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**American Association of
Community Theatre AACT
NewPlayFest Winning Plays:
Volume 5 (2022)**

Escaping the Labyrinth by
THOMAS HISCHAK

Unpacking Mother by
KAREN SCHAEFFER

MLM Is for Murder (or, Your Side Hustle Is Killing Us) by
JOHN BAVOSO

The Café Mocha Murders by
DEANNA STRASSE

Of Men and Cars by
JIM GEOGHAN

Launch Day (Love Stories From the Year 2108) by
MICHAEL HIGGINS

Dramatic Publishing Company
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AACT NewPlayFest Winning Plays:
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INTRODUCTION

The American Association of Community Theatre (AACT) is proud to present the six winning scripts and playwrights of the fifth AACT NewPlayFest cycle. AACT NewPlayFest is an initiative by AACT to address the critical need for new, high-quality plays for community theatre audiences around the globe. It has been embraced by playwrights and theatres across the country, bringing exciting theatrical journeys to producing companies and joyful realization and anticipation to playwrights and their work.

AACT is pleased to partner with Dramatic Publishing Company for this program. AACT NewPlayFest is unparalleled in new play competitions, providing full productions of the winning scripts, plus publication and rights representation by a major theatrical publisher.

This fifth cycle of AACT's NewPlayFest, ending in 2022, proved to be a success with more scripts submitted than in prior years and six theatres from across the country were selected to produce world premieres of the winning scripts. This festival continues to benefit the producing theatres by giving them the excitement of bringing new works to their patrons, and the playwrights by allowing them to experience quality productions of their work and publication and representation by Dramatic Publishing. The benefits of AACT NewPlayFest will expand as additional theatres produce these top-notch plays.

We hope you will consider one of these plays for your next season.

Break a leg,

Quiana Clark-Roland, Executive Director
American Association of Community Theatre

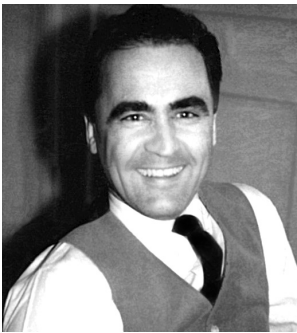
The American Association of Community Theatre is the resource connection for America's theatres. AACT represents the interests of more than 7,000 theatres across the United States and its territories, as well as theatre companies with the U.S. Armed Services overseas. To learn more about AACT NewPlayFest and AACT, go to aact.org.

FOREWORD

Jack K. Ayre, born in Pittsburgh on July 9, 1921, celebrated his 90th birthday before passing away in December 2011. At his birthday party in Sunnyvale, Calif., he sang with a barbershop quartet—one of his favorite activities—and celebrated with his cousin and lifelong friend, Frank Ayre Lee. Though as adults they lived on opposite sides of the country, the cousins kept in touch through letters that displayed a love for the written word and an irreverent sense of humor. Jack had participated in theatre productions at Drew University in New Jersey and at a community theatre in Connecticut in his younger years and continued that interest when he moved to California.

Frank, a chemical engineer by profession, was also an avid aficionado of theatre and had dabbled in playwriting, adapting Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* for a children's theatre production, and penning *McSteg*, a tongue-in-cheek discourse ribbing his cousin Jack and based on a scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

The Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation has been created by the children of Frank as a tribute to their father, who passed away in August 2012, and a legacy for the creative endeavors of Jack, who was an advertising executive and public relations director. The family is pleased to honor both men through a lasting legacy promoting new works for theatre.



Jack K. Ayre



Frank Ayre Lee

Photos: Courtesy of the Jack K. Ayre and Frank Ayre Lee Theatre Foundation.

Escaping the Labyrinth

By
THOMAS HISCHAK

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(ESCAPING THE LABYRINTH)

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Escaping the Labyrinth received its premier production at Des Moines Community Playhouse on Oct. 15, 2021.

