

The Christmas Party

A one-act comedy by
Ludvig Holberg

Adapted by
Jerry Argetsinger



Salt Lake City

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THE CHRISTMAS PARTY

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The Christmas Party

By

Ludvig Holberg

Characters in the Comedy

JERONIMUS, an Old Citizen

LEONORA, his Young Wife

PERNILLE, her Maid

LEANDER, a Young Man

MAGDELONE, Sister to Jeronimus

TUTOR

ARV, a stable boy

Six Children (ages 4 to 12)

Christopher, Henning, Peer, Else, Marie, Anne

Party Guests (in disguise)

Watchmen, the local police

Setting – Twelfth Night in the main room of the comfortable home of Jeronimus and Leonora in the Jutland village of Aebeltoft, Denmark. The religious symbols celebrating Christmas are removed but the Christmas tree, decorated with handmade paper, straw and wooden ornaments still lingers. There are three entrances to the room, one from the Entry Hall, one that leads to the Kitchen and one and that leads to the other areas of the House.

THE CHRISTMAS PARTY a one-act comedy by **Ludvig Holberg**. Adapted and Translated by **Jerry Argetsinger**. 4 Males 3 Women 6 Children (3 boys, 3 girls ages about 4 - 12) Several Men and Women (party guests and watchmen) (*For performance by Professional, Educational and Community theatres*) Christmas parties were held after Christmas when the religious celebrations were over. They traditionally recalled the Heathen Days of Denmark and were notorious for their lack of restraint. Guests often came in costume and behaved with abandon. One of the things Holberg considered most ridiculous was the marrying of old men to young women. How could such a thing not result in affairs of the heart? It is Twelfth Night in the Jutland village of Aebletoft and the young wife, Leonora, is anticipating a raucous Christmas party where she can slip away with the handsome young Leander. She is devastated to learn that her pious old husband, Jeronimus, has declared there shall be no such party, the likes of which have been outlawed in Copenhagen. As her maid, Pernille, arranges a tryst, the entire household - her sister-in-law, their six children, their tutor and their servants - conspire to trick Jeronimus into hosting a party in spite of his reservations. As the revelry builds, Leonora and Leander slip away for their rendezvous, but are soon discovered by the outraged Jeronimus. A brawl ensues which is finally contained by the local watchmen who march everyone off to jail. **ORDER #3112.**

Gerald Argetsinger, Ph.D. (Bowling Green State University), is an Associate Professor, Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, a college of the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, NY. Argetsinger has had a distinguished career in theater and film as a scholar, playwright, director and producer. He has published extensively on Ludvig Holberg, “The Father of Danish Literature and Theatre” and has translated several of his comedies. Over a dozen of his scripts have been produced and published, including *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, the Virginia State Outdoor Drama. He is a nationally recognized director of outdoor drama, including *The Hill Cumorah Pageant* (Palmyra, NY), *Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (Big Stone Gap, VA), *Utah!* (Tuacahn, St. George, UT), *Equality of Rights: the First Women’s Rights Convention* (Seneca Falls, NY) and two historic dramas, *Sword of Peace* and *Pathway to Freedom* (Snow Camp, NC). Off Broadway and regional directing credits include Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (Quintero Theatre, Theatre Row, NYC), Shaffer’s *Equus*, van Zandt’s *Silent Laughter*, Wright’s *Mistakes Were Made*, and Carol Lynn Pearson’s *Facing East* with an African American cast. He is married to award winning costume designer Gail (Bishop) Argetsinger and they have raised two sons.

The Christmas Party

A comedy in One Act

LEONORA: *(Enters from the living area and looks around, checking to be certain she is alone. She notices the audience and crosses down to address them.)* Oh! Today has been as long as two days! You know, love is a passion that surpasses all others. It's like a seething ocean, the more it's confined the more it roars. Oh, Leander! I see you every day right before my eyes, the young man my old husband's suspicions prevent me from enjoying. My only consolation is his occasional love letter, which serves only to throw oil on the fire and fill me with despair. We have devised several intrigues to bring us together, but so far they have been in vain. If I'm to have the long-awaited joy of getting him alone, then it must be at the Christmas party we are having this evening. Pernille, my maid, is standing watch at the door to tell me when Leander walks by. He usually comes by about this time, but I dare not even open the window for fear my husband will walk in on me. But this fright, this pressure, is far from making our love grow cold; instead it kindles the passion.

