



HUMAN NATURE (CLOCK OF THE HEART)

By

Judy Klass

WHY I LIKE IT: Drama Editor EZRA NEIGHBORS writes...

Mark my words; the 1980's will be making a very strong resurgence in trends in the near future. I am submitting my formal prediction by picking Human Nature (Clock Of The Heart), and no, naysayers—

It is not simply because I have deep affection for the 1980's,

It is not simply because George Michael should've been my husband in a past life,

It is not simply because we are feeling the repercussion of Reaganomics to this day,

No— it's because playwright Judy Klass has given us a slice of totally-tubular-gag-me-with-a-spoon worthy struggles packaged delightfully into the bedroom of an everyday teenage girl in the mid 1980's. The generational divide isn't as big as it seems, and Klass' commentary has the ability to make you giggle and make you ponder just as hard.

HUMAN NATURE (CLOCK OF THE HEART)

A Play in One Act by Judy Klass

Cast of Characters

AUDREY: Sixteen/seventeen, not really mean, but sarcastic; she sees herself as a little deeper and a little more sophisticated than her friends.

NINA: Around the same age, not as antagonistic to AUDREY as she may sound, but not inclined to let AUDREY put on airs. NINA is genuinely protective of MICHELLE.

MICHELLE: Around the same age. Tender-hearted, given sometimes to working herself up into worry or to lapsing into a dream state.

MOM: MICHELLE's mother, forties. Harried, and almost out of patience with her daughter and her friends.

Scene

MICHELLE's bedroom. In suburbia, in the US.

Time

Somewhere in the vicinity of 1983/1984.

NOTE: "O'tay, Panky," was something US teens said in imitation of Eddie Murphy playing "Buckwheat," a Black kid on old Little Rascal cartoons, on the show Saturday Night Live in the 1980s. Eddie Murphy would make the "okay" sign with his hand, and lisp while saying "Okay, Spanky."

SCENE: We are in MICHELLE's bedroom: cluttered with '70s/'80s toys and posters.

AT RISE: MICHELLE and her friends NINA and AUDREY sit on MICHELLE's bedroom floor, with a bunch of 1980s LPs. An '80s song is playing – perhaps it is "Human Nature" by Michael Jackson, or "Time (Clock of the Heart)" by Culture Club. The music FADES OUT as the LIGHTS COME UP.

NINA: I've been thinking about it. I could make him want me.

AUDREY: Nina, the man is totally gay.

NINA: That's because he hasn't met me yet.

AUDREY: The fact that you're even hot for him ... kind of indicates that you're a lesbian.

NINA: It does not. Give me five minutes with him in an elevator and he'd come out a new man.

AUDREY: He's with Jon Moss, okay? The drummer. All those songs he writes, "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me," "Victims," "I'll Tumble 4 Ya," they're all about Jon.

NINA: Which just goes to show he should be with me, if that's how Jon treats him, if that's the kind of songs George winds up writing about him! Jon treats him so bad, and Jon won't even admit that they're a couple. Jon's not out of the closet, he makes George lie about the relationship.

AUDREY: Oh, and George is out of the closet – and so that's why you want to date him?

NINA: He's honest, he's spontaneous. He believes in real love. Like me. He's said in interviews he's bisexual.

AUDREY: That's just a euphemism for gay. For the media.

NINA

He doesn't see gender, he doesn't see color, he's beyond all that. He sees the person inside.

AUDREY

Nobody is beyond all that, even if they think they are. Especially not men. Men don't want the person inside. They want a blonde, or a redhead, or a black guy, or this kind of tits or that kind of jeans. That's as deep as they go.

NINA

Yeah, Audrey, like you know what men want.

AUDREY

I know more than you.

MICHELLE: (dreamy) The first time I saw Boy George, I rubbed my eyes. I never actually rubbed my eyes before. But I was at Renée's house, and she had just gotten MTV. And I saw the video for "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me." And I'd heard it on the radio and I pictured the guy singing it, you know, I pictured this young Black guy. Sensitive, kind of androgynous, like Prince, or Michael. And instead, in the video, there was this White woman! Except, I wasn't sure it was a

woman, it was someone really tall, and ... and I wound up literally rubbing my eyes. I couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl. But maybe that's good for us, sometimes. To see somebody just as a human being, and really not know what gender they are.

AUDREY: God, Michelle. You are such a frigging idealist. The world is just going to stomp all over you.

MICHELLE: Maybe. (beat) I'm thinking of changing my name.

NINA: To what?

MICHELLE: To Susan. It's my middle name.

NINA: What's wrong with Michelle?

MICHELLE: There are four other Michelles in our grade, okay? And in my last school there were five.

AUDREY: You know why that is, right?

NINA: God, you have to have an explanation for everything.

