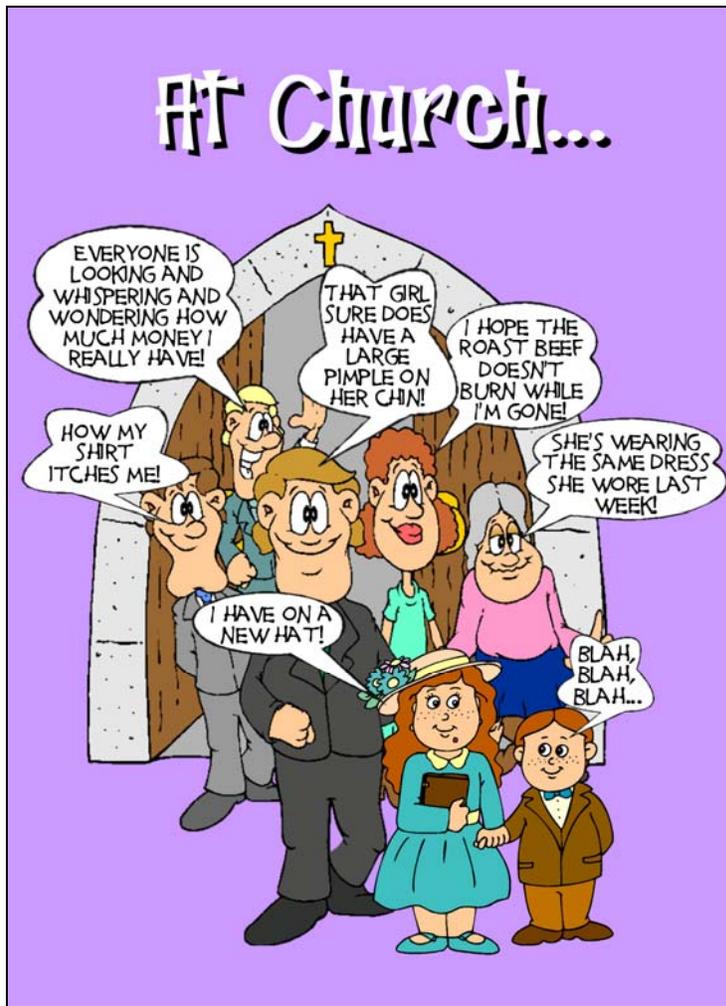


# At Church...



**Felix Stripe**

Adapted from the play "Orthodoxy" by Nina Wilcox Putnam

**BIG DOG PUBLISHING**

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## # Church

**COMEDY.** An adaptation of the comedy "Orthodoxy" by Nina Wilcox Putnam. What do people really think about during church services? In this hilarious comedy, the parishioners of a small church carry out all the conventional acts of a church service but their unfiltered thoughts are humorously revealed to the audience. The minister's wife worries that her roast will burn, the butcher reveals that he overcharges his customers; the grocer's daughter wonders if a boy will take notice of her; choir members complain about each other's singing; and the minister dreams about preaching in a big city instead of a stupid little town.

**Performance Time:** Approximately 30 minutes.



Inez Coralie "Nina" Wilcox Putnam  
(1888-1962)

## About The Story

Inez Coralie "Nina" Wilcox Putnam was a playwright, novelist, and screenwriter. She was born in New Haven, Connecticut, and was homeschooled by her father. Putnam wrote short stories, children's stories, westerns, romances, plays, musicals, and horror. Many of Putnam's stories were made into movies. The 1932 screenplay for the film *The Mummy* starring Boris Karloff was adapted from a story by Putnam and Richard Schayer in which a 3,000-year-old musician injects himself with nitrates to stay alive. In addition, Putnam wrote the first US income tax 1040 form for the Internal Revenue Service in 1912.

## Characters

(11 M, 13 F, 5 flexible, opt. extras)

**NINA WILCOX PUTNAM:** Playwright; female.

**SEXTON:** Church sexton who is going to be evicted the next day; has an air of complacency and self-importance; wears ill-fitting clothing; male.

