

THE VANISHING OF SISTER AIMEE

Based on the 1926 Disappearance of Aimee Semple McPherson

A New Play

by

Michael David



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12745 Welby Way
North Hollywood, CA 91606

Registered WGAw No. _____
michaeldavid24601@gmail.com
(310) 462-1868 **Draft: 3**

THE VANISHING OF SISTER AIMEE

Characters

AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON, thirty-five
evangelist and performer

MINNIE 'MOTHER' KENNEDY, fifty-five
mother and manager

EDDIE 'DOC' DOYLE, fifty-eight
radio operator and pragmatist

SISTER EMMA SCHAEFFER, twenty-three
secretary and loyalist

CAPTAIN HERMAN CLINE, forty-six
LAPD detective and skeptic

The same five actors also play, as needed: REPORTERS,
CONGREGANTS, BEACHGOER, POLICE OFFICER, NURSE, SHERIFF,
WITNESSES, ATTORNEYS, various VOICES, etc.

Place

Sister Aimee's office suite, Angelus Temple, Los Angeles

Time

May 18, 1926, and the months following

The Setting

Aimee's office suite. Large desk, two phones, chairs, settee, religious iconography, coat rack with a long blue cape and hat box, 1926 radio console, filing cabinets, wall calendar, vanity mirror with bulbs, a small radio broadcast console and a prominent radio microphone on a stand with a 'KFSG' placard. Two doors (hallway and inner dressing room). Windows with Venetian blinds.

Staging Notes

There is no set change. The office always remains.

As an example, the Pacific Ocean is created in this room through sound (surf and seagulls), lighting (moving water), and props: the desk becomes the pier; the blue cape becomes waves; filing cabinets become dunes and a background for headlines; the blinds become glare.

The microphone is an altar and a weapon. Treat it like both.

There is a red ON AIR light that indicates when the mic is being broadcast.

Music and sound: period hymns, radio static, typewriters, press cameras, etc.

There are no blackouts, save for the end.

Punctuation

Two slash marks (//) indicate overlapping text.

All music indicated in this play
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"No amount of belief
makes something a fact."

- James Randi

"Half your success is due to your magnetic appeal,
and half due to the props and lights.
Whether you like it or not, you're an actress."
[speaking to Aimee Semple McPherson]

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- Charlie Chaplin

THE VANISHING OF SISTER AIMEE

ACT ONE

(As the houselights and stage lights
dim to half, we hear the hiss of
radio static followed by ...)

AIMEE [RADIO]

Beloved ... The devil has only one favorite word. "Stay."
Stay where you've always been. Stay ashamed. Stay afraid.
Stay the woman everyone has decided you are. Stay the man
your failures have named. Stay buried beneath yesterday.

(A low organ begins to play the
opening strains of "Just As I Am,"
an 1836 revival hymn.

The house and stage lights go dark)

AIMEE [RADIO] (Continued)

But Christ has another word in this year of our Lord,
nineteen hundred and twenty-six. That word is *Come*. Come
out from doubt. Come out from fear. Come out from
addiction. Come out from your secret life. Come out from
your public one. Lazarus did not resurrect himself; someone
called his name. Tonight ... He is calling yours.

(A men's quartet begins to sing)

QUARTET [RADIO]

*Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I--*

(LOCATION: AIMEE'S office suite.

Late afternoon. The room is awash
with slatted sunlight from the
Venetian blinds.

A phone on the desk rings, abruptly
cutting short the hymn. After
several rings, the hallway door
explodes open, followed immediately
by MINNIE 'MOTHER' KENNEDY.

MINNIE races to the phones and
picks up the one not ringing)

MINNIE

Hello?! ...

(Hearing a dial tone, she quickly hangs up and picks up the phone that's ringing)

MINNIE (Continued)

Hello, are you there? ... Speak or don't ... Are you there? ... Listen, friend, either talk or get out of my afternoon ... I'm hanging up now.

(She does)

MINNIE (Continued)

(to herself)

No chaos. Not here. Not if I can help it.

(The room is quiet now. Too quiet. The kind of quiet Los Angeles gets right before somebody knocks on your door with bad news and a badge.

MINNIE straightens everything she touches with military precision. She wears a dress expensive enough to suggest success and practical enough to deny it.