AUDREY: No, seriously. Was your mom a Beatles fan?

MICHELLE: Kind of. She had a crush on Paul.

AUDREY: See, that's why. The song "Michelle Ma Belle" was on the radio when all of our moms were pregnant.

NINA: Audrey, where do you get this stuff?

AUDREY: It's true, ask your parental units, Michelle. I dodged that bullet, so in one respect I'm lucky, but then I wound up getting named after Audrey Hepburn, so, same difference.

NINA: Well, they're both nice names, you did fine.

MICHELLE: Who are you named for, Nina?

NINA: My dead great aunt.

MICHELLE: Oh.

NINA: Well, don't sound so sad, you didn't know her.

MICHELLE: No.

NINA: Michelle, you have got to cheer up! What is your problem?

(MICHELLE turns sad, desolate eyes on her)

NINA (CONT'D): No, I totally didn't mean it like that. I mean, you're obviously upset about something, and we're supposed to be your friends. And you should trust us. You should open up about it. Okay?

MICHELLE: Otay, 'Panky.

NINA: That's more like it. So?

MICHELLE: So, it's stupid. You'll laugh.

NINA: We will totally not laugh!

AUDREY: I might.

NINA: Audrey, shut up, stop that. Michelle, why are you so sad?

MICHELLE: I'm worried about Michael.

NINA: Michael Graziano in our chem class?

MICHELLE: No. Michael.

AUDREY: She means the freakazoid. She's still in love with him.

NINA: Audrey, shut up! (to MICHELLE) You mean Michael Jackson?

MICHELLE: (nods, almost in tears) I just have a really bad feeling. I don't know what's happening to him.

AUDREY: He's incredibly rich, and he's petting his llama and living in Neverland, and everything is fine.

MICHELLE: No! He, like, never comes out of Neverland. And he was so hurt by that mean piece about him in *Rolling Stone*. And Eddie Murphy's jokes about him. And now the Jehovah Witnesses are mad at him about the "Thriller" video, and making him stop doing stuff with "Thriller." And I think he's afraid to cut another album, afraid it won't be as good. And I'm just – I've got a bad feeling.

AUDREY: Well, try listening to some good music for a change, and you'll feel better.

MICHELLE: (flaring) Audrey, this is not a joke, okay? You never even tried to give Michael's music a chance, you've never even listened to *Off the Wall* or *Thriller* all the way through –

AUDREY: I heard the first putrid single off of *Thriller*. "The Girl Is Mine," with him singing with your mom's boyfriend, Paul McCartney? That's all I needed to know about that album.

MICHELLE: It's not terrible, but it's not the best song on the album.

AUDREY: It's putrid, Michelle, okay? It's dire.

MICHELLE: (in a dreamy state once more) I will never forget where I was the first time I heard "Billie Jean."

AUDREY: We've heard this story.

MICHELLE: I was on a bus to the teen leadership council. And the bus driver had the radio on, and they played this new song through, twice, back to back. And it had this amazing groove and this bass line. It was all elaborate and layered, like White rock and roll, but it had this funky thing going on like Black rock and roll, and then this voice started singing, I thought maybe it was Michael Jackson, but it was so full of pain and confusion and guilt and shame, all this Hamlety, scared, teenage pain they don't usually even *allow* on the radio, everything has to be all bright smiles and sunshine all the time. I couldn't quite make out the lyrics, about "the kid is not my son." We arrived at this college campus for the conference. And I skipped the whole talk that night on President Reagan making it Morning In America again, and the new optimism among young people. Because I *had* to hear that song again! I hung out in the college bowling alley until the radio played it again. And when I got home, I bought the album – I was probably one of the first million people to buy it.

NINA: It's a good album, Michelle. Audrey probably owns it too.

AUDREY: "Gag me with a spoon, I am so sure," as the Valley Girls say.

NINA: She just hides it under her bed when we come over.

MICHELLE: I couldn't believe how he had put White music and Black music back together on this one album – and that's what rock and roll *should* be about! It should be Elvis and Buddy Holly meet Little Richard and Chuck Berry, but it hasn't been, for years ... Michael put rock and roll music back together. And I bought *Off the Wall*, and I also started appreciating what he did as a little kid more. And when I saw *Motown 25* – when I saw him moonwalk – it was physically impossible! I couldn't believe it!

AUDREY: Did you rub your eyes again?

MICHELLE: I didn't rub my eyes – but I was just staring at the screen because he quickly, fleetingly, did this magical thing – and it made sense that he could do magic! He's the most beautiful person on Planet Earth, he makes the most amazing videos ... His dancing on that show was so perfect, that if he had started flying around the room suddenly, that would have made sense also!

AUDREY: Well, he *is* Peter Pan.