**MINISTER:** Smug minister; male.

**MINISTER'S WIFE:** Worried that her roast beef may burn; female.

**YOUNG GIRL 1, 2:** The Minister and Minister Wife's two young daughters; nonspeaking; female.

**ANCIENT WOMAN:** Old woman who is bent over and walks with a stick or cane; female.

**LAND AGENT:** Is going to evict his tenant, the Sexton, the next day for nonpayment; wears nice clothing; male.

**AGENT'S WIFE:** Land Agent's wife who is excited that she is wearing a new hat to church; female.

**BUTCHER:** Butcher who overcharges his customers; wears a fine new suit; male.

**BUTCHER'S WIFE:** Butcher's wife who thinks going to church makes her look respectable; wears a fine dress; female.

**GIRL 1:** Teen girl; wears a dress and a new hat with pink roses on it; female.

**GIRL 2:** Teen girl; wears a dress with new white shoes; female.

**GIRL 3:** Grocer's daughter who has a crush on Youth 1; female.

**YOUTH 1:** Teen boy who has a crush on Girl 2; male.

**YOUTH 2:** Teen boy who has a crush on Girl 3; male.

**YOUTH 3:** Teen boy; wears an itchy shirt; male.

**BASSO:** Bass singer in church choir; male.

**TENOR:** Tenor singer in church choir; male.

**SOPRANO:** Soprano singer in church choir; female.

**CONTRALTO:** Contralto singer in church choir; female.

**FARMHAND 1:** Unsure why he is attending church; flexible.

**FARMHAND 2:** Unsure why he is attending church; flexible.

**WORTHY CITIZEN:** Businessman who is in business with Rich Bachelor; wears nice clothing; male.

**WIFE:** Worthy Citizen's wife; wears a fine dress; nonspeaking; female.

**RICH BACHELOR:** Rich bachelor; male.

**OLD MAID:** Old woman who hopes the Sexton takes notice of her; female.

**PAN:** Greek god of fields, groves, wooded glens, and mountain wilds; fun-loving and mischievous, he likes to tell stories during church services; carries a pan flute (opt.); flexible.

**NAUGHTY KID:** The only one in church who can see and hear Pan; enjoys listening to Pan's stories during church services; flexible.

**MOTHER:** Strict mother who is frustrated that Naughty Kid keeps staring out the window during church; afraid Naughty Kid's antics will embarrass her in church; female.

**HOBO:** Young hobo looking for lodging; he is barefooted with a beard and carries a long staff like a shepherd's crook; wears shabby clothing and voluminous cloak; flexible.

**ORGANIST (opt.):** Church organist, flexible. (Note: May use pre-recorded organ music, if desired.)

**EXTRAS (opt.):** As Choir Members and Members of the Congregation.

## Setting

A small church, 1914.

## Set

**Interior of a small church.** A half-section of the building is seen as though it has been cut lengthwise through the near side of the center aisle, leaving it intact and running parallel with and immediately behind the footlights. The entire width of the aisle is shown. Beneath a proscenium arch, there are steps leading to a platform, where there is a reading desk for the Minister. At the end of the aisle carpet is the communion table. Extending to the aisle are pews facing the pulpit in the usual manner. The sun is shining gaily and there is a glimpse of blue sky and waving trees seen through a row of long, undecorated windows at the rear. There is a widow with a windowsill for Pan to sit on when he talks to the Naughty Kid. At SR is the organ loft, shown as a half-section, and beneath that is the entrance to the church. There are steps leading to the church door.

## Props

Hymn books  
Contribution plate/basket  
Handkerchief, for Sexton  
Cane or walking stick, for Ancient Woman  
A ridiculously large "bible" for the Minister  
Money/coins for the collection plate/basket  
Church notice or newsletter  
Pan flute (opt.), for Pan

## Special Effects

Church bell tolling  
Light shining through the church door  
Strange, wild laugh  
Pre-recorded organ music (or an organist may play live)  
Hymn music  
Breeze/wind  
Raspy sound of key turning in a lock

“...while people  
are saying one thing,  
they are almost invariably  
thinking another.”

