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A PLAY IN ONE ACT

But Listen

By
Susan Cottrell



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(BUT LISTEN)

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BUT LISTEN!
A Play in One Act
For Two Men and Two Women

C H A R A C T E R S

HELEN

KIM

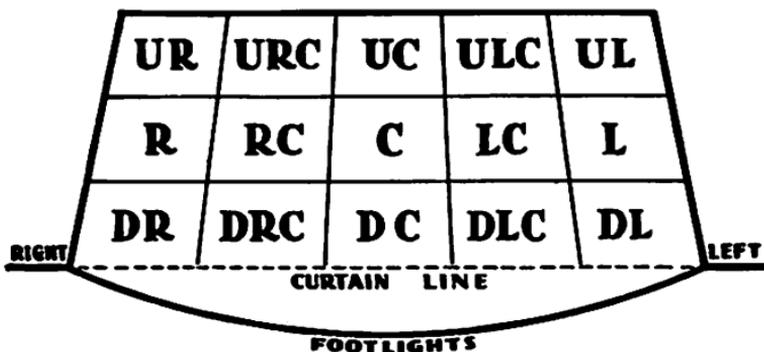
NICK

RICHIE

TIME: *The present.*

PLACE: *Courthouse and Nick's apartment.*

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for *up right*, RC for *right center*, DLC for *down left center*, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

But Listen

SCENE: The stage is divided in half, but there is no wall. Each set just simply stops close to the center of the stage. The right half of the stage shows part of a large public office. We hear background noise of typing, telephones ringing, people talking crisply -- not chatting. The sounds are professional and ordered -- all about the same volume and frequency, not erratic or confused. All dividing barriers in the office should be inter-office type, such as waist-high walls, swinging doors, file cabinets, and cubicles; no main walls, no windows. It should give the impression of being a small part of a very large office. The lighting is bright and artificial-looking. Everything is clean, shining, and institutional: no plants, pictures, coffee cups, sweaters, etc. People may occasionally walk in and out, carrying files or papers, looking in drawers for things, and so on. All are well-dressed. You may use as much or as little furnishings as desired, but there should at least be two desks relatively close to each other, each with a telephone.

On the left half of the stage is the living room of a small apartment, crowded with ratty-looking furniture and assorted junk. There is an ancient dirty rug with one edge kicked up. Things are lying around everywhere -- clothes, magazines,

dirty dishes, an unstrung tennis racket, record albums, etc. The cut-off point at center stage is not a natural wall: instead, the room appears to be sliced off about two-thirds of the way through. There is a door UC and another door, not functional, LC. Somewhere in all that mess is a telephone.

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: The office half of the stage is lit. The other half is dark. It is a working day and HELEN is standing by her desk, RC, gesturing with small controlled movements, like a robot, as she talks. KIM, standing slightly to her left, follows Helen's gestures with her head. Both are fairly young, well-dressed and carefully groomed -- especially HELEN, who looks like a mannequin. KIM looks nervous. HELEN goes into what sounds like a prepared speech.)

HELEN. The cubicle on this side is Mr. Lane's office. The other one is Mrs. Harmon's. (She gestures toward UC and then L.) Those are the cabinets for the larger files, and these are for the files that are being . . . well, we'll get into that later. You'll be learning about the telephones today. Now. You'll notice that there are seven incoming lines. We also wait on the people at the counter, and we do the paper work in between. Mary is the section supervisor . . . (She indicates off DR and KIM nods.) . . . and that's Allen over there, and then Jane and Cathy, and you and me. Now, the most important thing to remember about working here . . . (She pauses for emphasis. KIM straightens to attention, wide-eyed with alertness.) . . . is, that we stagger our coffee

breaks, so that only one person is gone at a time. The schedule is in your top drawer. (KIM opens the top drawer, finds a piece of paper and also a staple-puller, which gets caught on her finger. She disengages it quietly as HELEN goes on.) Answering the telephone isn't very hard. You'll learn how it goes. If you have to get a file to look up something, you put the person on hold. If you can't answer a question, you transfer the call.

KIM. To where?