PERNILLE: *(Enters from the Entry Hall.)* Madam!

(PERNILLE turns and hurries to her.)

Get ready! Monsieur Leander will be here any minute. The signal is three loud coughs. Then you must let him in to the entry hall to arrange your rendezvous.

LEONORA: No, Pernille! On my life I dare not let him in! What if my husband arrives at the same time?

PERNILLE: Let me worry about your husband. The second I see Mr. Jeronimus coming I'll run in and detain him with a lot of blather. I've come up with an entire sackful of things to tell him that will hold him up long enough for you to exchange a few urgent words with Leander.

LEONORA: But sometimes he won't listen to anything!

PERNILLE: Does Madame think my part isn't well rehearsed? I know what kind of talk the old man wants to hear. Do you think I'll tell him the news? No! I'll tell him some old wives' tales, like he always itches to hear. I'll tell him there is a calf born with ruffles on its head and frills down its legs. Then he'll start right in to moralize and run on about the evils of the times, about splendor and finery . . .

(Three coughs are heard from the Entry Hall.)

But there I hear Leander's cough! Run out and meet him! I'll run in to your husband.

(PERNILLE exits into the house while LEONORA runs out to the Entry Hall.)

(LEONORA escorts LEANDER in from the Entry Hall. She quickly looks to be sure they're alone and gives him a quick kiss.)

LEANDER: Oh! My sweetest Leonora!

(Kisses her.)

Is it possible that after waiting so long, I finally have the good fortune to . . .

LEONORA: Leander! We don't have time to waste on ceremonies. I'm already sure of your love. Let's plan what we're going to do tonight at the Christmas party. I know that your landlord and his wife have been invited, but I'm not sure if you have been.

LEANDER: If I'm not invited I'll come on my own. My landlord and lady will bring me with them on the pretext that they cannot leave me at home alone.

LEONORA: That will do. But do they know anything about our relationship?

LEANDER: I've never said anything, but my landlady clearly did notice something, for the other day she said, "Soon we'll go to our neighbor Jeronimus' Christmas party, then you'll have the good fortune to kiss the beautiful Leonora's hand." I blushed and she continued, "Both my husband and I smelled the rat. Any service we can render, we'll do with the greatest pleasure." I thanked her then and opened up my heart, for these people are faithful unto death and love me more than their own brother.

LEONORA: That's good, dear Leander. Since they're faithful to you, they can be our accomplices. But what can we do to arrange some privacy?

LEANDER: Let's think of some Christmas game that will provide the opportunity.

(We hear PERNILLE'S laugh coming from across the room.)

LEONORA: That's Pernille. My husband is coming! We must part!

LEANDER: *(Kissing her)* This time I take my leave against my will. Good-bye, my beloved, and be certain that . . .

LEONORA: Leander! I'm certain! Good-bye!

(She hurries him out the Entry Hall. As he disappears PERNILLE runs in from the opposite side.)

PERNILLE: Madame, did you speak with him?

LEONORA: Of course, Pernille! But why did you come back so quickly? I made him run off the second I heard your laugh because I thought it was my husband at the door.

PERNILLE: I knew I should have waited a little longer. But Madame, I'm afraid I've done the devil's deed.

LEONORA: How so?

PERNILLE: Your husband became so pious when I told the story about the calf being born, I'm afraid he's canceled the Christmas party.

LEONORA: If he has, you've done a hell of a job with our party. But it can quickly be corrected when you tell him you made up the story.

PERNILLE: That's won't work. I already swore that I saw the calf's ruffled head and frilled legs with my own eyes.

LEONORA: Well then, we're in a real mess. But did he say specifically that we won't have any Christmas party?

PERNILLE: Well . . . he didn't say that exactly, but he began to rant that we should ban all parties and frivolities.

If he's gotten that into his head, then you will have to encourage him to go ahead with the party.