CAST:

BUD SCHLIEMANN Nick Cornelison
HERMAN Tyler Robinson
DEE Jillian Traskos
MANOS Don Rothweiler
JULIAN..... Clifton Antoine
PAULA.....Shelby Dale
DR. VALENCY Ken Reams
HESTER..... Dottie Flener
SARGE.....Madison Ray
OLD BUDJim Meade

PRODUCTION:

Director Katy Merriman
Scenic Design.....Nicholas Amundson
Costume Design.....Jessica Van Essen
Lighting Design Chris Hanian
Composer/Sound Design Mark Toeppen
Properties Designer.....Allyson Braum
Stage Manager Jenna Darsee
Assistant Stage Manager.....Sam Amadeo
Assistant Director.....Toni K. Farris
Assistant Properties Designer Eileen M. Diaz
Dramaturg Kathy Pingel

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“Escaping the Labyrinth was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Des Moines Community Playhouse in Des Moines, Iowa.”

Escaping the Labyrinth

CHARACTERS

BUD SCHLIEMANN: ages from 25 to 45 years old throughout the play; an American grad student, a professor, then a scholar.

HERMAN: late 30s; a cultured Greek man.

DEE: 30s; a no-nonsense American waitress.

MANOS: 70s; an exuberant Greek restaurateur.

JULIAN: 30s; a dashing European airline pilot.

PAULA: early 30s; a sensitive British airline stewardess.

DR. VALENCY: late 70s; a philosophic college professor.

HESTER: 30s; a smart prostitute.

SARGE: 40s; an American military officer.

OLD BUD: 83 years old.

PLACES AND TIMES

Scene 1: Delphi, Greece, 1951.

Scene 2: Dayton, Ohio, 1958.

Scene 3: Dayton, Ohio, 1958.

Scene 4: London, England, 1961.

Scene 5: St. Louis, Missouri, 1964.

Scene 6: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1966.

Scene 7: Syracuse, New York, 1971.

Scene 8: Delphi, Greece, 2009.

PRODUCTION NOTES

SETTING: The play takes place over a period of 58 years, from 1951 to 2009. The different locations can be suggested by a few furniture pieces as described at the beginning of each scene. Lighting or projections can also help establish each locale.

CASTING: The casting is flexible, using 1 to 3 women and 3 to 7 men. For a smaller cast, the following roles may be doubled:

HERMAN, JULIAN and SARGE

DEE, PAULA and HESTER

MANOS, DR. VALENCY and OLD BUD

“Myths which are believed in tend to become true.”

—George Orwell

Escaping the Labyrinth

Scene 1

(A hillside cafe in Delphi, Greece. Late summer, 1951. There are two small tables with chairs. The audience cannot see the spectacular view that those sitting at the tables can. At one table sits BUD SCHLIEMANN, an eager and excitable young American who is twenty-five years old. He is a tourist and has the guidebook and camera to prove it.)

At another table sits HERMAN, clearly a native Greek who is in his late thirties and speaks impeccable English, but there is still the trace of an accent. He is drinking wine and looking out over the valley. BUD drinks a Coke out of a bottle and also soaks up the scenery. A pause, then BUD speaks aloud to no one in particular.)

BUD. This is the best! The very best!

HERMAN. What's that, young man?

BUD *(excited)*. Delphi! The best there is! I've been all over Greece for the past three weeks. But this is the best! The very best!

HERMAN. I see.

BUD. The Acropolis was terrific. And so was Mycenae. And Olympia! But up here ... looking out over this valley ... with the Temple of Apollo down there and—well, it's just the absolute very best!

HERMAN *(smiling)*. Yes. It is very, very nice.

BUD *(stands)*. Delphi ... ! The center of the Greek universe! The sacred home of the oracle! The destination of those seeking the ancient truths! The mystical city gazing up to the gods! Unspoiled and as majestic and intoxicating as it was over two thousand years ago!

HERMAN *(wryly)*. Do you, by any chance, make your living writing travel brochures?

BUD. What? *(Laughs.)* No. I'm just excited, I guess. But I *am* a writer. Well, I plan to be one. Right now I'm working on my dissertation. But that doesn't count. One day, I am going to write books—real books—about Greece! Not travel books. No siree! Books about ancient Greece! Its history! Its people! Its art! Its ... *(Searching.)* its ...

