

THE ART  
OF  
SACRIFICE

*Anthony Clarvoe*

**BROADWAY PLAY PUBLISHING INC**

224 E 62nd St, NY NY 10028-0202

212 772-8334 fax: 212 772-8358

BroadwayPlayPubl.com

THE ART OF SACRIFICE

© Copyright 2005 by Anthony Clarvoe

All rights reserved. This work is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America. No part of this publication may be photocopied, reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher. Additional copies of this play are available from the publisher.

Written permission is required for live performance of any sort. This includes readings, cuttings, scenes, and excerpts. For all rights please contact Broadway Play Publishing Inc.

First printing: November 2005

I S B N: 0-88145-293-9

Book design: Marie Donovan

Word processing: Microsoft Word

Typographic controls: Ventura Publisher

Typeface: Palatino

Printed and bound in the U S A

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Clarvoe's plays CTRL+ALT+DELETE, AMBITION FACING WEST, WALKING OFF THE ROOF, THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, THE LIVING, LET'S PLAY TWO, SHOW AND TELL, and PICK UP AX and his translations of Ibsen's THE WILD DUCK and GHOSTS are all available from Broadway Play Publishing Inc. They are performed across the United States, receiving drama critics' awards in Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, San Francisco, and elsewhere, as well as fellowships and grants from T C G/Pew Charitable Trusts, the John Simon Guggenheim, W. Alton Jones, McKnight, Jerome, and Berrilla Kerr Foundations, Kennedy Center/Fund for New American Plays, and, twice, from the National Endowment for the Arts. Born in San Francisco, he lives with his wife, actress Katherine Clarvoe, and two sons in New York City and the Midwest.

THE ART OF SACRIFICE was written with the support of a Playwrights Horizons/Amblin Commission. Its writing was assisted by readings by Playwrights Horizons, Primary Stages, 78th Street Theatre Lab, and Merrimack Repertory Theater.

The world premiere of THE ART OF SACRIFICE was presented by Merrimack Repertory Theater (Charles Towers, Artistic Director) on 13 November 2005. The cast and creative contributors were:

WILL .....Nesbitt Blaisdell  
ARON .....Jeremiah Wiggins  
*Director* .....Charles Towers  
*Set* ..... David Evans Morris  
*Lights* ..... Juliet Chia  
*Costumes* ..... Jane Alois Stein  
*Sound* ..... Jamie Whoolery  
*Props* .....Michaela Duffy  
*Stage managers* ..... Emily McMullen, Adam Scarano

## NOTE

This edition of THE ART OF SACRIFICE has been published to coincide with the premiere production, and does not include any revisions made during the rehearsal process.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In addition to the collaborators listed above, my thanks to the following for their work on the readings that helped bring THE ART OF SACRIFICE to fruition:

Playwrights Horizons: Tim Sanford, Lisa Timmel, David Esbjornson, Harris Yulin, and Ben Schenkman. Primary Stages: Casey Childs, Andrew Leynse, Elliot Fox, Tyler Marchant, George Grizzard, and Michael Stuhlberg. 78th Street Theater Lab: Eric and Ruth Nightengale, Ethan McSweeney, Brian Murray, and James Ludwig. Merrimack Repertory Theater: Charles Towers, Harriet Bass, Jack Davidson, and Harry Carnahan.

My gratitude to Jamie Horton and Doug Harmsen for my first hearing; Kip Gould for this book and much more; John Golbach, my chess buddy; the late Frank A. Clarvoe, Jr for teaching me the game; Sam Clarvoe for asking me to teach it to him; and Kate Clarvoe for love and talent, an inspiring victory, and many, many sacrifices.

## CHARACTERS & SETTING

*ARON, thirties. An international grandmaster*

*WILL, sixties. ARON's father*

*WILL's living/trophy room*

*Time: the present*

The beauty of a game of chess is usually assessed  
according to the sacrifices it contains.  
Rudolph Spielmann, *The Art of Sacrifice in Chess*

Sacrifices only prove that somebody has blundered.  
Savielly Tartakower

The way to refute a sacrifice is to accept it.  
Wilhelm Steinitz

## Scene One

*(WILL's living room. Functionally furnished.)*

*(On every available wall space, floor to ceiling, even in front of the window, hang the kind of inexpensive open shelves that you can buy at the hardware store. The shelves are filled with trophies, loving cups, plaques, ribbons, framed citations, certificates, clippings, and photographs. The trophies range from the few that are shining and fresh to the greater number which are coated in darkening shades of tarnish and dust.)*

*(Night)*

*(ARON is dressed for travel, with a dark coat over what from the fit and condition looks to be a good but second-hand suit. He has put down a battered briefcase that would hold a notebook computer.)*

*(WILL is dressed for bed, in a faded robe and pajamas.)*

*(ARON carries a grocery bag out of which peeks a large and ornate trophy.)*

*(They move, oblivious to each other.)*

WILL: Something wakes me up. He's standing at the door.

