

MARJORIE GOLD

History of Script Development and Screenplay Concept

Notes from playwright Erin Leigh Peck

Marjorie Gold is a two-act stage play based on my real life experiences with pregnancy, parenthood and postpartum depression. Billed as a “Comedy about PPD”, this play has been described as a “dramedy” because it’s an often lighthearted look at a desperately serious subject. We try to poke fun at the absurdity of the world of modern parenting and the people in it while telling the truth about the hopeless depression, confusion and lack of control many new mothers experience.

Under the guidance of producer Amy Nauiokas of Archer-Grey productions, I developed Marjorie Gold over a two year period with Tony nominated director Sheryl Kaller, resulting in a 29-hour reading at the Signature Theatre. During the developmental process, we focused on tightening and refining the script to most efficiently and artfully tell a clear story with a focused message about a shared journey lead by Marjorie Gold, the central character of the story. Through a series of rewrites and casual “living room readings”, the idea of giving up control and embracing the chaos that comes with allowing love to flow was explored and applied to all the main characters, making a play about pregnancy something that could be relatable for any audience member, regardless of gender or age.

A major device used in the play was the infusion of what we called “Crazy Town Moments”. Little doses of unreality scattered throughout the story that intensified as Marjorie’s plummet into the despair of postpartum depression deepened. No other characters were aware of these moments. It was always something that only Marjorie and the audience would observe, yet Marjorie’s reactions to these events were clearly perceived by the people around her, making those outside the realm of “Crazy Town” more and more concerned about Marjorie’s mental state.

For example, at the top of Act II, when Marjorie has just had her baby and is in the hospital surrounded by celebrating family members, she is constantly distracted by an invasive beeping sound that seems to be coming from an invisible source. She can’t find any medical equipment in the room and obsessively checks to see if she or the baby are connected to any devices while everyone around her enjoys the moment and focuses on the new baby. The fact that she is the only one who hears the sound is at first annoying, then jarring, then terrifying. Meanwhile, the rest of the characters continue on in peace, with no idea about the confusion and turmoil Marjorie is experience beneath the surface.

While the use of special effects seemed like a cool device to feature in a stage play, it was often perceived as too cinematic and ultimately not theatrical within the confines of a live performance.

Two days before the final presentation at the Signature Theatre, when the elements of the script had been drastically refined during an intensive developmental period, it became clear to me that everything these “Crazy Town” moments were written to communicate was now already in the dialogue. We had brought the scenes up to a level where we no longer had to rely on these cinematic moments to communicate subtext. Removing them not only made the script more focused, it made our play more producible.

The more I explore the idea of adapting Marjorie Gold into a screenplay, the more the idea of revisiting these “Crazy Town” moments appeals to me. This device that was often perceived as being too cinematic might work perfectly as a way to make the emotional life in our story come alive in a visual and audible way that dialogue cannot produce on its own. Each of these moments would present an opportunity for action and a way to deepen a viewer’s connection to the story of Marjorie Gold as a film.

To that end, I have provided a list of these moments....the scenes where they appear and the device used. The advantage of having drafts where they appear as well as our final draft where they have been written out is that it gives a filmmaker the option of exploring each scene and each “Crazy Town” moment individually, making choices that are in the best interest of the film both from a story-telling and cinematic point of view.

I am excited to jump into the next stage of this journey and to adapt Marjorie Gold the play into Marjorie Gold the film. I have been touched by the deep reactions audiences have had to this play and I am excited to explore the expansive possibilities of turning this story into a movie.

CRAZY TOWN MOMENTS IN MARJORIE GOLD

1. Act I, scene 4. Even though “it’s supposed to be hard to read these things”, every time Jack and Marjorie make eye contact with the pregnancy stick, the world outside explodes in a fanfare of positivity. Horns outside honk in united proclamation. The song “La Cucaracha” rises up out of the audible chaos and we hear a marching band go by. The moment the stick is put back down, the sounds abruptly stop. While the box claims that results may be difficult to discern, this anomaly happens three times, as both characters experience the discovery of that plus sign on the pregnancy stick and then re-check to confirm the results.
2. Act I, scene 5. Marjorie is at the obstetrician’s office. Upon confirming her pregnancy, Marjorie, who expected to feel elated is surprised by her own panic and disappointed. Behind her, an entire bouquet of balloons from a grateful patient simultaneously runs out of air and wilts.