LEONORA: No! That's the way to ruin everything! Let's see. If he speaks about it, I must pretend to be completely against a party. You see, the more an old man with a young wife believes her to be modest, the more freedom he gives her. But I don't believe there's any danger. If we don't get a Christmas party our old Aunt Magdelone will jump right out of her skin. She believes that all such traditions are commandments. You can't even get her to eat unless an Epiphany candle is on the table.

(JERONIMUS enters from across the room.)

But there's my husband, you run out and talk to Auntie.

(PERNILLE dashes out toward the kitchen.)

JERONIMUS: *(Muttering to himself.)* If the world is still here at Easter, I'll cut my throat! Those ruffles, frills and curls are nothing more than Lucifer's inventions!

LEONORA: What's the matter, dear husband?

JERONIMUS: We see one sign after another, but we're just as wicked.

LEONORA: Has something bad happened, Jeronimus?

JERONIMUS: Listen Sweetheart, you would be doing me a favor if you wore round hats from now on and have dresses sewn in the same fashion as my old sister Magdelone.

LEONORA: But Sweetie, if you compare my dresses with Aunt Magdelone's you'll find that hers are much more expensive.

JERONIMUS: That's not the problem. Expense neither adds nor subtracts from its effect. But these damned new inventions, these ruffles, these frills, these curls that were not known to our honorable forefathers are sinful attire that is the basis for all of the world's misfortunes.

LEONORA: If I'd only known it was a sin, my darling husband, I would have rejected it all.

JERONIMUS: We will not believe the sin before we're warned with signs, and then it's too late. Recently there was a calf born with ruffles, frills and curls!

LEONORA: How can you be sure that's true?

JERONIMUS: May lightning strike me if it isn't! Pernille and other good people here in our very own town of Aebletoft have seen the calf! Listen Sweetheart, what I want to say is, I'm not at all in the mood to have a Christmas party tonight.

LEONORA: Did that story about the calf frighten you out of it?

JERONIMUS: No, not at all, for that isn't the first such story. But after I thought about it I decided that these Christmas parties and Christmas games bring about nothing good.

LEONORA: to me it doesn't matter one way or the other. You know yourself how little I am of the world. You won't find many young wives like me. I'd be just as happy if there were never any dancing or playing in this world. My joy comes from sitting at home with my work, caring for my sweet husband.

JERONIMUS: I know! You are an example to all young wives in Aebeltoft. The best thing I ever did was to choose such a virtuous soul for my wife.

LEONORA: I simply can't understand how sensible people find pleasure in Christmas games. They may be good enough for children, but they should be disgusting for mature adults.

JERONIMUS: Sometimes these same Christmas games can also have evil consequences.

LEONORA: Christmas games and all other festivities, Sweetheart! I simply don't care for them. If it were not to please my Little Husband I would never go out again.

JERONIMUS: No, my little doll must not completely cut herself off from the world. One must have some enjoyment in life. Otherwise young people will be overcome by melancholy.

LEONORA: I always seem to become melancholy at parties and drive it away with solitude.

JERONIMUS: There, there. That's fine, but there is a limit! I'm glad, though, that you do not want the Christmas party this evening. I'll go and find out what my sister says about it.

(To himself as he exits toward the kitchen.)

Any honorable man who has a wife such as mine should celebrate his anniversary every year like a holiday!

LEONORA: *(Alone.)* Pernille's meddling has certainly caused a lot of trouble. I only hope that my aunt will change his mind again. If I had argued with him, he would have been much worse and developed a hundred suspicions; but I'm playing my cards so he'll have to beg me for a Christmas party and I'll say that I'm only doing it to humor him.

(When she hears JERONIMUS and MAGDELONE coming from the kitchen LEONORA quickly exits into the rest of the house.)

JERONIMUS: *(Entering with MAGDELONE.)* I have nothing else to say, Magdelone. I will not discuss a Christmas party! They serve no other purpose than to incur great expense and they always end with impropriety.

MAGDELONE: I don't believe you're serious!

JERONIMUS: I'm dead serious! I've seen far too many examples of such madness. I wish I had a dollar for every maidenhead launched at such festivities!

MAGDELONE: Jeronimus! But it's still a good, old, accepted custom.

JERONIMUS: It may be an old custom, dear sister, but it is not a good custom.