HERMAN. Its gods?

BUD. Yes! The ancient Greek gods! Still alive in art, in stories, in architecture, in ... (*Searching.*) in ...

HERMAN. In life?

BUD. Yes! I suppose, in a manner of speaking, in life.

HERMAN. You are quite an enthusiastic young man.

BUD. When it comes to the ancient Greeks, I am out of control!
(*Laughs.*)

HERMAN (*smiling again*). How refreshing.

BUD (*goes to HERMAN with his hand extended*). Bud Schliemann!
Glad to know you!

HERMAN (*rises and extends his hand, which BUD shakes vigorously*). You're American ...

BUD. How'd you know?

HERMAN. Well ...

BUD. Was it the camera? My clothes? This English guide book?

HERMAN. It was your handshake, actually. A very American handshake.

BUD. Guilty! I've been here three weeks and can't get enough of the place!

HERMAN. Did you say Schliemann? Are you related to the famous—?

BUD. No. No relation to Heinrich. A different branch of the family, I guess. But I sure would have liked to have been with old Schliemann when he dug up Troy!

HERMAN. Before your time, I'm afraid.

BUD. Yeah. Way before my time. There are lots of Schliemanns all over Cincinnati. That's where I'm from.

HERMAN. Oh ...

BUD. Most of them are Jewish. The Schliemanns in Cincinnati, that is. But my family isn't. And neither was Heinrich.

HERMAN. That's all right. Some of my best friends are not Jewish.

BUD. I'm what you might call a fallen-away Lutheran.

HERMAN. Of course. Do you plan to stay in Greece much longer?

BUD. Wish I could. But I gotta leave on Saturday for the States. I've got to work on my dissertation, and I'm teaching two undergrad classes starting in September. Ancient history.

HERMAN. Right up your alley, as they say. You seem so young to be teaching at a university. How old are you?

BUD (*bursts out in laughter*). I love it! The way you people always do that!

HERMAN (*confused*). I beg your pardon?

BUD (*still laughing*). You Greeks are so blunt! I mean, direct. “How old are you?” It’s perfect!

HERMAN. I didn’t mean to offend—

BUD. Not at all. It’s so ... Greek! The cabbie who drove me up here asked me how much money I earn in the States! Can you believe that? And the guy at the hotel last week asked me what kind of car I drove back home! I love it!

HERMAN. I suppose we are a curious people ...

BUD. I’m afraid I disappointed both of those guys. Grad assistants make lousy money, and I drive an old 1941 Chevy that’s held together with chicken wire. (*They both laugh.*) Twenty-five!

HERMAN. What’s that?

BUD. I’m twenty-five! Quarter of a century. What do you think of that?

HERMAN. Twenty-five is a good age to be.

BUD. But I won’t be twenty-five forever.

HERMAN. Probably not ...

BUD. Once I finish my doctorate and get some years of teaching behind me, I am going to write some of the gosh-darnedest books you ever read about ancient Greece! (*Laughs.*)

HERMAN (*laughs kindly*). I believe you will, Mr. Schliemann. Or Dr. Schliemann, I should say.

BUD. Not yet! And call me Bud. I didn’t catch your name.

HERMAN. You can call me Herman.

BUD. A German name! Well, Mr. Herman—

HERMAN. Just Herman. That will suffice.

BUD. Well, just Herman, if you don’t mind my being a little Greek myself, how old are you?

HERMAN (*after a beat*). Two thousand three hundred and fifty-seven years old. Give or take a decade. There were no birth certificates back then. (*Awkward pause.*) Just kidding. (*They both laugh.*)

BUD. I was going to say—you sure don’t look it! (*Both laugh again.*)

HERMAN. Thank you! (*More laughter.*)

BUD. You Greeks sure are a riot! Sometimes I look at people in the street or on the bus, and I say to myself, that could be the great, great, great, great grandson of Agamemnon!

HERMAN. I think you'll need to add a few dozen more "greats" in there, Bud.