HELEN. That's not important. There's a list of telephone numbers taped to the desk, though, in case you want to look at it. (KIM notices.) If you need any others, there's a county telephone book in the second drawer. Now. If you're on one line, and a call comes in on another one, you put the first one on hold and answer the second one. Then you put the second one on hold. Then you go back to the first one. If anyone asks you about fees or costs, transfer them to the business office. If they ask you to look up something, put them on hold. If they ask for forms, transfer them to the forms division. If they . . .

KIM. Don't they ever ask questions we can answer?

HELEN. And if they get obnoxious . . .

KIM. You put them on hold.

HELEN (not hearing). You put them on hold. Then you refer the call to the supervisor.

KIM. What if the supervisor isn't here?

HELEN. If the supervisor isn't here, you put the person on hold, and . . .

KIM. Oh. Yeah.

HELEN. And try to find an assistant division chief or someone in authority.

KIM. But how will I know who . . . ?

HELEN. You'll recognize everyone after awhile.

There should be a pad of paper in your top drawer. When you're answering the phone, you always write everything down. If a person tells you a file number, or a name, or a phone number, you write it down. If you take a message, put down the time. The clock is up there. (Points out over the audience. **KIM** nods. **HELEN** sits at her desk. After a brief hesitation, **KIM** decides the other desk must be hers, and sits down.) You always identify yourself when you answer the . . . (Telephone rings.) Why don't you listen in while I take the first few calls? Then you'll see how it goes. (**HELEN** pushes the button on her telephone and picks up the receiver. **KIM** watches, and does the same. **HELEN** speaks in a pleasant little sing-song voice, like a stewardess:) Superior Court Records. This is Helen. May I help you?

WOMAN'S VOICE ON LOUDSPEAKER (sounds slightly senile and very earnest). Hello. Hello?

HELEN. May I help you?

WOMAN. Oh! There you are! What hours are you open?

HELEN. Eight to five, Monday through Friday.

WOMAN. Are you open on Saturday?

HELEN. No. Monday through Friday.

WOMAN. I need a copy of my divorce decree, dear. Do you have anything like that?

HELEN. Yes, we do.

WOMAN. Then, if I come in, will you make a copy that I can keep?

HELEN. Yes, we will.

WOMAN. And what hours are you open?

HELEN. Eight to five, Monday through Friday.

WOMAN. And you're not open Saturday?

HELEN. No, we're not.

WOMAN. Are you sure?

HELEN. Yes, I am.

WOMAN. Well, thank you very much, dear.

HELEN. You're welcome.

WOMAN. Good-bye now.

HELEN. Good-bye. (HELEN and KIM hang up.

HELEN goes on as though there had never been an interruption to her speech.) Most of the questions are fairly routine. A lot of people who call want to get copies of things. The fee for copies is fifty cents for the first page, and thirty cents for all subsequent . . . (Telephone rings again.)

(The left side of the stage is lit. NICK, a young man in jeans and a sweat shirt, is holding the telephone carefully in his lap, the receiver to his ear. RICHIE, his friend, sits cross-legged on the floor, watching with great interest and excitement. As HELEN picks up her receiver simultaneously with KIM, NICK begins menacingly:)

NICK (false, growly voice). Hey! Listen, kid, there's a . . .

HELEN (pleasant, artificial voice). Superior Court Records. Hold the line, please.

NICK. Hey, now, wait just a damn . . . (HELEN punches hold, and continues her speech to KIM.)

HELEN. And certification of copies costs one dollar. I'll teach you how to do it. If a document is more than one page long, you certify the last page only. If the judge's signature is at the bottom of the page, you turn it over and certify it at the top, on the back. (KIM nods, and

HELEN continues inaudibly. RICHIE looks at NICK, who is scowling at the receiver.)

RICHIE. Whatsa matter, man?

NICK. She put me on hold.

RICHIE. Well, why didn't you tell her there was
a . . .

NICK (edgy). I'm going to, I'm going to! Gimme a chance, will ya?

RICHIE. She wouldn't've put you on hold if you'd a told her there was a . . .

NICK (waving him down furiously). Shut up, will ya?