ARON: I drive up. No. I'm driven to the door. From—

WILL: He'll say—

ARON: The bus station. No, train station. Airport. Yes.

WILL: And I'll say—

ARON: I walk in.

WILL: And I'll say, what I meant.

ARON: I'm wearing...like when I was a kid. No.

WILL: All I meant.

ARON: No, I'll wear the suit. He'll like the suit.

WILL: No, first I have to...

ARON: I'll carry the trophy.

WILL: I'll invite him in.

ARON: In a box? In a bag?

WILL: Do I hug him? Shake his hand?

ARON: In my hand.

WILL: Nod?

ARON: (*Nodding*) Yes. (*He takes the trophy out of the bag.*)

WILL: He kisses me on the cheek like when he was three years old. Before everything.

ARON: Nothing will be different.

WILL: Everything will be just like he remembers it.

ARON: But he'll see how I've changed. He has to.

WILL: He'll be his old self again.

ARON: I'll stand there.

WILL: He'll relax.

ARON: No matter how tired and hungry I am.

WILL: He'll make himself at home.

ARON: I won't sit down right away.

WILL: Don't get pissed off again. Don't.

ARON: I'm going to get there in the middle of the night.

WILL: (*Suddenly shouting*) What were you doing? Why did you do that?

ARON: He'll open the door, and as soon as I'm inside he'll turn his back and go. Knowing I'll follow him. By the time I do, he'll be sitting in that room. His generation, they always put the king in the corner too soon.

WILL: And if I said...

ARON: And then he'll say...what?

WILL: So who died?

*(They look at each other for the first time.)*

WILL: Quite the suit.

ARON: This is how I dress now. Didn't know if you'd be up.

WILL: I don't sleep much anymore.

ARON: You never slept much.

*(Both are aware of the trophy. Neither acknowledges it.)*

WILL: You haven't taken some money job, have you?

ARON: No.

WILL: The suit. You had me worried.

*(They watch each other.)*

WILL: Why aren't you at the Nationals?

ARON: I am at the Nationals.

WILL: What happened? They haven't posted today's results.

ARON: They're probably still playing.

WILL: Wait a minute.

ARON: It's fine.

WILL: Why aren't you playing? You didn't lose, did you?

ARON: No.

WILL: You did, you lost, you've lost, Jesus Christ, I don't see you since God knows when, and this is why you show up?

ARON: No. I had a rest day coming, I asked to take it early.

WILL: Why?

ARON: I told them I had a family emergency.

WILL: What family emergency?

ARON: Well, my father thought I lost and he fell down dead.

WILL: That's not funny.

ARON: It's a little funny.

WILL: No, because you're trying to make jokes. You only do that when you're worried.

*(They watch each other.)*

WILL: Do they know where you are? The tournament people?

ARON: They send their best.

WILL: They hate my guts. You told them you were coming to see me? I bet that put fear in their hearts.

ARON: I bet it did.

*(Beat)*

WILL: *(Nodding to the trophy)* So that's from last year?

ARON: Which? *(Looking at the trophy in his hand)* Huh! What have we here?

WILL: Come on, come on—

ARON: Oh, this?

WILL: What have you got for me?

ARON: You want this?

WILL: Give it here, give it here.

*(ARON hands over the trophy. WILL sets it in his lap and dandles it like a grandchild.)*

WILL: Hello, shiny guy! Look at you! *(To ARON)*  
It's beautiful.

ARON: Got your eyes.

WILL: You made me wait long enough! *(To the trophy)*  
Oh, I've been thinking about you. You are even bigger than I expected. So much bigger than the last one.

ARON: The prize funds get smaller, the trophies get bigger.

WILL: It's gorgeous. Welcome! Come meet the family! I've been saving a special place for you. Right here. *(Setting the trophy in an empty spot on a shelf, rearranging some of the older trophies)* Everybody bunch up a bit. Make room, make room. That looks great, doesn't it?