EDDIE 'DOC' DOYLE enters quickly from the hallway, slightly out of breath. He wears a 1920s checkered suit with a vest but without a jacket; shirt sleeves rolled up, tie loosened.

From down the hallway comes the distant murmur of reporters, parishioners and opportunists)

MINNIE (Continued)

Doc, where's Emma? I told her to guard this phone like the gates of Heaven.

(DOC goes to the radio broadcast console and begins flipping switches)

DOC

I saw her in the anteroom.

(donning headphones)

Do me a favor, Mother Kennedy, and talk into the microphone.

(MINNIE positions herself at the mic. The second she faces it, something in her changes. The room may be a church office, but the microphone makes it a pulpit)

MINNIE

This is K.A.L.L. Four Square Gospel radio, broadcasting from the Angelus Church in the heart of Los Angeles, California.
(in a normal tone, away from the mic)

Did I make a mistake, Doc, by bringing the police into this?

DOC

Depends. Careful with that microphone, it cost more than my first marriage.

MINNIE

Why are you testing the mic?

DOC

(still fiddling)
She's got a broadcast tonight.

MINNIE

I don't think she's coming back.

DOC

Everybody comes back. Eventually.

(EMMA SCHAEFFER appears from the hallway, stopping in the door frame.

Dark dress, stiff collar. Perfect posture. The expression of someone who apologizes before saying hello.

EMMA gestures to someone as yet unseen)

EMMA

Right this way, Captain.

(CAPTAIN HERMAN CLINE enters in a dark suit with a straight tie and a gun. Fedora in hand, eyes that miss nothing)

CLINE

Thank you, Miss.

EMMA

(by way of introductions)
Captain, this is Mrs. Kennedy, Sister Aimee's mother, and Eddie Doyle, our new radio man.

CLINE

(taking MINNIE'S hand)
Ma'am. I'm familiar with your work.

MINNIE

Did I hear her call you "Captain"?

CLINE
Yes, ma'am. Captain Herman Cline. Chief of detectives.
L.A.P.D.

DOC
We expected a couple o' flatfoots.

CLINE
(shaking DOC'S hand)
Well, you got *me*, Mr. Doyle.

DOC
Everyone calls me 'Doc.'

MINNIE
Captain, shouldn't you be down at Ocean Park Beach?

CLINE
I was just there. We've got two squads scouring the beach
and the water. Reporters breathing down their necks. Beach
goers staring at the Pacific like it owes them money.

EMMA
Crowds?

CLINE
Hundreds.

MINNIE
(sotto voce, to DOC)
Should be thousands.

CLINE
I'm here to talk to *you*, Miss Schaeffer.

EMMA
But I was interviewed earlier by a Sergeant Winters.

CLINE
Yes, I have the part you gave away.
(to MINNIE and DOC)
May I have the room?

MINNIE
Certainly. Doc, I want to talk about tonight's program.

(MINNIE and DOC exit into the
hallway, closing the door)

CLINE
Please, Miss Schaeffer, have a seat.

(She sits.

CLINE lights a cigarette. The
match briefly illuminates his face)

CLINE (Continued)

Smoke?

EMMA

Of course not.

CLINE

You've already given a statement.

EMMA

Yes.

CLINE

Good. Then we won't waste time repeating it. I'm here to find out what you left out.

(CLINE takes out a small leather notepad and a pencil. He takes notes throughout)

CLINE (Continued)

Full name?

EMMA

Emma Rose Schaeffer.

CLINE

Occupation?

EMMA

Personal secretary to Sister Aimee.

CLINE

Aimee Semple McPherson.

EMMA

To the newspapers. To me she's simply Sister.

CLINE

You admire her.

EMMA

Everyone admires her.

CLINE

I asked about you.

EMMA

I sometimes think the apostles must have felt like this.

(CLINE makes a note)

CLINE

You were with her today.

EMMA

All day.

CLINE
Start at the beginning.

EMMA
Well // the day--

CLINE
No. Start from the first moment you're certain of. Not the version you practiced.

(EMMA recalibrates. This is not what she expected)

EMMA
Um, okay. We went to Bullock's to buy a dress for Margaret. Her daughter.

CLINE
Age?

EMMA
Fifteen. Then we picked up Sister Aimee's new car.

CLINE
What type of automobile?