BUD. Yeah. Everything here is so old! (*Sits and looks out.*)

HERMAN. Absolutely ancient, you might say. (*Sits at his table.*)

BUD. Sure. Just sitting here, looking down onto this valley, I feel like I was back in those days. Look ... no telephone poles or highways or billboards ...

HERMAN. Yes. I was thinking that very same thing earlier. If one could rebuild Apollo's temple down there, this view would be just like it was.

BUD. You know, Herman, I've studied all those ancient folks. Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians ... and they're all great. But I've got a soft spot in my heart for Greece.

HERMAN. How kind.

BUD. I really got into everything Greek when I was a teenager. I even read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* before I ever had to study Homer in school. And I made a model of the Parthenon out of sugar cubes! Can you believe that? And the goddesses! Oh, those Greek goddesses! I had a real crush on Artemis. I think it was the picture in Bullfinch's *Mythology*!

HERMAN (*more to himself*). Artemis ... a beauty indeed ...

BUD. Diana ... to the Romans.

HERMAN. Yes ...

BUD. And here's a funny thing, Herman. You had these half-man/half-lion gods in Egypt and half-man/half-monster ones in Mesopotamia. But in Greece, the gods looked just like ... well, us. Now isn't that interesting?

HERMAN. Indeed it is.

BUD. I wonder why that is.

HERMAN. There is a theory about that.

BUD. There is?

HERMAN. Just a theory. I suppose the early Greeks woke up one day and decided they needed to create some gods to ... to

explain certain phenomena. They looked around them and they saw rocks and olive trees and goats and ... whatever. Not very godlike models, to be sure. Then one of them looked at his reflection in a pool of water and saw the perfect image of a god: man. Simple, really.

BUD. That's a theory?

HERMAN. More an old wives' tale, I suspect.

BUD. It sure explains those good-looking statues of the gods. They almost seem real.

HERMAN. They were real. Perhaps they still are.

BUD. Yeah. Forever alive in art and stories and ... whatever.

HERMAN. Whatever. (*Pause.*) Bud, what do you think happened to those gods when the Greek empire collapsed?

BUD. That's easy. They were all turned into Roman gods. Just changed the names.

HERMAN. Very good. And when the Roman civilization fell? When Christianity took over?

BUD. You mean when no one believed in them any more?

HERMAN. Yes.

BUD. I guess they just ceased to exist. After all, the gods had been made up by men. When people stopped believing in them, the gods just ... disappeared.

HERMAN. Would you like to hear a theory about that?

BUD. Another old wives' tale?

HERMAN. No, this is a theory. An actual theory.

BUD. Shoot.

HERMAN (*getting very serious*). What if the gods one day found out that no one believed in them and yet they continued to exist. They saw their temples destroyed or turned into churches. Their feast days were changed to Christian holy days. Their statues abandoned and neglected until the Renaissance when they were considered highly desirable ... but only as art. What happened to those ancient gods?

BUD. They died?

HERMAN. The gods are immortal. They can't die.

BUD (*trying to make light of it*). Then, according to your theory, they still exist. They're still here!

HERMAN (*still serious*). Not here. Everywhere. They are nomads roaming the globe looking for some place where they are still believed. Of course there is no such place. People study the ancient Greek gods and write about them. But no one actually believes in them. Instead the gods see their images in museums all over the world. Nothing but ... scrapbooks of their past. (*Awkward silence.*)

BUD (*uncomfortable*). That's one hell of a theory, Herman.

HERMAN (*lightens up*). I thought you'd like it.

BUD. And this place is so ... so mystical that one can almost believe it.

HERMAN. Delphi has that kind of power.

BUD (*practically*). But when you see those buses over there and all those souvenir shops around the corner and the cute little hotels and ... you know what I mean?

HERMAN. Yes. It's 1951. Not ancient times. No question about it.

BUD (*rises*). Herman ... ? (*Goes over to him.*)

HERMAN. Yes, Bud?

BUD (*sincerely*). How old are you really?