MAGDELONE: You always say that things were better in the old days than they are today. Why shouldn't we follow in our forefather's footsteps? Oh, dear brother, you should have seen the Christmas party yesterday's at the Miller's house. Why should we be inferior to the Miller's?

JERONIMUS: We won't be inferior, we'll be wiser. Besides, we can't go by old man Miller. He has other sources of revenue. He can eat Christmas cake all year round.

MAGDELONE: But Jeronimus, think of the children.

JERONIMUS: *(Throwing up his hands.)* Yes, yes! There we have it! Put the blame on the children!

MAGDELONE: But my dear brother, what will the neighbors think if we don't have a Christmas party this year? They'll think we've lost our faith and look on us like heathens.

(She cries.)

JERONIMUS: What damned nonsense! Is it changing your religion to eliminate madness?

MAGDELONE: You may call it madness, my dear Jeronimus. But I know many who also despised such good, old customs and it has not gone well for them in this world.

JERONIMUS: And I know many who have rejected the same customs and it's gone very well for them in this world.

MAGDELONE: Remember Christopher von Bremen, who always laughed when his wife put the Epiphany candle on the table? He was as healthy as anyone; but just as he was fastening his suspenders, he fell over dead.

JERONIMUS: Are you saying von Bremen wouldn't have died if he lit an Epiphany candle?

MAGDELONE: And what happened to Old Man Jeremias who owned the tobacco store? We refused to celebrate Christmas with so much as a bowl of rice pudding and he lived like a heathen throughout the entire Christmas season? He suffered intense grief when his three sons were denied their theological degrees one right after the other.

JERONIMUS: If those scoundrels had studied harder, they would have graduated. I know those who earned top

grades who never celebrated a religious holiday. Do you mean to say that man must eat pudding before he can earn his degree?

MAGDELONE: Well then remember what happened to Hendrick Buttercup's daughters!

JERONIMUS: Who cares what happened to Hendrick Butter-cr. . . Butter-kraut's . . .or anyone's daughters? What damned nonsense! What examples! Maybe all those daughters buttered their maidenheads at a Christmas party and everyone slipped into heaven? I'd be crazy to discuss this any longer.

MAGDELONE: Then at least remember what happened to . . .

JERONIMUS: I don't know and I don't care. But I do know that you're not having any Christmas party this year! Besides.

(He pauses. He takes a breath and calms himself down.)

I have my own special reasons.

(Exits.)

MAGDELONE: *(Bursts into tears, crying bitterly.)* I'm so miserable! I wish I were in the ground! In all my forty-five years I've never had a Christmas so meager as this one. Why should one toil and slave in the world when one is not allowed some pleasures now and then? We'll hear all of our neighbors celebrate the entire night, while we, alone, must live as though we're in the midst of lent!

(She continues crying.)

PERNILLE: *(Entering.)* Why does Madame weep?

MAGDELONE: Oh, Pernille! I have reason to weep! Anyone with a brother as stubborn as mine must . . .

PERNILLE: Well I never! Was Mr. Jeronimus so rash as to strike his sister?

MAGDELONE: No!

(She cries.)

It's worse than that! He will not allow a Christmas party tonight!

PERNILLE: No Christmas party?

(They both cry.)

I wish the devil was a servant in this house if this is how it's going to be. I'd rather give up my pay.

MAGDELONE: I can assure you, Pernille, when I heard it I felt as though someone stuck a knife in my heart. Our house will be the laughing stock of Aabeltoft.

PERNILLE: I was so sure we were having a Christmas party that I already invited the Miller's daughter.

MAGDELONE: This will be to the eternal shame and ridicule of our entire house. Curse the one who put this into my brother's head!

PERNILLE: When he hears about this, Arv will feel the same as we do. That poor boy spent the entire afternoon practicing to be the Christmas ram to scare the children.

MAGDELONE: The poor boy. He'll be devastated.

PERNILLE: Madame wouldn't believe how perfectly he can act the Christmas ram, sneaking in a scaring everyone. You'd think he were a real ram.

MAGDELONE: Don't say another word about it. My heart just breaks to think about it.

PERNILLE: But, if Madame took the trouble to beseech her brother . . .

MAGDELONE: It wouldn't help, Pernille, if I fell on my knees.