HELEN. Kim, why don't you listen in on one or two more calls, just to get the feel of it? (They punch buttons simultaneously, and lift receivers.) Thank you for holding. May I help you?

NICK. Listen, there's a bomb in your office, and it's set to go off at exactly . . . (Starts to look at his watch, but doesn't have one. Makes frantic gestures to RICHIE to produce one.)

HELEN. What case number are you calling about, please? (RICHIE holds his watch out; NICK grabs it.)

NICK. Look, it's set to explode at exactly one hour and twenty-eight minutes from now, unless . . . (KIM looks nervously out toward the clock.)

HELEN (pencil poised). What case number, please?

NICK. This isn't about a case number, it's about a bomb, you dumbbell! And if you wanna go home all in one . . .

HELEN (calmly). Sir, you must have the wrong office. I'll transfer your call to the sheriff's office. (Looks at list taped to desk.) That number is . . .

NICK. I don't wanna talk to no sheriff's office! There's a . . .

HELEN. What number were you trying to call, please?

NICK (still belligerent, but uncertain now). Isn't this the courthouse?

HELEN. Yes, it is.

NICK (triumphantly). I thought so. Well, now it's one hour and twenty-seven minutes, and if you don't listen to what I'm sayin', your whole place is gonna be full of dead people.

HELEN. Sir, the number for the coroner's office is two-four . . .

NICK (frustrated). Whatsa matter with you? Don't you even care? Because there's a real live bomb in your office, an' you'd better listen!

HELEN. Would you like to speak to the supervisor?

NICK. No. The only reason I even . . .

HELEN. Sir, front-office clerks are not trained to take this type of call. All calls of this nature are to be transferred to Mr. Lane's office.

NICK. Didn't you hear what I said?

HELEN. Yes, I did.

NICK. I said, there's a bomb set to go off. In your office, where you are right now. (Pauses for reaction. When there is none, he adds for emphasis:) And if you think I'm kidding, I'm not.

HELEN. Sir, Mr. Lane is the only one who is authorized to take . . .

NICK. What does he think he can do about it?

HELEN. Mr. Lane is the Division Chief. He is in charge of approving all . . .

NICK. I don't care if he's the president! I don't. . .

HELEN. He prefers to handle all important incoming calls personally.

NICK (gratified; swells a little with importance, and gestures to RICHIE to come listen). Oh, he does?

HELEN. Yes, sir. He's in charge of this division.

NICK. Okay, then, I'll talk to him.

HELEN. One moment, please. (She puts him on hold, but **KIM** is too nervous to notice, and keeps listening. **HELEN** goes to a cubicle **UR.**)

NICK. Hey, man, we've really got 'em sweatin'. She went to call the big boss.

RICHIE. Yeah? Hey, not bad.

NICK. Not bad? Listen, she's scared to death. I can tell by the way she talks, so quiet -- you know? Real calm. Like she's just about to faint.

RICHIE. Wow, really shakin' up the joint, huh? What're you gonna say to the big boss?

NICK (shrugs, being cool). Play it by ear. (**HELEN** returns, picks up the receiver.)

HELEN. I'm sorry, sir, Mr. Lane's at a meeting right now. May I take a message?

NICK. A message? What are you, some kind of a nut? Hi . . .

HELEN (pencil ready). I can have him call you when he returns.

NICK. When's he gettin' back?

HELEN. I couldn't say, sir. He's attending a meeting.

NICK. Well, you can tell him for me that if he wants to go home alive . . .

HELEN. If you'd like to leave your name and number, I'd be glad to have him return your call.

NICK. If you think you can pull an old trick like that on me, you're the nuttiest dame I ever . . .

HELEN. Would you like to leave your name and number?

NICK (shouting). No! (**HELEN** removes the receiver and rubs her ear briefly, but without noticeable emotion. Puts receiver up to her ear again.)

HELEN. Mr. Lane has authorized his assistant to

take his calls in emergencies.

NICK. Now it's one hour and twenty-three minutes.

HELEN (continuing). Is this an emergency?