3. Act I, scene 6. Marjorie tries to find peace in this new chaos by running home to her mother. She shuts the windows to drown out the jarring sounds of New York City, but is jarred when those sounds are replaced by the sounds of a jungle safari and wild animals stampeding outside her window in Manhattan.
4. Act I, scene 6. Finding no peace or answers from her mother, Marjorie seeks support from an online community of pregnant women. She is shocked to find out how much she does not know and how strange and unwelcomed she feels in this new world. The words on her computer screen turn to Greek as she desperately tries to find her way through the confusion of the conversation or the magical computer glitch.
5. Act I, scene 7. Determined to find the answers she needs to in complete control of her journey, Marjorie forces her husband and best friend to accompany her on a visit to the book store in search of information. While Marjorie tries to concentrate on empowering herself with knowledge, the sound of babies crying slowly takes over her senses until the entire store is filled with the sound of hysterical infants. This is the first scene where Marjorie's behavior starts to reflect her inner turmoil and the heightened nature of each "Crazy Town" device reflects that.
6. Act I, Scene 8. Marjorie attends an expectant moms dinner where she is overwhelmed by how unprepared she is for motherhood. She finds herself slowly and helplessly floating away from the table while the other women slowly evolve into satanic beasts enjoying conversation and cappuccino.
7. Act I, Scene 9. Just as Marjorie is finally starting to get a handle on things, she is thrown off by a phone call from her obstetrician where she is given concerning news. The doctor on the phone appears in her living room, speaking nonsense and drawing on his white board with a crayon.
8. Act I, Scene 9. Marjorie seeks refuge under the care of a midwife. As the midwife speaks and an exhausted Marjorie gives in to giving up control, images of all the happy mothers and babies that have come before her leave their place in the picture frames on the walls of the midwife's office and begin to swirl around Marjorie, enveloping her in images she feel she may never embody.
9. Act I, Scene 10. We are back in Marjorie and Jack's kitchen but in Marjorie's altered state, the room is closing in on her. As her emotional chaos has grown (along with her belly), the room has gotten smaller.

10. Act I, Scene 10. Emotionally unstable and on the verge of labor, all the characters from act one converge upon Marjorie in what feels like a dream. It rains inside her kitchen as her water breaks and labor begins.
11. Act II, Scene 2. While in the hospital, Marjorie is haunted by invasive beeping from an imaginary EKG machine while the rest of her family happily celebrates the birth of her child.
12. Act II, Scene 3. A distracted Marjorie tries to bring her baby out for her first lunch with her best friend after giving birth. She is ashamed of desperate and confusing feelings that she is sure nobody else feels. While confiding her dark feelings, she sees that the male waiter is also pregnant, making Marjorie paranoid that her inner life may be leaking out and effecting the world around her.
13. Act II, Scene 4. Home with her new baby and trying to adjust to her new life, Marjorie is attacked by forces within her environment.....a baby blanket keeps leaping out of her hands as struggles to keep hold of herself and reality.
14. Act II, Scene 5. Now that Marjorie's parents have left, it's time for Jack to return to work, leaving Marjorie alone with the baby for the first time. As her panic over not being able to manage both a baby and her depression grows, the light outside grows darker and darker until Marjorie cannot find any light.
15. Act II, Scene 6. In a series of montaged moments, Marjorie is attacked by her own environment and is constantly haunted by what she perceives as an unnatural baby cry. She struggles to find her grip on reality as time and events converge. Other people's babies look altered. She tries to move quickly but cannot match her pace to the reality around her. All the while, she is reminded of her failure as a mother by failing to keep up with the demands she feel are being placed on her.
16. Act II, Scene 7. Still desperately trying to create order out of emotional chaos, Marjorie attempts to organize wrapping paper from newly-delivered baby gifts, only to find that the paper and bows on the floor are growing and multiplying like a messy beast.
17. Act II, Scene 8. On the verge of giving up and unable to move herself out of the bathroom and out of her bathrobe, images of happy babies from the midwife's office return, mocking her for having any hope about her future as a mother.