HERMAN. It's not important. You are twenty-five and have, I'll wager, a long and prosperous future in store. I, on the other hand, have a long and interesting past.

BUD (*paces nervously*). What's your real name?

HERMAN. I was born Hermes. But then under the Romans—

BUD. Mercury!

HERMAN. Yes. I prefer Hermes. Now I go by Herman. It causes less bother in writing checks and signing papers and so on.

BUD (*wary*). Uh huh ... and where have you been all these ... centuries?

HERMAN (*remembering fondly*). Everywhere. I spent some of the Dark Ages in Mexico. It was Renaissance time in Chichen Itza. I dabbled there in politics for awhile. When Europe was having its Renaissance, I spent some years in China. Plenty of gods there but not my kind of deities. It seemed like half of them were dragons. I spent your Western Age of Reason in South Africa. Import export. Very interesting. Some time later I worked as a physician in Scotland. In 1912, I was on the *Titanic*. Second class. As you may have guessed, I did not perish. During the Roaring

Twenties I was in Paris. They treated dance instructors very well back then. During this latest world war, I was a resistance fighter in Poland. I believe I was the only one to survive. Recently I've been selling real estate in Argentina. Mostly seaside homes.

BUD (*cautiously*). And now you're here.

HERMAN. Yes. Call it nostalgia, but I am back here.

BUD (*carefully*). Where are the others? The other ... deities?

HERMAN. I can hardly keep track. We're not very good at staying in touch. I know Zeus just got a job as an airline pilot working out of London. Those new transcontinental flights, you know.

BUD. Why would he do that?

HERMAN. For the stewardesses, of course. He hasn't changed a bit. I hear Ares is fighting in Korea. You can imagine what kind of mischief he is up to over there. You mentioned Artemis. Or Diana, if you prefer. I was told she works at a Greek restaurant in Dayton, Ohio. Daphne was modeling in San Francisco, the last I knew of her. A while back Poseidon was a chiropractor in Tokyo but I'm not sure where he is now. No one ever stays in one place very long.

BUD (*suspiciously*). How come?

HERMAN. Think about it, Bud. We don't die. It means we don't age physically. If we stick around one place too long, people start to notice.

BUD. Oh ...

HERMAN. I'd say the usual stay is ten years. After that, mortals start to get suspicious.

BUD (*suddenly upset*). Either you are crazy or I am!

HERMAN. Bud, we're both as sane as can be. (*He has an idea.*) But I will be the raving lunatic if that makes you more comfortable.

BUD (*still uncomfortable*). Why are you saying these things to me?

HERMAN. With your interest in the ancient past, I ... I ... thought you might believe me. My mistake. I apologize. (*Rises.*) Perhaps I better move along.

BUD (*testy*). I suppose you are going to fly off to Pago Pago or something. I thought Mercury or Hermes had wings on his feet.

HERMAN. Poetic license taken by poets and artists over time. I arrived here by bus. A package tour out of Athens. I think our next stop is Corinth. (*A beat.*) But you know something, Bud?

BUD. What?

HERMAN. I'm so tired. Perhaps I'll just stay here.

BUD. For ten years.

HERMAN (*thinks about it*). Not that long. I've been considering it for many years and coming back to Delphi has convinced me.

BUD. Of what?

HERMAN. Bud, there is something about ancient Greece that is not in any book.

BUD. Such as ... ?

HERMAN. The gods are immortal—

BUD. I knew that—

HERMAN. Only as long as they wish to be immortal. We are given the option to die and join all the mortals in the underworld if we so desire. All it takes is two coins to pay the ferryman Charon, and we can take a one-way cruise down the River Styx.

BUD. Why would anyone want to do that?

HERMAN. Weariness. Centuries of being forsaken. Not to mention the wear and tear from constant travel. Like any mortal, we sometimes just want a long, long rest.

BUD. A kind of divine suicide, I suppose.

HERMAN. Yes. One might call it that.

BUD (*belligerent*). You are one confused fellow, Herman! And you are confusing the hell out of me!