NINA: Audrey, shut up. Michelle, he's probably fine. He's resting up, he's playing with Bubbles the Chimp, and the bones of the Elephant Man. He's waiting for the "Thriller" thing to blow over with the crazy Jehovah's Witnesses ... Or maybe he'll leave the Witnesses and get a girlfriend and start acting normal!

AUDREY: Is it because you girls are afraid of sex? Is that why you're both in love with gay guys?

NINA: Audrey, I know better than to listen to you, but don't you go upsetting Michelle.

AUDREY: Well, I guess that's assuming Michael Jackson has any sexuality at all. But seriously, psychiatrists used to say that was the reason in the sixties – that's why girls liked the Beatles. The girls were scared to be growing up. All the new "impulses." They were frightened of men, but the Beatles were okay. They looked feminine, they had those moppet hairdos – so they were non-threatening. They made for a good first crush.

NINA: For someone who says she hates the Baby Boomers, you sure talk about them a lot, Audrey. Their icons, their music.

AUDREY: That's why I hate them. I've imprinted on them. That's all we were given – we were fed a steady diet of their TV and their rock and roll and their counter-cultural heroes, and we were told that's all there is. The sixties are all that matter. That's supposedly the only authentic way to be a rebellious teenager, is to be a Baby Boomer. And now they've got all these magazine articles saying, "Oh, too bad about AIDS, but at least we've had time to explore, and sleep around, and now it's time to settle down in monogamous relationships," and I read that, just as we're about to go out into the world and start dating, and they're so frigging smug I just want to – to kill every last one of them!

AUDREY (CONT'D): Every last yuppie creep hypocrite who was at Woodstock, and did drugs, and felt so revolutionary, and went to live on a commune – but now they write those magazine articles about AIDS, and they're suddenly so proud to be greedy conservative capitalists –

NINA: Calm down –

AUDREY: And they love your wonderful President Reagan, Michelle.

NINA: Her parents make her do that teen leadership council stuff. It's not her concept.

AUDREY: Kill the Baby Boomers, that's what I say!

NINA: But that's the music you say is the good music, when you turn up your nose at what we listen to, right? Boomer rock. You don't have time for the New Romantics, you don't have time for the New Androgyny, no Eurythmics or Men at Work, it's all about the Dead, and the Stones, and the Jefferson Airplane –

AUDREY: No. Not at all. I do not believe, like the Boomers, that all the good rock and roll was in the fifties and sixties. I think we have to know those basic texts to understand what goes on today, all right? Like Michelle said – go back to when Black and White music was all tangled up with blues. But I like plenty of stuff from the last ten years. I like punk bands you people couldn't even listen to. I like bands that started out at CBGB's in New York City. Blondie. The Ramones. The Talking Heads. The B-52s, The Cramps. I like Bowie. You guys are so into the cute, safe New Androgyny you go on and on about –

NINA: The New Androgyny is *not* safe, it freaks out all the Boomer teachers, they can't handle Annie Lennox and Boy George, they're upset that they don't *get* rock and roll anymore, it's the most subversive thing that's going on right now –

AUDREY: You don't even remember the original pioneers of that stuff! You know nothing of glam rock. You don't even understand that Bowie invented music videos, before the pop candy fluff on your precious MTV, and his videos actually didn't suck. I like Pink Floyd, okay? I'm still trying to understand *The Wall*. That's the most subversive thing that's come out in the last five years. Every time I listen to that album, I understand something new about it. Sometimes it seems like he's in different rooms, different wards, of a mental hospital, in different songs. I thought Vera Lynn was maybe his old girlfriend, but it turns out she was this British lady who sang songs during World War II, so that's actually another song about the father who died in the War, when he talks about her. I like layers of meaning, okay, more than layers of sound.

NINA: Well, I think Roger Waters is kind of a jerk. He hates Americans, and he hates women, and he's always angry and sneering at everybody. You just like him because he's rude and pretentious, like you.

AUDREY: And you're just saying that because the worms ate into your brain.

NINA: Whatever.

(There is a KNOCK, and then MICHELLE'S mother ENTERS.)

AUDREY: Hey, Mrs. Gardner.

MOM: Hey, yourself, Audrey. Don't you have homework this weekend?

AUDREY: Oh, I took care of that Friday night, so I could spend time with my friends.

MOM: Well, if you did, that was really responsible of you. But I'm not sure that Michelle here planned ahead that way. Don't you have a report due, honey?

MICHELLE: I started it, Mom. I'll get it done in time.

MOM: I'm not sure I'd want to bet on that.

AUDREY: Michelle does her best work when it's crunch time. The adrenaline gives her inspiration.

MOM: Is that so? Well, the procrastination gives me indigestion. Michelle, I don't want you up all night, doing work you were meant to do all weekend, ending up half-asleep in class.

