and now everybody wanna stand in line and get overcharged to eat that funk. Gentrification.

(Shakes can, resumes painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)

What's up with you and Melissa, though? She follow you back? Oh, for real? Slide in them DMs, Tommy!

(Does a slow grind.)

ANA (CONT'D)

I know you wouldn't, I'm just saying.

(Shakes can, resumes painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)

Me? Maybe a little situationship. Low-key, though, you know how it is. My mom would probably send me off to re-education camp if she found out.

(Stands back to take in work.)

ANA (CONT'D)

And to quote the subject of my magnum opus here, "I refuse to be enslaved."

(A passing police car chirps.)

ANA (CONT'D)

Seriously?

(Ana crouches down. Chirps fade. She stands up.)

ANA (CONT'D)

Right? I don't get what the big deal is anyway. I mean, like,

(Stands back, spreads arms while taking in work.)

ANA (CONT'D)

this is free public art, you know?

(Shakes can, resumes painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)

Sometimes it feels like being out here writing is the only time we really get to express ourselves. Besides, it's not like they ever put anything up on these walls except campaign posters and "keep out" signs. How's that working out for them? But this? This is art about us by us and for us. It's like, meta. Maybe? No. It's like. Well, nobody understands us, but us. This right here is us exercising our right to express ourselves. We're expressing our right to self-expression. Yo...

(Stops painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)

Is that meta? Yo, you kinda quiet over there. We good? I said, "Is that meta?" It is, right? I should definitely get extra credit for that. Tell that to that dumbass art teacher.

(Shakes can, resumes painting.)

ANA (CONT'D)

Yo, fam, I'm telling you, one day I'm gonna dunk on her so hard! I'm gonna go to some fancy art school in Paris or London, and get mad clout, marry a model, and -- yeah, why not? And I'll come back flexing, just like Lady T here, riding an elephant, a sword in each hand, saying,

(Raises arms over head as if holding a banner.)

ANA (CONT'D)

"Fuck school policy!"

(Music begins as stage goes black with the exception of one spotlight on Ana and another on bitter but impassioned 20-year-old Vietnamese-American HANNAH as she enters, proudly sporting a "Fuck the Police" t-shirt. A silver pendant of an elephant hangs from her neck. She and Ana begin to dance in unison, moving like bantamweights. Hannah raps and Ana cantomimes.)

HANNAH

WHEN ANA COMES RIDING AN ELEPHANT, HO!
HURRAH! HURRAH!
THE PO-PO WON'T COME AROUND NO MO
HURRAH! HURRAH!
THE MEN WILL CHEER, MY BOY, TOMMY, WILL SHOUT
THE LADIES, THEY WILL ALL PUT OUT
AND WE'LL ALL FEEL GAY
WHEN ANA COMES WIELDING SWORDS!

(We hear approaching sirens as Ana exits running.)

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 4

(Afternoon. University campus. Hannah stands on the steps of the administration building. A cloth mask covers her nose and mouth. She speaks through a bullhorn, addressing the handful of students who have gathered at the last-minute protest she has organized.)

HANNAH

...all of these cities lost in the light of day! Homes consumed by fire. Lives destroyed. And our --

(Bullhorn dies. Hannah shakes bullhorn. Tries it again.)

HANNAH (CONT'D)

And our tax --

(Bullhorn dies again. Hannah shakes bullhorn again. Can't get it to work. Tosses it aside. She removes mask and gets bigger to be heard.)

HANNAH (CONT'D)

And our tax dollars paid for that. The government never asked the Afghan-American community how it felt. They never asked if we were scared, too. And now it's happening again. Well, enough is enough! This time we will not be silenced!

(Scattered claps.)

HANNAH (CONT'D)

We must raise our voices! We who are here. Safe. Far away from the falling bombs in Kabul. And stand up for those less fortunate! Isn't helping others what they teach us every day right here at this institution? An institution that our tuition fees pay for? No, we will not be silenced.

(More enthusiasm from small crowd.)

