

Tilth

by Daniel J. Meyer

Translated from the Catalan play *Artiga* © 2024 by Daniel J. Meyer. English translation © 2025 by H. J. Gardner.

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Notes on the Play:

“Tilth” is a play for one performer who plays Richard [Ricard], a man, 43.

Author’s Notes:

- Horizontal lines indicate changes of speaker or space.
- Parentheses indicate internal thought that is verbalized.
- In the text, a forward slash (/) implies interruption, overlapping.

Time Changes

- Narrator
- Flashback to childhood
- Leo around 14
- Leo at 16
- Choreography

Tilth, Part I

Scene 1

Begin? (*He laughs to himself, then quiets.*) Is there a “begin”? I don’t know, I really don’t. I’m here because... I need help... Because... I don’t know.

He breaks down, buries his face in his hands, and cries.

With his face in his hands, crying.

He uncovers his face and smiles at the audience.

Or, I do know. All right, by now, I know... But, where to begin? At what instant? What is the zero moment?

He covers his face again, then removes his hands, his eyes tearful.

He looks over at a corner behind him, at Carla.

– This is when everything begins, Carla. Everything... Together. Forever.

The best day of my life... Of our life together. Carla and I had been dreaming about this moment forever. A *forever* that encompassed practically our entire lives since we’d started going out as teenagers, at sixteen. So we’d already been together forever, for us. Everything, forever, for us, together... That’s the world you were born into, Leo.

(To Leo, cradled in his arms.) Welcome, Leo.

Looking off to the side. Angry and impotent.

– You’re not to go out. What did I do, Leo? Huh? Spit it out. What did I do so wrong?

Richard looks at the audience.

Sorry. I’ve skipped ahead in time when really, I need to begin at the beginning. In the beginning... Of his life, or mine, or ours? They’re so entangled. But when he was born, that for sure is the absolute zero moment.

Oh, sorry! My name is... Richard. I'm 43. A nobody journalist for the local news. That is, until I quit. But I'm getting ahead of myself. A father. Being a dad especially, is what defines me, and has, and will, for a long time. "Everything, forever, for us, together." I can begin with that, our motto, our rallying cry. Our mantra of sorts.

He starts to go on, then realizes he has forgotten an important point.

Sorry! Leo's father. There. Sorry... And if it wasn't clear, yes, Leo is an only child.

Um... Sorry. For so many sorries. This isn't easy.

(To the baby.) Thank you, Leo. A trio of happiness. *(Looking behind him.)* Triply happy!

Looking out at the audience.

And we were. Carla, Leo, and I were very happy. Whatever thing we could find to celebrate, we'd celebrate. Maybe celebrating stupid things comes off as unnecessarily romantic, but it meant we got to rediscover so much that we'd forgotten about. Like how amazing animals are. Or how brilliant the colors of the rainbow. Or how beautiful it is to visit somewhere in the countryside for the first time. Or sucking on a lemon, the yum, then yuck. Or tripping on a piece of chocolate melting in your mouth...

So rich...

So sweet...

So smooth...

And delicious and sticky and intense...

Man!

We really dug being parents. We went from the thrill of nightclubs in our early twenties, to the rush of— "Wait, did he say 'Mama'?"— when really he just said, "Ah-ah." From sleepless nights rolling around in the hay to... Sleepless nights full of— don't worry, I won't go into explicit detail— coughing, strep, snot, fever, vomit, dirty diapers, and shit, pretty much all kinds of it, in fact, because basically, all these disgusting discomforts and predictable whoopsie events make for the most inexplicable, unforgettable, and totally unacceptable mess. Sorry for the string of adjectives. A side effect of my profession. A bad habit from university, sorry! Man! What a sorryass habit of saying "sorry"... But... I can do this.

I should just begin by explaining... The birthdays. They were always so...

He waves his hand so abruptly that...

...he wakes the baby.

Sorry! *(To the baby.)* Hush. Don't cry. *(To Carla.)* Carla, here. *(He hands over the baby.)* Let me go get it...

Scene 2

Richard enters with a trunk.

First party. His half-birthday. *(To an audience member.)* Did you have one? *(Singing.)* Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you!...

Teddy bears. *(He begins removing teddy bears from the trunk.)* Sir Ermengild, a giraffe. Mister Ribbit, the nighty-night toad. And Sister Ana and Sister Mary, the duck twins, two very pious birds who became LGTB activists instead.