EMMA
Black Kissel sedan. Then we went to the Ocean Park Hotel in Santa Monica. Then the beach. No other stops.

CLINE
None?

EMMA
No. We arrived at the hotel at one o'clock. Exactly one.

CLINE
Nobody remembers time that precisely.

EMMA
I do, because Sister Aimee checked her watch and said something about a 4:30 meeting back here at the Temple.

CLINE
So you're working backward.

EMMA
Well, yes. I guess.
(stammering)
I, uh, we, uh ... I remember it clearly. I wrote it down.

CLINE
You're doing very well. People who lie usually rush. You're taking your time.

EMMA
Thank you.

CLINE
You said you arrived at the Ocean View Hotel at 1 pm.

EMMA
Yes, then we went up to her room.

CLINE
Her room?

EMMA
Yes. Sister Aimee has a room at the Ocean View. Room 202. She frequently goes there for a day of writing sermons on the beach.

CLINE
I get that. But why the standing reservation at the hotel?

EMMA
She needs a place to change into her bathing suit. And to conduct business, when necessary.

CLINE
Anything else?

EMMA
Like what?

CLINE
A meeting. Private. With a man.

EMMA
Certainly not.

CLINE
"Certainly" is doing a lot of work there. What happened next?

EMMA
Next, well, Sister Aimee changed into her swimsuit and cap, and we // started--

CLINE
Color?

EMMA
Her suit was emerald-green. Her cap was brown.

CLINE
You remember details.

EMMA
I try to be precise.

CLINE
Good. Precision is helpful. The bathing suit and cap ... she walked to the beach like that?

EMMA
She wore a white terry cloth robe. But she was barefoot.

CLINE
No more stops?

EMMA
Just the umbrella rental stand.

(The office melts into a California beach. A very large beach umbrella appears on its side, the inside facing us.)

(At the same time, the surf and sea gulls can be heard. Lights create reflections of moving water)

EMMA (Continued)
It was warm. Bright. Too bright to miss anyone.

(The lighting intensifies)

CLINE
Did she go into the water straight away?

EMMA
No.

(AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON appears from behind the umbrella, carrying a notebook, pencil and a Bible)

AIMEE
Calendar?

EMMA
(turning toward AIMEE)
In my bag.

AIMEE
Good. Let's build ourselves a little kingdom.

(EMMA takes one end of a blanket from AIMEE and they spread it out in front of the umbrella.)

As they do ...)

AIMEE (Continued)
Let's not put up the umbrella. Not yet. I want the sun while it's still charitable.

(She removes her robe)

CLINE
Then what?

EMMA
We sat.

CLINE
Doing what?

EMMA
I read a book.

CLINE
Which book?

EMMA
A novel.

CLINE
Title?

EMMA
The sort nobody remembers when they're being questioned by homicide detectives.

CLINE
I'm not homicide.

EMMA
Not yet.

(He makes a note)

CLINE
When did she decide to go into the water?

EMMA
After about an hour.

CLINE
"About." Was it an hour? Or does an hour sound reasonable?

EMMA
It was an hour.

CLINE
Good. Let's use that. Go on.

EMMA
Sister Aimee stood up and said:

AIMEE
(standing suddenly)
I need ten minutes in the water. Call the Temple. Tell them I'll be late. And cancel my 4:30.

(AIMEE exits the beach into the ocean)

CLINE
You didn't want to join her?

EMMA
No, I can't swim.

CLINE
She needed to be alone.

EMMA
She needed me to make the call.

CLINE
Same result. How long were you gone?

EMMA
Only a few minutes.

CLINE
How many?

EMMA
I don't know.

CLINE
Ten? Twenty? Thirty?

EMMA
Twenty. No more.

CLINE
Good. Twenty minutes is enough time to lose a woman, start a war, or invent a miracle. And when you returned?

(EMMA hesitates. The first real hesitation)

CLINE (Continued)
There it is.

EMMA
What?

CLINE
The place where memory stops and fear begins.

EMMA
I don't know what--
(shifts in her chair)
Sister Aimee was nowhere to be seen. She was gone. Just ... gone. I searched everyone. Everywhere.

(DOC enters as a BEACHCOMBER, dressed in a 1926 bathing costume)

CLINE
How do you know she hadn't just returned to the hotel?