HERMAN. I'm sorry. I'm just kidding. (*Forced laugh.*) It was a metaphor. I thought you'd understand. I'm really Herman Papadakis, I'm thirty-seven years old, and I have pancreatic cancer. Inoperable. The doctors give me three months to live but I want the easy way out. (*Pause.*) Does that sound better?

BUD (*softening*). Herman ... I didn't mean anything ...

HERMAN (*fishes in his pocket*). Ah. Two coins. (*Looks closely at them.*) Minted in 1946 but Charon won't mind.

BUD. Are you really ... ill?

HERMAN (*sitting*). I would love another glass of wine, but it is obvious that waiter in there is never coming back out here. (*Pulls out paper money.*) Would you do me a favor, Bud? Would you go in there and buy me another? (*Holds out a bill, but BUD doesn't move.*) Just tell him I want the same. It's a wonderful white from the Southern Peloponnese. (*Pause.*) Please?

BUD. OK ... *(Takes bill.)* But I think maybe you've had enough vino already.

HERMAN. Indulge me. *(As BUD exits.)* Thank you! *(A pause, then he rises and looks out at the view.)* Thank you for those centuries of prayers and sacrifices and festivals in my name. Thank you for taking me with you to Rome for similar adorations. And thank you for admiring my image in museums all these years since. Thank you ... thank you. *(Sits, exhausted.)* Why did I tell that young man all that? What was I thinking? That he'd believe me? One last believer before I go? Ridiculous ...

(HERMAN gently faints away. As he does, his hand opens and the two coins fall to the floor noisily. BUD re-enters with a glass of wine and his other hand full of coins.)

BUD. I still can't believe how inexpensive everything is in Greece. That was a lot of money for just one glass of wine! Here's your change—*(Stops when he sees HERMAN unconscious.)* Herman? Are you all right? *(Goes to him and touches his arm.)* Herman! Should I call a doctor? *(Puts the wine glass on the table and shakes HERMAN a bit and in doing so drops the coins that are in his hand and they land on the floor.)* Your change! Herman! *(Frightened.)* Hermes! Mercury! Whoever you are—!

HERMAN *(awakes quickly)*. What? *(Pause.)*

BUD *(breathes a sigh of relief)*. Oh, you're OK. *(Bends down and starts to pick up all the coins from the floor.)* Your change ...

HERMAN. Thank you so much. But I'll only need two coins for the ferryman. *(BUD stands and gives him two coins.)* And thanks for the wine. *(Drinks it in one long gulp.)* Well! *(Rises.)* Which way to the River Styx? *(Blackout.)*

Scene 2

(Greek music is heard and then the recorded voice of an American radio DJ.)

RADIO DJ. That was Danny and the Juniors with "At the Hop," number five on the charts this week and climbing, climbing up to rock and roll heaven. This is WDAY Dayton, number ninety-three on your dial and number one in the hearts of the greater

Miami River Valley. This portion of our broadcast day is brought to you by Pulowski Chevrolet where they are having a big sale on all their remaining 1958 models. This is your time to save, save, save! Speaking of time, the clock says eight-forty-seven, and the forecast says partly cloudy skies expected through the night and temperatures in the upper sixties. But tomorrow ... I don't want to say it but I have to ... rain expected tomorrow and I just want to cry, cry, cry, with Paul Anka and his number three song on the charts, "Lonely Boy."

(Greek dance music plays and is heard under the beginning of the scene. Lights rise on a Greek restaurant. It is spring of 1958. The same two tables now have tablecloths and dishes on them. The restaurant is empty except for BUD who is sitting at one of the tables and finishing his meal. He is eight years older and somewhat less energetic but still enthusiastic. He wears the conservative garb of a college professor: jacket, sweater vest, bow tie, etc.

In a moment, the waitress, DEE, enters. She is in her thirties. She has dark hair and classic features, but her posture and bearing are very common. She goes to one of the empty tables and picks up the dishes and such, piling them with experienced movement. BUD stares at her with undisguised rapture. She starts to exit with the plates, but his voice stops her.)

BUD. Just about closing time?

