

# The Sweet Potato Queens

## ABOUT

In 1982 Mississippi native Jill Connor Browne, recently divorced and bereft from the loss of her father, was looking for a little something to cheer her up. An acquaintance in Jackson, MS, Malcolm White, decided to start a Saint Patrick's Day Parade and Browne knew instinctively she wanted to be involved. Browne wanted to be 'queen of something' - because all she could do was "smile and wave. That's my talent!" she told a Fondren, MS reporter. At the same time she was writing a column in the local paper (under a pen name) that caught the eye of a publisher who wanted to include her work in *The Anthology of Southern Humor*. A book deal with Random House followed less than a year later, and *The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love* hit the bookshelves. Nine books later the reign of Boss Queen Jill is going strong.

Asked to describe the Sweet Potato Queens, Browne said:

"... it's men, women, gay, straight, young, old, black, white, rich, poor, drunk and sober... So when I say there is no line - THERE IS NO LINE. And I love that. Actually university studies have shown that play is as important to your health and well-being as food, clothing and shelter. I could have saved them all the money and time on that study and told them that! Life is hard on a good day; I don't care who you are. There's something oppressive weighing down on you. And the dressing up funny and acting stupid makes it possible to step outside of yourself for a little while - to be someone that doesn't have a worthless ex-husband or a child in therapy or breast cancer, whatever it is you're dealing with - and it makes you a little stronger spiritually to go back and tote that load when you have to."

## CONTENT ADVISORY

**Language** Shit is used once, hell is used four times, damn is used six times, and tits is used once.

**Drugs/Alcohol** Frequent onstage alcohol consumption by adult cast members, and discussions of alcohol consumption.

**Violence** Flower Tammy is the victim of offstage domestic violence; we see the results only, not the act.

**Sexuality** Floozie Tammy has frequent sexual encounters that are discussed, but never seen; Rooster and Jill kiss multiple times, and flirt with heavy innuendos; there is an entire song about oral sex.

# SYNOPSIS

NOTE: This script knowingly plays with time. The 'present' of this play is a timeless zone where Jill and the Sweet Potato Queens, in full regalia, explain the rules and wisdom of their philosophy from (to quote Ms. Browne "a lofty vantage point above the masses where our words to live by, axioms and laws have been carved in stone." When the story goes into a flashback sequence with Jackson Jill it is approximately a dozen years earlier, so there is no striking age difference between the Tammys then and now.

## CHARACTERS

**Queen Jill** – Mississippi born and bred, Jill has a heart as big as her hair and dreams as sparkly as her dime-store tiara; the center of the story and founder of the Sweet Potato Queens; Queen Jill is the supreme Queen in the full flowering of her reign, and she reigns on her own parade.

**Jackson Jill** – our protagonist and, ultimately, the creator of the Sweet Potato Queens. Unhappy wife to second husband Travis, mother to baby daughter Peep. Jackson Jill's dreams are long-deferred. Lossely based on New York Times best-selling author and Sweet Potato Queen figurehead Jill Connor Browne.

**Flower Tammy** – A small-town 'good girl' all grown up with a sweet, timid disposition, can be a bit of a doormat; in an undisclosed abusive relationship.

**Floozie Tammy** – A striking, fun-loving woman, the life of every party; 'no' isn't in her vocabulary.

**Too Much Tammy** – A lovely woman with lifelong body image issues and weight loss struggles; often finds companionship in a knife and fork.

**George** – Flamboyant 'gay best friend' and honorary Sweet Potato Queen, George serves as advisor and confessor to the Tammys, and doubles as Chinese restaurateur George Wong.

**Daddy** – Jill's beloved, very likable father; adores his baby girl.

**Reporter** – Ted Barlow, Action News Eleven, covering the parade and the Sweet Potato Queens.

**Mama** – A good woman, but small-minded and traditional in her ways and thoughts. Doesn't always 'get' Jill.

**Travis** – Jill's second husband; a beer-drinking, womanizing, out-of-work good ol' boy who is handsome and charming enough to get away with it.