HANNAH (CONT'D)

So who here has the courage to join me and fight for those who can no longer speak for themselves? The situation on the ground in Afghanistan is critical. Lines of communication have been cut. People don't have access to news about what's going on around the country. I have cousins who are deleting their social media accounts right now because they're afraid the Taliban will find them.

(Sirens approach.)

HANNAH (CONT'D)

Speaking of the Taliban.

(Students start to disperse.)

HANNAH (CONT'D)

Don't be afraid! Don't back down! We have a right to peacefully assemble! Don't let them silence you! We have a right to --

(Hannah retreats a few steps then struggles with campus police as they attempt to restrain her.)

HANNAH (CONT'D)

Wait! Get off me! No!

(Hannah restrained. Sirens, background noise of crowd and lights fade with the exception of a single spotlight on Hannah who sits, handcuffed, on ground.)

HANNAH (CONT'D)

The sirens caught up with us that day. Tommy and I took off running and thought we'd lost them. But they cornered us in an alley near the bus station. We were out of breath and trapped. Like miners in a shaft.

The first blow doesn't hurt so much as surprise you. Knocks the wind out of you. It's the second blow that hurts. And the third. If you're lucky, you black out after that. When I came to, I was face-down on the ground, my hands cuffed behind me. I tried calling out for Tommy but no sound would come. My lungs were on fire. And the smell. You know that parched smell? Like when it hasn't rained for weeks and the grass and the weeds and dead flowers all smell the same as dirt? It's a thirsty smell. Like dried tears. Like the ground's been crying, praying for rain.

I flinched when I heard the shot. Then everything went real quiet. I turned my head and saw his backpack lying on the ground a few feet away. I barely managed to cry out to him. "Tommy?" Tommy didn't answer.

(Music begins as another spotlight appears on ANAH - an Afghan-American woman in her late 30s, dressed the part of a dynamic, idealistic, liberal candidate - as she enters. A silver pendant of an elephant hangs from her neck. Anah walks over to the broken bullhorn on the ground, picks it up and shakes it back to life. She speaksings into it while Hannah, still seated, cantomimes.)

ANAH

AND WHERE IS THAT BAND WHO SO VAUNTINGLY SWORE
THAT THE HAVOC OF WAR AND THE BATTLE'S CONFUSION
A HOME AND A COUNTRY SHOULD LEAVE US NO MORE?
THEIR BLOOD HAS WASH'D OUT THEIR FOUL FOOTSTEP'S POLLUTION
NO REFUGE COULD SAVE THE HIRELING AND SLAVE
FROM THE TERROR OF FLIGHT OR THE GLOOM OF THE GRAVE
DOES THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER IN TRIUMPH NOW WAVE
O'ER THE LAND OF THE FREE AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE?

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 5

(Spotlight on Anah who stands to one side of a podium, an American flag draped over her shoulders. She strokes the silver pendant around her neck then tucks it inside of her blouse. Lights up as confetti explodes, balloons drop. Anah moves behind podium to deliver election victory speech to a loud crowd of supporters.)

ANAH

Thank you, voters! Thank you for your support! We did it!

(Crowd erupts. Anah raises flag over head and shakes it. Returns flag to shoulders. Takes a deep breath.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

I think I speak for everyone here when I say, "It was a tough race." But we fought hard and we won. We won because people were able to connect with our story. Because we listened to them, we spoke to them. And with their participation, we were able to bridge the divide that so often keeps us apart. But the battle is far from over. We cannot rest on this victory alone. Now, more than ever, we must remain steadfast in our commitment to fight and to adapt to the challenges this city faces. Now, more than ever, we need to work together as we build a new chapter in our city's history. A chapter of change. A chapter of unity. A chapter to ensure that our story will not be forgotten!

(Crowd erupts. Anah moves in front of podium. Crowd noise and lights fade. Single spotlight on Anah.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

My great-grandmother was enslaved. My name comes from hers. I carry the legacy of my people in my name as we have been moved from one home to another.