MICHELLE: I won't, Mom.

MOM: I've heard that before.

AUDREY: Mrs. Gardner, may I ask if you named Michelle for the song "Michelle, Ma Belle"?

MOM: What? Yes, I did, actually. So what?

AUDREY: I was just curious. Would you say you're more conservative now than when you were growing up?

MOM: Is this an interview?

AUDREY: I'm just – trying to learn from an older generation.

MOM: Hmm. I'm not exactly sure I believe you. But I would say we had *real* issues to protest in the 1960s. The Vietnam War. Civil Rights.

AUDREY: And those things have all been solved?

MOM: Well, we're out of Vietnam, and Black people can vote and sit at any lunch counter they want to, now. If you've noticed.

AUDREY: So, you went from supporting Bobby Kennedy to supporting Ronald Reagan?

MOM: Not in one fell swoop, no. Not overnight. But I agree with President Reagan that we've got a level playing field now. And people should try to get ahead on their own initiative. And

now that I've got a daughter of my own, I appreciate what he says about getting back to traditional values.

AUDREY: Huh. Do you think you should protect your daughter from decadent rock and roll music?

MOM: Oh, please. None of you even *know* what rock and roll music is. We had *real* music in the sixties. Everything from doo wop to Motown to the British Invasion, to psychedelic and folk rock. We had The Beatles and The Stones and The Who and Aretha Franklin. I don't know *what* you call that stuff you listen to. (points to the album covers strewn around her daughter's room) It's a joke, compared to what we had. It's cartoon music, and insipid music video soundtrack noise. It has nothing to do with rock and roll.

AUDREY: Uh huh. Well, thanks for sharing your views.

MOM: (staring at AUDREY, annoyed) I hope you've arranged for your parents to pick you up, Audrey.

AUDREY: Yes, ma'am. In, like, an hour.

MOM: And you, Nina?

NINA: Audrey's dad is gonna give me a lift home.

MOM: Good. Because I'm afraid we don't have enough food for you girls to stay to dinner. And like I said, Michelle has her homework to do. And she needs keep her priorities straight. Have fun.

(MOM leaves. A beat or two goes by.)

AUDREY: Wow. I really do hate the Baby Boomers. It's like, my hatred is shimmering, and multi-faceted, and multi-colored, and fresh and new, each day.

NINA: Hey, it's her house. We have been hanging out here a long time. And what she says about MTV is basically what you say about it. What she says about our music –

AUDREY: Okay, but I can say it because it's *my* music to put down, it's my generation. Her g-g-generation can blow it out their ear. You know? I hear a Boomer start sounding off that way, and I want to give a talk in defense of Cyndi Lauper and Bruce Springsteen and whatever. Michael Jackson, even. And Depeche Mode. Oingo Boingo. Scritti Politti.

NINA: Michelle, you still look upset.

MICHELLE: I'm fine.

NINA: Seriously. It's okay, you cannot let Audrey get to you. It's like, yes, she's rude to your mom, but she's also rude to her mom, and my mom ...

MICHELLE: I don't care about Audrey.

NINA: Then, what? Did your mom upset you?

MICHELLE: No, my mom is fine. I'll do my homework.

NINA: Then, what?

MICHELLE: I'm worried about Michael! He's hidden away somewhere, and there's no way to reach him, or talk to him, or tell him it's going to be all right. There's no way to make him feel loved. And something bad is happening to him, I can feel it, and I'm really, really scared for him.

(NINA reaches over and hugs her.)

NINA: You are a major nut-job, you know that? Audrey, put something on, would you? Something Michelle likes – something all three of us can handle?

(NINA keeps her arms around MICHELLE, and MICHELLE rests her head on NINA's shoulder.)

(AUDREY puts a record on the stereo turntable: perhaps the song is something by the Police like "King of Pain," or a Culture Club song like "Victims.")

LIGHTS DOWN

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *Music is so key to the identity of any generation, and it provides a slide you can go down, right back into your teen years. I had an idea for a play about people my age when we were in high school. Gen Xers have always been kind of an invisible generation, and I guess I wanted to "represent." So, I listened to music we listened to, and thought about conversations I'd had with friends in those years, to channel that time. The mom entered the scene in a later draft.*

AUTHOR BIO: Eight of Judy's full-length plays and thirty-nine of her one-acts have been produced onstage. Her full-length play *Cell* is published by Samuel French/Concord, and her full-length play *After Tartuffe* is published by Next Stage Press. Two of her full-length plays and of

her six one-acts have been produced as podcasts. A seventh, a short play she wrote with Ron Reed, is being released this month as a podcast by Janno Media in the UK. Judy is a New Yorker who wandered off to Nashville, Tennessee, in part because she also writes songs. Her Gen X issues with Baby Boomers should resolve themselves any day now.