– Your godfathers Mario and Gerard gave you these when they came to visit you in the hospital.

(To Carla.) Remember that, Carla? *(He goes over to Carla and takes Leo in his arms.)*

Every day we'd play.

With the baby in his arms.

– Easy, Mario. It's fine if Clotilde isn't trans...

– *(As Carla.)* But why, Richard?

– Back me up, Carla!

– *(As Mario.)* Here she is... Miss Mimi.

– No way, Mario. No.

– *(As Gerard.)* Mimi. Now that's racy.../

– *(To Gerard.)* Gerard, enough!

– *(As Gerard.)* OK, OK.

Richard laughs and turns to the baby.

(To the baby.) Leo, this is Ermengild, the giraffe king, or queen. *(To Carla.)* Wait, is he going to be a he or a she? Ermenilda, maybe? Would something more basic be better? Too late...!

That's how the days, months, years came and went. We were happy. No problems. None that I remember.

Carla touches Richard, and he is ticklish.

– Not a good time, Carla.

– *(As Carla.)* Why? Don't you want me baby? *(Laughing.)*

– Carla... Stop it! Leo's here and.../

And if there were (problems), and I don't remember them, then they weren't really problems, were they?

- Hear that? He said, "Da-da."

Richard looks to one side. Angry and impotent.

Because I'm your father, that's why.

He turns round, exhausted.

(Singing.) Christmas comes but once a year...

To the audience.

Christmas. Age two and a half. A bike, with training wheels!

He takes a small bicycle from the trunk.

Well? Like it, Leo? (*He smiles at Leo.*) No. Don't cry. I can teach you... Don't cry!

– (*As Gerard.*) I told you so. The boy wanted a doll. But go ahead, ignore me...

– (*Mario.*) Don't be a bitch, Gerard! Papa don't preach.

– (*Gerard.*) I take offence at how the word "preach" is used, Mario. In fact.../

And they're off, arguing again. I take as much as I can until...

– Stop it, both of you! You're upsetting him, Carla yells.

– Well, he's not crying now.

Richard takes a Barbie doll from the trunk.

– (*As Gerard.*) Barbie!

– Happy now, Leo?

Carla, seeing Leo about to cry again, starts blaming me for a present that is "totally conformist while pretending to be progressive," and I sulk and try to make it Gerard's fault. I've learned that if you want to spoil a kid, it's best to blame a family friend or grandmother for your dumb ideas.

– I swear it was Gerard.

– (*As Gerard.*) Throwing me under the bus, Richard?

– You're always so sensitive! Mario chimes in.

Carla tries to calm Leo (and maybe get away from us) by taking out a clown nose and putting it on.

– (*As Mario*) Girl, talk about retro!

– (*Gerard.*) And yet, non-conforming. Ever notice there aren't enough famous female clowns?

– What are you doing with that, babe?

Richard takes the clown nose and puts it on, playing Carla.

– Hiya, Leo. Mama’s a clown... Just call me, Carly-har-har. (*Richard makes a face, mocking the made-up name.*)

– (*To Carla.*) Carla, stop. You’re making him cry.

– Yes, I’m Carly-har-har. From very Far-Far. And this is my giraffe-y and together we like to laugh-y. Did you say hi to Ms. Emernilda? (*She laughs.*) Want me to teach you to ride a bike? Let’s say the magic words, and it’ll be easy. “*I call on the great clown Carly-har-har... To put on her nose-y and see how it goes-y, because when you smile, everything’s rosy.*”

Richard, as Carla, climbs on the bike and starts pedalling.

Spoken from the bike.

At three, Leo talks non-stop. “Carly-har-har, Carly-har-har, Carly-har-har.” One month and one week after his third birthday, Carla comes home from work with a giant present. Well, not that giant, but giant in Leo’s mind. He’s over the moon... But Carla tells him that mommy and daddy are going to have a talk in the bedroom. And before he can open the present, he has to guess what’s inside...

– And if you guess it before mommy and daddy come back, just say the magic words that Carly-har-har taught you three times, and I’ll... I mean... She’ll appear. (*Softly and sexily to Richard.*) Now’s our chance, Richard. Come!

He gets off the bike.

He looks to one side.

Grounded, Leo. You’re to stay home.

Then a shove.

Scene 3

It was Carla. Carla giving me a big shove in the direction of the bedroom.

– I need you to fuck me, Richard...