NICK. Believe me, when the whole courthouse blows up, and all you idiots are scattered in pieces from here to Milwaukee, then you won't be asking if it's an emergency.

RICHIE (making triumphant gestures). Yeah, man! That's tellin' 'em! (But NICK is too frustrated to notice.)

HELEN. Would you care to speak to Mr. Lane's assistant?

NICK. No, I don't wanna talk to any assistant. And if you think that just because . . .

HELEN. Sir, Mr. Lane and his assistant are the only ones who can help you. If you'd care to leave your name and number, I'll . . .

NICK. Okay! Okay! I'll talk to him!

HELEN. Who?

NICK. The big boss's assistant, who else?

HELEN. I'm sorry, sir, she isn't in today. She's having an operation.

NICK. Oh, she is? Well, everybody in your office is gonna be having an operation the hard way in just about exactly . . . (He gropes for the watch, but can't find it. Mutters to RICHIE:) Hey. What time is it?

HELEN. The time is two-fourteen. (You expect her to add "and twenty seconds. Beep.")

NICK. Well, in just about one hour and . . . (He starts to count it out on his fingers, but gives up.) . . . and if you don't wanna go home in a strainer, lady, you'd better . . . (Telephone rings in office.)

HELEN. One moment, please.

NICK. Don't you . . . (Panicky.) . . . so help me, if you put me on hold . . . (HELEN punches

button. NICK slams his receiver to the floor.)

RICHIE. Hey, man, what happened?

NICK. She put me on hold. (HELEN pushes another button on her telephone. KIM does the same belatedly, and they answer.)

HELEN. Superior Court Records. This is Helen. May I help you?

WOMAN'S VOICE. Hello, is this where I call about getting forms?

HELEN. No, I'll transfer you to the forms div----

WOMAN. You see, I want to file for my divorce, and my husband said he was going to do it, and I knew at the time I should never count on him just because he said he would, but I thought maybe, maybe just this one time . . . but then he got drunk, and threw the forms in the pan while I was making split pea soup, and I told him they were the only ones we had and they'd never be the same again, but what did he care? He'd been drinking ever since noon! And of course he didn't know where to get any more . . . he had an attorney who gave them to him, you see, but of course that was before we filed bankruptcy. So anyway, I want to know where I can get forms to file, because if I wait for him to do it, it'll be weeks before he gets around to it again. You know how men are, they can't keep their minds on anything except you-know-what for more than two seconds . . . well, if I had the forms myself, I could go right down and file today, while the baby-sitter's here, because I just got paid yesterday . . . but if I gave him the money, you know he'd go right out to a bar with it and start buying drinks for that redhead again. . . . (HELEN, who has been taking breath to speak every time the WOMAN pauses, finally gets a word in.)

HELEN. Legal forms can be obtained in the forms division of the business office for a nominal charge. I'll . . .

WOMAN. Where's that?

HELEN. It's on the ground floor of the courthouse. I'll transfer your call. (Motions to **KIM** to hang up. **KIM** does so. **HELEN** transfers the call. **NICK**, who has been shaking his receiver, trying futilely to re-establish the connection, now gets a definite dial tone.)

RICHIE. Now whatsa matter?

NICK. She musta hung up on me.

RICHIE. Are they allowed to do that?

NICK. Well, listen!

RICHIE. Yeah. Boy, she's got her nerve, all right. (NICK begins dialing. **HELEN** finishes transferring her call and looks for the original one.)

KIM. What happened to that man? Wasn't he on line one?

HELEN. He must have been cut off.

KIM. What do we do, then?

HELEN. He'll call back if it's important.

KIM. Important? It must be important. He said there was a . . . (Telephone rings. Each picks up her telephone.)

HELEN. Superior Court Records. This is Helen. May I help you?

NICK (accusing). You hung up on me.

HELEN. I'm sorry, sir, we must have been cut off.

NICK. Well, don't let it happen again. If you work for the government, you're not allowed to hang up on people.

HELEN. I'm sorry, sir, we must have been . . .

NICK. Let me talk to your boss.

HELEN. Our section supervisor is working on our monthly statistical report. May I have her call you back?