—Vina Wilcox Putnam

## Prologue

*(Before the curtain.)*

NINA WILCOX PUTNAM: This is my childish observation of those who sat around me in the bare white church to which my grandmother took me as a little girl. In those long hours when I sat in the red cushioned pew, my feet dangling over its edge, quick with restrained energy, my eyes fixed upon the bit of sky beyond the tall windows over the clergyman's head—in those long hours, I knew that I was not thinking of the words I repeated so mechanically, and by a thousand tokens, I knew that the others about me were not doing so either! In every way, they betrayed themselves. I looked into the utterly bored face of a departing parishioner and guessed that his "such a delightful time" meant "I have had a horrible time." Then the notion came to me to write out all that I guessed to be the truth about them...to put into the mouths of the congregation the things I guessed they were thinking. And so I have put down the service as I heard it when I was a child and as I guessed it with my mind as an adult...

## At Church

*(AT RISE: The interior of a church. The Sexton is tidying up the church and making sure that there are hymn books in the racks. Finally, he brushes off the contribution plate with his handkerchief. Church bell rings. Note: The characters are intended to give voice to their private thoughts, but are intended to do so in the usual tone and manner of polite conventionality.)*

SEXTON: *(Proudly.)* They will all look at me as they come in. I'm important on Sundays. What a sense of pride it gives me to bustle about, getting things ready. The stipend is nothing, the sentiment is nothing...but I put on these clothes and they all look at me, whereas they would do nothing of the sort otherwise. Now I must go and stand by the door and show them to their seats as they arrive. *(Thinks.)* I wonder if the town clerk will wear the shoes I repaired for him. *(Angrily.)* Confound him! I wish he would pay me for them!

*(Sexton goes to the entrance and opens the door, letting in a patch of sunlight and disclosing the steps of the building. He stands just inside, facing the audience, and adjusts his clothes self-consciously. A strange, wild laugh is heard, but the Sexton seems not to hear it. An Ancient Woman enters, walking doubled over with the aid of a cane or walking stick. Sexton accompanies the Ancient Woman to her pew. Note: For the following, the Sexton escorts each character to his/her pew with a courtesy of manner that utterly contradicts his language. Likewise, the characters' manners contradict their words.)*

SEXTON: *(To himself, referring to Ancient Woman, annoyed.)*  
Well, old crone, what a nuisance it is to have to assist your doddering footsteps up the aisle every Sunday.

ANCIENT WOMAN: *(To herself, excited.)* Thank goodness I am the first! Last Sunday, the butcher's wife got here before

me, and I missed seeing her come in. But, today, I'll miss no one!

SEXTON: *(Politely assisting Ancient Woman into her pew. To himself.)* Old and stupid! Oh, tuck your skirt in, for heaven's sake!

ANCIENT WOMAN: *(Gazing around. To herself with an air of satisfaction.)* This is fine...so much better than staying at home alone. I would not miss it for world!

*(Minister's Wife enters with Young Girl 1, 2, one on each hand. She exchanges a surreptitious bow with the Sexton and heads to a front pew.)*

MINISTER'S WIFE: *(To herself as she hurries down the aisle.)* Oh, I hope the roast doesn't burn while I am gone. That wretched stove! *(Walking awkwardly.)* Oh, my panties are in a bunch! Will I be able to adjust them, I wonder? No, someone might see. *(Sighs.)* I shall have to sit in misery. The whole congregation will watch me, but no matter how I act, they will talk about it afterward. I hope the children will be quiet. I will pray for that.

*(Minister's Wife enters the pew and kneels, burying her face in her hands. Young Girl 1, 2 sit and stare about, round-eyed. Sexton heads to the entrance.)*

SEXTON: *(To himself, referring to Minister's Wife, shaking his head.)* Poor woman, what a silly face she has...

*(Land Agent and Agent's Wife enter. Sexton leads them to a pew.)*

LAND AGENT: *(To himself, regarding Sexton.)* If this were the place to talk about such things, I would tell you that I am going to evict you tomorrow.

SEXTON: *(To himself.)* How you glare at me, sir! I am tempted to rob the plate in order to pay you!

