

© 2009. Anne Phelan. Sample. The Benders: A Dark Western Comedy. For script copies or performance rights, contact [anne@annephelan.com](mailto:anne@annephelan.com).

Characters:

KATE BENDER

20s; beautiful, seductive, manipulative, out for herself, greedy; trusts no one

MA BENDER

40s-60s; lets PA think everything's his idea, but she's much smarter than she looks; resents JOHNNY because HE takes up too much of PA's affection; doesn't trust KATE as far as she can throw her

JOHN "PA" BENDER

50s-60s; the brains of the operation, HE thinks; a little pompous with the paterfamilias attitudes; HE's genuinely fond of HIS compatriots, until they get in his way; plays SHERIFF

JOHNNY BENDER

20s; pure of heart; worships the ground KATE walks on; PA is the father he's always wanted; plays NEWSPAPER REPORTER #1

ACTOR #1

audience member; NEWSPAPER REPORTER #3; SCOTT; SARGEANT; WINTER

ACTRESS #1

audience member; NEWSPAPER REPORTER #2 (Smith)

Actor #1: in Scenes 1, 2 & 3, he plays an audience member; in Scene 6, he plays Scott; in Scene 9, he plays Sargeant; in Scenes 11 & 12, he plays Winter; in Scene 13, he plays a newspaper reporter;

Actress #1; in Scenes 1, 2 & 3, she plays an audience member; in Scene 13, she plays a newspaper reporter;

Setting: The play takes place in and around Osage Township (now Cherryvale), Kansas in the early 1870s.

Scenes:

Prologue: Aboard the Prairie Schooner: Pa, Ma, Kate

Scene One: Miss Kate's Spiritual Emporium: Pa, Ma, Johnny, Actress #1, Actor #1, Kate

Scene Two: Miss Kate Herself: Pa, Ma, Johnny, Actress #1, Actor #1, Kate

Scene Three: Johnny Reveals his Heart: Pa, Ma, Johnny, Kate, Actor #1, Actress #1

Scene Four: Pa Surveys his Property: Pa, Ma

Scene Five: Kate and Johnny Behind the Barn: Kate, Johnny

Scene Six: First Guest: Ma, Pa, Kate, Johnny, Actor #1

Scene Seven: Pa and Johnny in the Orchard: Pa, Johnny

Scene Eight: Kate and Johnny at play: Kate, Johnny, Ma

Scene Nine: Seventh Guest: Ma, Pa, Kate, Actor #1, Johnny

Scene Ten: Kate & Johnny on the Bridge: Kate, Johnny

Scene Eleven: Pigeon Flies the Coop: Ma, Johnny, Winter, Kate

Scene Twelve: The Long Arm of the Law: Ma, Kate, Sheriff, Winter, Newspaper Reporter #1

Scene Thirteen: Trial: Ma, Kate, Sheriff, Newspaper Reporter #1, Newspaper Reporter #2, Newspaper Reporter #3

Scene Fourteen: Miss Bender on the Courthouse Steps: Kate, Newspaper Reporter #1, Newspaper Reporter #2, Newspaper Reporter #3

Playwright's Note: This play is loosely based on a true story about some people who called themselves "Bender," and operated in southeastern Kansas in the 1870s. Special thanks to Peter Ellenstein, Naomi Iizuka and Andy Taylor for all their help and encouragement.

## Prologue: Aboard the Prairie Schooner

(The interior of a covered wagon, sometimes called a Prairie Schooner, going across the prairie towards Kansas. MA, PA and KATE are in the wagon. PA holds the reins)

PA:

(With a slight German accent)

I know we're going to the right place.

MA:

How could you know that, old man?

KATE:

Pa's always the smartest man in the room- he'll tell you himself.

PA:

Kate, what sort of a dutiful daughter are you?

KATE:

(With a laugh)

I'm not.

MA:

What's in Kansas?

KATE:

(As the horses hit a rill, the weight shifts in the wagon, and PA tugs on the reins)

Will this Godforsaken jostling ever stop!?

MA:

(To KATE)

No more Godforsaken than you, *mein herz*.

KATE:

Look who's talking! Not an ounce of the milk of human kindness in you, old lady.

PA:

(To MA)

Kansas is men looking to make money.

KATE:

Far from home, a fool and his money are even sooner parted.

MA:

Wouldn't surprise me.