They do not even try to pronounce my name correctly. I am referred to as "The Girl". I hold little purpose for Them. The only things They have ever wanted from me, from my people, from our land, have already been consumed. Our bodies were repackaged, rebranded and disposed of before we had even arrived here.

Soon, though, once Their bellies are full of our food, Their museums full of our likenesses, Their closets full of our skeletons, and after I have taken on a new name, They will come for our story. Defiant, I will refuse. Our story is all that will be left of the legacy of my people. They will insist. And when I ask Them why, They will say that only by fully understanding our story could They understand Themselves. That only by fully comprehending our story could They understand who it was They were meant to become. I might then tell Them a story. Out of compassion. But which story would I tell?

I could tell Them that our story begins with the pages of a civilization that is almost as old as time itself, and that it travels through the 10th century with the cutting-edge verse of Rabia Balkhi. I could tell Them that Lady Trieu,

(Spotlight on Hannah as she enters upstage left. She stands just behind the podium to one side.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

the third century warrior who rode into battle on a white elephant, remains a symbol of Vietnamese Independence even until this day. Or about the strength of Doña Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez,

(Spotlight on Ana as she enters and stands next to Hannah.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

whose efforts helped incite the Mexican War of Independence. Or how in 1900, Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa,

(Spotlight on Annie as she enters and stands next to Ana.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

led an army of 5,000 men to fight against British colonization. But They would not want to hear that version of our story because in it They could not see Themselves. I could tell Them about Shaesta Waiz, who, in 2017, became the youngest woman to fly solo around the world in a single-engine aircraft. Or about the pioneering work of biochemist Xuong Nguyen-Huu,

(Hannah takes one step forward.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

whose research has helped develop medicines to combat the HIV virus. About former astronaut, Dr. Ellen Ochoa,

(Ana takes one step forward.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

who, in 1993, became the first Hispanic woman in space. Or how in 1945, Steward First Class Carl Clark,

(Annie takes one step forward.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

single-handedly, and with a broken collarbone, saved the U.S.S. Aaron Ward from sinking after a kamikaze attack. But They would not want to hear that version of our story because in it They would not see Themselves. I could recite for Them the eulogies of those whose stories will forever remain untold: Kayla Moore,

(Annie takes another step forward.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

41. Loving sister and aunt. Berkeley. Adam Toledo,

(Ana takes another step forward.)

ANAH (CONT'D)

13. Loving and caring little brother. Chicago. Tommy Le,

*(Hannah takes another step forward.
Hannah, Ana and Annie should now all be
standing as far downstage as Anah so that
they form a straight line across.)*

ANAH (CONT'D)

20. Hard-working student who loved playing chess. King
County.

ANAH (CONT'D)

Abdul Arian, 19. Kindhearted and gentle friend. Los Angeles.
Justine Damond,

*(Spotlight on Annabel who enters stage
right and stands slightly downstage of
Anah.)*

ANAH (CONT'D)

40. Animal lover and caring neighbor. Minneapolis.

But They would not want to hear that version of our story
because in it They would not want to see Themselves.

No. I know exactly what They will want. They will want
something unblemished, easy to consume. Something branded
with images reflecting Their own perception of Themselves. So
I will tell Them a story I know They will not silence. I will
tell Them a story they already know. I will tell them Their
story.

*(Music begins as all spotlights fade with
the exception of Annabel's.)*

ANNABEL

O BEAUTIFUL FOR SPACIOUS SKIES,
FOR AMBER WAVES OF GRAIN,
FOR PURPLE MOUNTAIN MAJESTIES
ABOVE THE FRUITED PLAIN!

*(Lights up as Anah, Hannah, Ana and Annie
each take one step forward to join
Annabel downstage. They also join Annabel
in singing. Out loud. For real.)*

ANNABEL/ANNIE/ANA/HANNAH/ANAH
(CONT'D)

AMERICA! AMERICA!
GOD SHED HIS GRACE ON THEE,
AND CROWN THY GOOD WITH BROTHERHOOD
FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA!

"The Five Impediments" 17.

BLACKOUT.

END OF PLAY