(They both continue crying. ARV enters from the Entry Hall dressed in a spotted white sheet with two horns on his forehead. He creeps up behind the two women and butts PERNILLE who stumbles into MAGDELONE'S arms. They continue to cry. ARV thinks he scared them into howling)

ARV: Don't be afraid. Don't cry, it's me!

(He whips off his disguise.)

Don't you recognize me? It's Arv!

PERNILLE: *(Sniveling.)* Yes. We know it's you; that's not why we're crying. Don't set your heart on any Christmas games tonight.

ARV: Why not?

PERNILLE: We're not having a Christmas party.

ARV: To hell with such talk. Who's going to stop it?

PERNILLE: Mr. Jeronimus got the notion and swore that . . . oh!

(All three cry.)

ARV: The devil take me if I don't dare to ask him who he thinks we serve around here. We're not heathens.

MAGDELONE: The only thing you'll gain by that, Arv, is a thrashing.

PERNILLE: I just thought of something, Madame. What if we get the children to pester him?

MAGDELONE: If anything will help, that will.

PERNILLE: All right! I'll run up to the children's room and get it together with the tutor.

ARV: You can promise him a sweet embrace in return for his help.

PERNILLE: You just watch your mouth. The tutor and I know each other well enough as it is.

ARV: It would be a poor parlor maid who didn't know her way around the tutor.

(PERNILLE Exits. ARV makes a clatter picking up the pieces of his Christmas ram costume as JERONIMUS enters from the Kitchen.)

JERONIMUS: What the hell is going on?

ARV: I'm the Christmas ram, sir.

JERONIMUS: *(Boxing his ears.)* Are you a Christmas ram? Are you?

ARV: *(Staggering.)* No, sir! I'm no Christmas ram.

JERONIMUS: Then what is the meaning of this?

ARV: I was only pretending to be the Christmas ram.

JERONIMUS: Pretending! You were pretending to be the Christmas ram?

ARV: *(Wailing.)* No! I wasn't pretending to be a ram.

MAGDELONE: Stop! My dear brother, it's a sin to strike this simple boy on a holy night.

JERONIMUS: Get out of here, scoundrel! Find yourself a book to read; that's better for you.

ARV: *(Exits crying.)* I swear there's no one on this whole street who reads a single Word of God at Christmastime.

JERONIMUS: You should have saved me that work, Magdelone, and chased him away with a couple of slaps before I arrived.

MAGDELONE: I don't know why our household shouldn't enjoy pleasures like everyone else.

JERONIMUS: So you can dress yourself up like a Christmas goat? That's shouldn't look too bad on an old nanny.

MAGDELONE: I don't see why we should be any more humble than any other people in the village.

JERONIMUS: Just see if any *distinguished* people have Christmas parties.

MAGDELONE: If we are going to emulate distinguished people, then we should invite everyone here and treat them to cakes and good cheer.

JERONIMUS: Christmas parties have already been completely abolished in Copenhagen.

MAGDELONE: So now it's Copenhagen, is it? The tutor tells me that religion has very little effect on people in Copenhagen. There's a young man here who recently came from Copenhagen; he has absolutely no faith whatsoever. He doesn't even believe that Martin Luther ordained that we should eat goose on St. Martin's Eve! He even claims that the world is round as an egg, and that's the worst lie there ever was!

JERONIMUS: Well . . . You're right. That will never do. We won't talk about it anymore. Call in the tutor and the children. I want to hear if they've learned something nice for the holiday.

(MAGDELONE exits toward the interior as JERONIMUS sits down with a basket of toys.)

There is an art to distributing gifts amongst the children so all are happy.

(He looks at each item as he talks about it.)

Christopher shall have this horse with the whistle in its rump. But the wagon, who should get it? I'll give it to little Henning. Peer shall have the violin; I think there's a musician in him. Else shall have the cradle with the baby doll. Girls are no sooner old enough to talk than they starting thinking of marriage and cradles. Marie, you shall have to be content with the fife. Oh, I almost forgot little Anne. She'll get this dangling thing with the bells.

(We hear the CHILDREN approaching.)

But I hear them coming with the tutor.

an additional 5 pages to the end