PA:

Men are more vulnerable out here. Get lonely. Get heads full of notions. I've heard of men that mate with their mares. Shepherds with the sheep.

MA:

Could we raise the conversation to a higher plane? We won't have to use candles at night, once we reach Independence.

KATE:

(With a sniff)

Kerosene lamps for light. Tisn't civilized. Not like Cincinnati.

PA:

Gaslight is so different?

KATE:

I love the sound it makes- not quite a hiss, not quite a sigh....

PA:

Is there coal for the gas in Kansas?

MA:

Kate Bender, you pull up your skirt and sit like a lady. What would people think with your petticoat hanging out like washing day?

KATE:

Ma, you can't do that!

MA:

Do what?

KATE:

Talk to me like I'm seven years old and need my knuckles rapped with a ruler. This will never work if you take that tone with me. Cut it out!

PA:

Girls, girls.

KATE:

Purgatory's got nothing on this place.

(Slapping at a horsefly)

Damn it!

MA:  
Stop cursing.

PA:  
Stop your quarreling, girls.

KATE:  
I ain't your damn girl.

PA:  
You are when you're on the stage.

KATE:  
Play-acting is play-acting, Bender. I can pretend as well as you. Maybe better!

MA:  
I remember you sassing me when you were just a wee thing. You told me to "shut up" before you were knee-high to a grasshopper.

KATE:  
(Really irritated)  
And where do you think I learned such fine talk, Ma? A crying shame so much of your old mind is cluttered with the ephemera of the past. Pa and I should get a bigger share of the money than you, if you're so feeble-minded.

MA:  
What an ungrateful child you are! Why didn't I leave you on the banks of the Ohio River to die of exposure?

KATE:  
(Rolling HER eyes)  
It didn't work on Moses in the bulrushes.

MA:  
This is how you repay me?

KATE:  
Your abundance of maternal sentiment, Ma-  
(Horses hit a gopher hole and THEY all get shook up)  
-it oozes from you like poisoned salve.  
(Shifts her weight trying to get comfortable)  
What I hate most-

MA:  
Bender, she's got a list already. You're a malcontent, child.

KATE:

(Ignoring MA)

-is when it rains. Every square inch goes to mud.

PA:

All I need's a boot brush to lick that.

KATE:

Lucky you! However high I yank up my petticoats, I still end up looking like I've been rolling around with the hogs in the sty.

MA:

Who's to say you haven't? You with the hogs, like the shepherd with the sheep-

KATE:

So much for your "higher plane" talk. We don't own any hogs. We've got these two horses, who've stepped in every blasted hole between here and the Indiana border. And the bulldog missing an eye walking behind. That's all the animals there is.

PA:

There will be more.

MA:

From our fortune?

PA:

Ma, if you didn't trust in our ability to make a fortune, why would you be here?

MA:

Because I enjoy the pleasant company?

(PA and KATE laugh)

PA:

Kate, you can do your spiritualist act until we determine our modus operandi.

KATE:

I want to ease up on the witches' potions for awhile. I was drawing funny looks back in Ohio.

PA:

Funny how?

KATE:

Funny from folks- like maybe burning the witches in Salem was a good idea. Didn't like their looks. Didn't trust 'em.

PA:

I thought you missed Ohio?

KATE:

I miss paving stones in the street. And gaslight. Not the slitty-eyes that said: "We could hang you from a lamppost without turning a hair."

MA:

When we's rich, I'll buy myself a different carpet bag for every day of the week- with a hat and veil to match.

KATE:

Oo, perhaps one of those Schwarzwald hats with red pompoms? Look like something that would flatter the head of a circus pony? Or are you passing as Hungarian today? A Gypsy?

MA:

If I was a gypsy you'd know by now- my evil eye would be upon you.

KATE:

What will you want, Pa?

PA:

A fancy Meerschaum pipe. With a walking stick to match. My own little plot of land for my old age. And little Katharina?

KATE:

To take New York City in triumph- wearing nothing but velvet and brocade, and feathers on every hat. Mary Todd Lincoln's dress bills will look like chicken feed compared to mine. With my own carriage! A house on Gramercy Square. And no pesky husband to answer to!

PA:

That's the thing about New York.

KATE:

(A little jump from the shuddering wagon wheels)

These horses find every single prairie dog hole to boot. Jackrabbit hutch-

MA:

(To PA)

What?