AGENT'S WIFE: *(To herself.)* I have on a new hat!

*(They arrive at a pew.)*

SEXTON: *(To Agent and Agent's Wife, smiling politely.)* Here is your pew. *(To himself.)* I wish its floor would collapse and drop you both through.

AGENT'S WIFE: *(To herself.)* I have on a new hat!

*(Agent's Wife kneels and she repeats "I have on a new hat" several times. Butcher and the Butcher's Wife enter. Sexton starts to escort them to a pew.)*

BUTCHER: *(To himself, anxiously.)* I hope the All-Pervading Power doesn't know that I overcharge my customers and that he will only see the fine suit I bought with the money.

BUTCHER'S WIFE: *(To herself.)* How respectable I look! It is so respectable to go to church wearing such a fine dress!

ANCIENT WOMAN: *(To herself, scoffs.)* The Butcher's wife is wearing the same dress she wore last week!

SEXTON: *(To himself, referring to the Butcher.)* I'll beat you at poker yet!

*(Girls 1, 2, 3 enter. Sexton starts to escort them to a pew.)*

GIRL 1: *(To herself, showing off, giddily.)* See my new hat! See my new hat! It has pink roses on it!

GIRL 2: *(To herself, looking at Girl 1's hat.)* Her new hat isn't any better than my new shoes. *(Shows off shoes.)* Look at my new shoes!

GIRL 3: *(To herself, looking around, sighs.)* My beloved isn't here yet...

*(They arrive at a pew.)*

SEXTON: *(To Girls 1-3, showing them their seat.)* Here you are, charming things. *(To himself as he heads toward the door.)* Hmm, that older girl is getting rather fat.

GIRL 3: *(To herself, kneeling.)* How the Sexton smells of pomade! He sickens me! *(Sighs, looking around.)* When will my beloved come?

GIRL 1: *(To herself, kneeling, giddy.)* My new hat! See my new hat?! See it?! See it?!

GIRL 2: *(To herself, kneeling, giddy.)* My shoes! My shoes! They hurt, but look how white they are!

*(A crowd of Parishioners enter along the outer edge of the aisle. The church gallery begins to fill. Youth 1, 2 enter.)*

SEXTON: *(To himself, referring to Youth 1, 2.)* Hooligans! You can find your own pew!

GIRL 3: *(To herself, staring at Youth 1.)* He's here! Will he not look at me?

YOUTH 1: *(To himself, pretending not to see Girl 3 staring.)* There's the grocer's daughter. How she stares! I wish she would stop it! *(Looks over at Girl 2, sighs.)* Now if it were that young girl over there, who looked at me once with soft eyes... *(Sighs.)*

YOUTH 2: *(To himself, sadly.)* The grocer's daughter will not look at me!

*(Youth 2 sighs. Youth 3 enters and heads to a pew.)*

YOUTH 3: *(To himself, itching himself, annoyed.)* How my shirt itches me! How my shirt scratches me!

*(In the pew, Youth 3 kneels and repeats several times to himself "How my shirt itches me!" Organ music is heard or an Organist begins to play softly. Choir Members straggle on and take their places.)*

BASSO: *(To himself.)* If you don't keep on key this morning, Miss Soprano, I shall go mad!

SOPRANO: *(To herself, indicating Basso.)* You have a wretched ear for music!

TENOR/CONTRALTO: *(To themselves, indicating Soprano and Basso.)* They are so conceited!

TENOR: *(To himself.)* This choir would go all to pieces if it weren't for me. *(Thinks.)* At least, I must keep them thinking so...

CONTRALTO: *(To herself, overjoyed.)* Oh, the music! The music! Once a week I get to sing! How glad I am! How glad I am to sing!

*(Contralto smiles and hums over her part under her breath. Farmhand 1, 2 enter and head to a pew.)*

FARMHAND 1: *(To Farmhand 2.)* I don't really know what this church stuff is all about, but let us sit down.

FARMHAND 2: I don't understand it either, but it's very respectable.

**[END OF FREEVIEW]**