ARON: Sure.

WILL: *(Taking down the trophy again)* Oh, but I've got to hold onto you for a while before you go to bed. Shiny guy, this makes my year, seeing you.

ARON: So, Dad. Hally called me.

WILL: Really.

ARON: About the last time you guys talked?

*(WILL is silent.)*

ARON: He was really upset. He paged me in the middle of the Nationals.

WILL: He paged you at the Nationals, he broke your focus to tell you that we talked on the phone? He calls me every week. What possessed him?

ARON: He said you weren't making any sense.

WILL: I have never made sense to Hally.

ARON: He said you were incoherent. You told him you were coming unglued.

WILL: Unglued? Unglued. Like I was glued before? And now I'm not, and that's a bad thing?

ARON: Then he said the line went dead. And he couldn't get through to you again.

WILL: I don't know what that's about.

ARON: I didn't know what I was going to find here.

*(They watch each other.)*

WILL: So when you face the unknown, this is what you wear?

ARON: I thought I might have to make funeral arrangements.

WILL: This is what you're going to wear to my funeral?

ARON: No, this is what I want to be buried in, I'm showing you 'cause you're going to outlast us all.

WILL: God forbid. So you want to call Hally, tell him false alarm?

ARON: I'll wait a little.

WILL: I'm fine.

ARON: Till I figure out what's going on.

WILL: Nothing's going on. False alarm.

ARON: Dad. Please. Move One, you scare Hally, and you know, Move Two, he's going to call me, and I'm not going to dismiss his feelings, what with everything, so Move Three, I'm going to do what he wants, drop what I'm doing and come here. It's a three-move sequence, a tactical shot. So what are you up to?

*(Beat)*

WILL: You guys were worried. I'm... That's touching.

ARON: Call him.

WILL: Me? No, I'm incoherent. Let him stew.

ARON: You are, to this day, such an asshole.

WILL: Secret of our success. So you've reconciled, you and your brother. That's great.

ARON: We get along fine. Always did.

WILL: Always did? He hated you.

ARON: Oh, I know.

WILL: Hated your guts.

ARON: We got along. Is there anything to eat?

WILL: That depends.

ARON: Oh, could we not? I'm hungry, I've been traveling all day.

WILL: You want to eat?

ARON: Yes, Dad, I want to eat.

WILL: Have you done what you need to do?

ARON: As a matter of fact, can I tie up the phone line later, I need to go to the websites, work on tomorrow's game.

WILL: Do it now.

ARON: It'll keep, I'll work better with a little blood sugar.

WILL: What did I always teach you?

ARON: You always taught me the strongest person wins. May I please have some food?

WILL: Help yourself.

ARON: You know what? It's your house. When you want to offer me something to eat, I'll eat.

WILL: Up to you.

ARON: Dad. Why did you say that to Hally? That you'd come unglued?

WILL: I did not say I'd come unglued. I might have said I'd been feeling like I'd gotten a little unstuck. Not unglued. Unstuck.

ARON: I don't know what that means.

WILL: I don't either. I just remember saying it.

ARON: He said you were shouting it at him.

WILL: And that was my last call with him? They mush together, those calls, they're all the same, your grandson this, your granddaughter that, the milestones rolling by on a very flat landscape.

ARON: They are very nice children.

WILL: They are boring children.

ARON: No.

WILL: They are not champions.

ARON: No.

WILL: They will never be champions at this rate. Of anything.

ARON: Hally sounds like they are sweet, funny little people.

WILL: Eh.

ARON: God, you're awful. That man calls you every Sunday.

WILL: Like clockwork. But you! You're back!

ARON: Just for the night.

WILL: No, no, no, I mean you're number one again. The new magazine came, did you see it? Announcing the Nationals. There you are, on the cover again. The Defending Champion. Where is that, I was showing it to Doctor Rubinstein—the way they wrote about you! Swashbuckling, they said.

ARON: Swashbuckling?

WILL: Something like that. Cutting a swath, that was it, the defending champion cut a wide and deadly swath through the field last year. Did you do that?

ARON: Wide and deadly.

WILL: Recalling his youth, they said. His fabled youth. Was it fun winning it again after all these years? All on your own?

ARON: Yeah.

WILL: The champion of the United States. The spacious skies, the amber waves of grain. You're champion of that.

ARON: Yeah.