PA:

It's big enough to disappear in.

KATE:

That's not what I meant.

PA:

It's what I meant.

PA (CONTD.):

(Looks out at the horizon)

Out here there's nothing but prairie grass and a breeze blowing across it. Makes it look like ocean waves.

MA:

Half the time there ain't even the breeze. Nothing moves but the flies.

KATE:

I can barely stand to look at it. Crawling with insects. Not a tree or a rock- endless and flat.  
(Tries to stand and stretch, but the canvas is too low)

MA:

You'd get lonely with no man around.

KATE:

I never said there'd be no man. He won't be the boss of me is all.

MA:

A fancy man!

KATE:

And what's Pa to you, Ma? Did I miss the wedding?

PA:

At our age, Kate, you don't need a preacher. But you're young- you can still whelp.

KATE:

(Awkwardly still trying to stretch)

What would I do with a baby, I'd like to know? It would be a prop for the pigeons, I suppose.

MA:

Say, that's not a bad idea.

KATE:

I'll be a hunchback soon, what with all this stooping. No one will pay to see a hunchback medium.

PA:

An awful lot of work for a prop.

MA:

(To KATE)

The more to look like the witch you are!

KATE:

(Ignoring MA)

The one-eyed bulldog is prop enough for me. How can you not love a mug like his?!

MA:

Why, Kate Bender, I'd think you were sentimental. Like a character out of one of Dickens' novels.

PA:

I know better.

KATE:

(With a harsh laugh)

You'd better, old man.

End of Scene

## Scene One: Miss Kate's Spiritual Emporium

(PA before the curtain, downright. HE holds a small basket. On an easel is a placard that reads: Miss Kate Bender, Spiritualist Extraordinaire. JOHNNY, MA, ACTRESS #1 and ACTOR #1 stand stage left, watching HIM)

PA:

We don't have many preachers out here on the prairie.

MA:

(The plant in the crowd)

Why's that, mister?

PA:

Passle of tenderfeet skulking about in their strange collars. Think a preacher with his soft hands can help you raise a barn or butcher a cow? By Jinks, we don't need 'em.

ACTOR #1:

What do we need?

MA:

(*Sotto voce*)

That was my line! Men always think they know everything.

PA:

Don't need no preacher to trust in the Lord.

MA:

Amen!

ACTRESS #1:

Hallelujah!

PA:

You'd do better with a strong right arm and the sweat of your brow, than putting your trust in a man who can't do anything but quote the Bible.

JOHNNY:

I got a strong right arm!

MA:

Amen! That's the truth.

PA:

God helps those who help themselves. But we all fall on hard times, sooner or later. Don't we?

JOHNNY:

You don't know the half of it, mister.

PA:

In a pinch, you've got Kate Bender to help you through the troubled times. Step right up, children of all ages. Witness my little girl, and her amazing spiritual feats.

ACTRESS #1:

(Kidding)

She reads minds with her feet?

JOHNNY:

(Dead serious)

Puts her toes on yer head? She must be a contortionist!

ACTRESS #1:

(Shaking HER head)

That Miller boy. What can you say?

MA:

I can read coffee grounds.

JOHNNY:

My ma could read tea leaves.

MA:

What can Kate Bender do that I can't?

PA:

Speak to the dearly departed.

ACTRESS #1:

Is she a witch?

PA:

She's sensitized to the spirit world.

ACTRESS #1:

My ma was a water witch. Get her in the dowsing mood and send her out with her stick- she could find water in a desert. Always busy in drought season, she was.

PA:

Kate can tell your fortune. Predict the future, like a soothsayer to the Sultan.

KATE:

(Sticks her head out from behind the curtain. Stage whispers)

Pa!

PA:

What, my one-girl spiritual emporium?

KATE:

The spirits are angry today. They broke all the slate pencils.

PA:

(As KATE darts behind the curtain)

No spirit notes on slates today. They're not in the mood.

MA:

What a shame!

PA:

For a nickel, a mere five cents, the answers you seek can be yours. Put your question in the basket, so that Miss Bender may reveal all to you.

(MA crosses to PA and hands him a nickel)

Thank you, madam.

(MA crosses into the house aisle. ACTRESS #1 crosses to PA, gives HIM a nickel and a folded piece of paper. JOHNNY and ACTOR #1 each do the same)

End of Scene