## ACT ONE

A voiceover – Jill explains what makes a 'Sweet Potato Queen'. She appears with other Queens on a flatbed truck float, decked out in full Sweet Potato Queen regalia (green sequined dresses, big hair and tiaras) and the story begins; a story of the only female drag queens in existence, complete with fake rear ends and majorette boots. The narrative reverts to the distant past which finds Jackson Jill, having recently quit her job at Sears for 'better things', living in a trailer with her momma, a baby and a deadbeat, philandering husband. While Jill's daddy always thought she hung the moon, her mother is never satisfied; she thinks the job at Sears is the best Jill could do, and that her cheating husband is Jill's best hope for happiness. Jill spills her woes to her father, then heads into town to the local Chinese restaurant for a drink. She meets Floozie Tammy, Flower Tammy and Too Much Tammy, who are celebrating a birthday; the ladies, although vastly different, recognize in each other a similar longing for a better life, and a friendship begins.

Though broke, Jill's jobless husband Travis gives her a small gift, a bottle of perfume. Jill runs into Floozy Tammy and Too Much Tammy at the laundromat, and they compare notes on the challenges of being a women, and the irksome ways of men. Flower Tammy joins them, dressed in her Sunday best – she is going to be an Avon Lady! She is quite skilled at make-up application, having much experience hiding bruises from her abusive husband. Flower Tammy recognizes Jill's perfume. It is men's cologne from Parisian's Department Store, where Travis's current fling works – more proof of his infidelity. Travis makes an appearance at the laundromat to borrow money from Jill; after he leaves she puts her foot down, telling her friends to stop gossiping about her husband.

## ACT TWO

The second act opens with Queen Jill reminding the audience of the importance of preserving, and that downtrodden Jackson Jill is actually her. She talks about the inevitability of human tragedy and the Southern tradition of using food as comfort.

In the past Jackson Jill gets a reminder from her Daddy to keep her head up. She is interrupted by her Mama; George has called her, one of her friends needs help. She goes to the Chinese restaurant to find Too Much Tammy, Floozie Tammy and George helping Flower Tammy clean up. They confront her, wipe off her make-up and document her injuries with pictures, and insist on keeping her safe for the night.

Queen Jill, in more casual clothes, meets Jackson Jill in the trailer park; they reminisce about first kisses. In a bar outside Jackson Travis is having a late drink and discusses women with George; Queen Jill and the Tammys appear in the present and state their case for the five men every woman needs, and the promise women can make to insure man's eternal worship. George is made an honorary queen – he shares his difficulties growing gay in a small town in Mississippi, and the joy of being true to himself.

In Jackson Jill's era, the ladies get together with George to imbibe and 'confess' their sins – Floozie Tammy admits to waking up in a strange bed in a motel, for the first time in a while; Flower Tammy acknowledges that the abuse at home continues; Too Much Tammy confesses to her over-eating, drinking and addiction to twelve-step programs. Floozie Tammy tells the ladies that she has been driving into Hattiesburg to be a 'good girl', where no one knows her reputation, and has met Steve, a great guy who works with handicapped kids and is in love with her fake persona. She has invited Steve to meet her friends; he walks in and it is Travis.

## **SYNOPSIS (cont.)**

The revelation shocks everyone, even Travis. Jackson Jill seeks out her Daddy for comfort – this is when it is revealed that he is dead, has been a ghost of sorts for the entire play. Jackson Jill returns home to tell her mother about Travis’s infidelity and her plans to leave home with her son and go back to school. Her mother discourages her, even telling her to take Travis back. Jill, at a very low place, gathers the Tammys; they buy some cheap tiaras and gloves, and convince a local farmer to provide a truck so they can ride in a parade the next day – his sweet potato farm truck. The ladies are the hit of the parade, and the Sweet Potato Queens are born. The ladies have learned the valuable lessons of self-respect, self-care, and mascara and sequin application; Jill becomes a writer, and sets out to tell her own story.

\*Please keep in mind that this is a new work, and will be undergoing changes throughout the creative process until performances begin. This guide was written with the most current information at the time of publication.

### **RESOURCES:**

<http://www.finditinfondren.com/2012/03/21/the-queen-meet-jill-conner-browne/>