WILL: The fruited plain.

ARON: What are you up to?

WILL: God shed his grace on thee. I'm being nice.

ARON: The fruited plain?

WILL: Well, I started hearing myself. But I meant the other stuff. Is it fun? You get recognized?

ARON: At tournaments, sure, people know me. There are times—I was walking through the terminal here—God, it's stupid, walking along, thinking, I am the champion chess player of the United States! Make way! Make way for your champion!

WILL: That's how you should be thinking. The purple mountains' majesty. You're champion of that.

ARON: Yeah, right, shut up.

WILL: Did you see—the magazine, there was a piece about that kid, the one who came up about when you did, what was his name, real little nightmare for you.

ARON: Nick? Joel? John?

WILL: John.

ARON: What's he done now, playing in Europe or something?

WILL: He's retired!

ARON: He what?

WILL: Another one down!

ARON: He's retired? John's—what's he going to do?

WILL: Some money job. Executive assistant to some big financier or something.

ARON: John. Jesus.

WILL: Don't get grief-stricken, what's wrong with you?

ARON: Thirty years, a couple of times a year I have to play against John. And he's just gone? He was almost the only one I learned something from when we played.

WILL: You beat him in the final at the Nationals last year.

ARON: His clock ran out.

WILL: You beat him, I watched the moves online.

ARON: I could have beat him, I was a pawn up in a minor-piece endgame, but I didn't want to blunder, so I sat back and let him lose on time.

WILL: Good gamesmanship.

ARON: It's not my favorite way to win, it's like watching a man drown, frantic little futile...I can't get stronger if everyone who can beat me quits the game.

WILL: Aron. If everyone who can beat you quits the game, you don't need to get stronger. You'll be the best one left.

ARON: That's not the point.

WILL: Yeah. It is. Only a quitter would leave the game for a money job.

ARON: You had a money job.

WILL: I had to have a money job, I had kids to feed.

ARON: So do they, some of them.

WILL: They have kids? Chess people? Big mistake.

ARON: I'm sure.

WILL: Big, big mistake.

ARON: Heard you the first time, Dad. I take back what I said, I have got to get something to eat. *(He crosses away.)*

WILL: Hey! Where're the big guns playing this week?

ARON: Dad.

WILL: I know, I know, I'm sorry, it's just great to have somebody to talk chess with. Are they in Linares?

*(ARON stops.)*

ARON: Yeah.

WILL: Strong field this year?

ARON: Strongest ever, say the ratings.

WILL: The ratings are messed up.

ARON: Yeah.

WILL: You should be over there.

ARON: I wasn't invited.

WILL: You should be, you're strong enough. It's an unfair system. Hey, but who's this new kid?

ARON: Hally didn't mention you were manic, Dad—

WILL: I've been seeing online, this new kid, from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, someplace, he's thirteen or something, stomping everybody?

ARON: He's a novelty, you know how it is. We've been there.

WILL: Thirteen-year-olds are outranking you and you want to eat.

ARON: Well. Not so much now.

WILL: Good. Work, it'll give you an appetite.

ARON: I'll eat while I'm online. You want anything?

WILL: You think that kid from Uzbekistan eats before he works?

ARON: Oh, God damn it.

WILL: Well?

ARON: Dad. I cut a wide and deadly swath.

WILL: A year ago.

ARON: I'm the champion of the United States.

WILL: I hate to see you wasting your time.

ARON: Then why am I here with you?

WILL: Because you need a kick in the ass! Like you always did!

ARON: And here I thought it was because Doctor Rubinstein, in addition to congratulating me on the cover of the magazine, told me you were sleep-deprived and starving to death.

*(They watch each other.)*

WILL: You've been talking to my doctor?

ARON: You've been stalking me online. Now.  
Do you want anything from the kitchen?

*(Beat)*

WILL: There's not too much in the kitchen. I need to shop.

ARON: There's nothing at all in the kitchen, is there.

WILL: I need to shop.

ARON: God damn it, Dad.

WILL: I am not starving. Do I look like I'm starving?

ARON: Malnutrition, that's what it means.

WILL: So you and Hally're thinking, what? Old man's going gaga?

ARON: No, that is not what I think.

WILL: And you're here to judge me? To judge if I'm competent to take care of myself? You?

ARON: We wanted to be sure you were okay.

WILL: And you figure you're a fit judge of that?

ARON: Dad. Heard you the first time. I get it.  
Have you been eating?

WILL: Of course I've been eating.

ARON: Every day?

WILL: Yes, every day. I get hungry, I eat.

ARON: Are you sure you always notice?

WILL: Yes.

ARON: If you didn't notice, would you know?

WILL: Yes I would know.

ARON: Because it's easy to miss those signals, when you've trained yourself not to care. Until it's too late.

*(Beat)*

WILL: Have you been eating?

ARON: I know that when a person doesn't eat or sleep, he loses track of time. Is that what unstuck means?

WILL: Have you been having time trouble? In your games? That's not how I taught you.

ARON: I'm playing okay.

WILL: If you were playing really well, I'd have heard about it.

ARON: If I were champion of the world, you might hear about it.

WILL: If an American were champion of the world again, it would transform the game. It would be the salvation of the game.

ARON: I hear you.

WILL: Don't shut me up.

ARON: I said, I hear you! I hear what you're telling me!

*(WILL is silent.)*

ARON: Dad. The not eating. Because work comes first. Is that what this is? But...you're retired, your children are grown, you're done working. You can eat now, you can rest. You have nothing more to do.

WILL: And why should such a person deserve to be fed?

ARON: Because a person is worth more than what he can do.

WILL: No. He is not.

*(Beat)*

ARON: Why aren't you sleeping?

WILL: Because my son has come home. And I never slept much.

ARON: You always said.

WILL: But lately, I don't know why, it's funny, you know what I started worrying about?

ARON: No, what.

WILL: It got in my head and I can't get it out, I have to get up, you ever do that, hoping I can leave it there, in the bed, and I'll stay out here till it decides to go bother somebody else. But I guess it followed me out here, 'cause I'm talking about it.

ARON: You're kind of talking about it.

WILL: Well, it's embarrassing. I keep thinking after I die...

ARON: Hey. That's not for long, long times yet.

WILL: No, I know.

ARON: You'll outlast us all.

WILL: Don't say—don't ever say that to me.

ARON: I didn't—

WILL: A son to a father. That is the last thing, the worst!

ARON: I hear you.

WILL: "I hear you," "I hear what you're saying," you say that a lot, it's a very noncommittal move, is that what I taught you? I keep thinking I'm going to die and you're going to turn into somebody else.

(ARON *is silent.*)

WILL: In the magazine I also saw there was a column with your name on the top.

ARON: Yes. That's my column, they gave me a column.

WILL: "Strategy Secrets of the Grandmasters?"

ARON: I know it's kind of... There's not a lot completely new to say about—

WILL: At the bottom of the column was the address of a website.

ARON: Yes.

WILL: You have a website.

ARON: I'm trying, yeah, game analysis, opening novelties—

WILL: I saw, I visited. It says you're taking private students.

ARON: Yeah. A few.

WILL: And there's a book.

ARON: Coming, yes, next month—

WILL: You wrote a book.

ARON: Collection of my best games, basically, with notes, you know, the usual kind of—

WILL: You're very busy.

ARON: Yes. That's. I haven't had a chance to come—

WILL: How do you have time to work on your game?

ARON: I do, I am, just in a different...I thought... winning, being champion again, I, the prize fund was pathetic, but the exposure, I was hoping, I could use the title, to piece together some kind of an, I don't know, a living. A life.

WILL: Sure. The years go by, you start to think, there's more to life than chess.

ARON: Yeah.

WILL: No. You're not missing a thing. People. You think they're happy? They're dead and their lives have no meaning. Believe me, I used to deal with them every

day. No principles. Not like you. You live by a code. You're a warrior in the cause of logic and beauty. Who can say that anymore? Yours is a fine, lone life. A wandering knight, that's you.

*(ARON is silent.)*

WILL: Well? What's going to happen to all that, you think?

ARON: When?

WILL: After.

ARON: After what?

WILL: After me.

*(They watch each other.)*

ARON: I hear what you're... Your parents died, what did you do?

WILL: You don't—no, sure you don't remember, your grandma, you were too young, and your grandpa died, you were playing in a tournament, I didn't want it to mess you up. And I was right. Where is it? *(Peering at the trophies)* Regional Under-12 Champion, where is it? There. See, you won.

ARON: I'm asking about you. He was your father. We're talking about the deaths of fathers now.

WILL: Well, you have to understand, with me... I was very angry at my father. So it was different.

*(ARON is silent.)*