DEE *(brusquely)*. Ten more minutes.

BUD. I'm sorry if I'm keeping you here late.

DEE. Not yet. Ten minutes.

BUD. I guess I got here just in time.

DEE. Ten minutes. *(Exits to the kitchen with dishes.)*

(BUD finishes eating, wipes his mouth with his napkin, fusses with his bow tie, takes a comb out and combs back his hair. He quickly hides the comb as DEE re-enters and goes to the other empty table and begins to pile up dishes.)

BUD. I'm sorry I arrived so late tonight. I had an evening seminar.

DEE. Come early. Come late. We stay open till nine.

BUD. I'll bet you're wondering why I've come here five nights in a row.

DEE. No.

BUD. Especially since Monday was the first time I ever came here.

DEE. Maybe you like Greek food. I don't know. *(Continues piling dishes.)*

BUD. I've only been in Dayton since Monday. I'm here for the week.

DEE. Lucky you.

BUD. A conference. At the university. A whole week.

DEE. Then I better warn you. We're closed on Sundays. You'll have to eat somewhere else.

BUD. Thanks. I hear this is the best Greek restaurant in town.

DEE. It's the only Greek restaurant in town.

BUD. That makes it the best, I suppose.

DEE. I suppose. *(Exits to kitchen with dishes.)*

(BUD rises, pulls out his wallet, and starts counting bills. MANOS, the proprietor of the restaurant, enters from the kitchen. He is in his seventies and has a Greek accent that is as thick as his mustache. He wears a dirty apron and is wiping his hands on a dirty dish towel.)

MANOS *(surprised to see him)*. Professor! You are here again! How wonderful!

BUD. I guess I just couldn't stay away from your excellent cooking.

MANOS. You are too kind. How many days is it you come here?

BUD. Five. Every night since Monday.

MANOS. You like the Greek food?

BUD. Of course—

MANOS. You know, this is the best Greek restaurant in Dayton!

BUD. I heard that—

MANOS. Good food. Good prices. And a good location. Very close to the university.

BUD. Yes. I can walk here from my room—

MANOS. Maybe you come back tomorrow? The special is stuffed cabbage rolls. I make them myself from—how you say—from scratch.

Unpacking Mother

By
KAREN SCHAEFFER

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(UNPACKING MOTHER)

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Unpacking Mother received its world premier production at Market House Theatre in Paducah, Ky., on Feb. 10, 2022.

CAST:

CASSIE Anna Tamaoka
KATHRYN.....Amber Dawn

PRODUCTION:

Artistic DirectorMichael Cochran
Director Kathy Pingel
Assistant Director/Stage Manager Denise Bristol
Scenic Designer Tom Hansen
Technical Director..... Jerome Viet
Costume Designer.....Davin Belt
Lighting DesignerMichael Cochran
Original Music Mark Toeppen
Dramaturgs..... Kathy Pingel, Brian Johnson,
Dr. Caitlin Powell

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*Unpacking Mother* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Market House Theatre in Paducah, Ky.”

Unpacking Mother

CHARACTERS

CASSIE: 32 years old. KATHRYN's little sister. Single. She's spent the last 10 years caring for her mother who has recently passed. Her father's suicide and mother's MS and OCD combined with hoarding tendencies have shaped her.

KATHRYN: 37 years old. Has been married to her wife, Atotcha, for 10 years. They have recently purchased a house and are using a surrogate to have a child. The last time she was home was for her father's funeral. Over the last 10 years, she's only spoken briefly with CASSIE. KATHRYN is exhibiting some of her mother's OCD tendencies, and it scares her.

TIME: Late afternoon into the evening hours and early the next day.
PLACE: The main living room of a modest, ranch-style, middle-class home.

SET DESCRIPTION

The set is a hoarder's house. There is a front door and an archway into an unseen kitchen. There is also a hallway that leads to the bedrooms. Everywhere there are stacks of magazines, books, newspapers and other hodgepodge collections. Some piles make sense like clothing, unopened appliances, seasonal decorations, etc. Some piles do not make as much sense like diaper boxes, a bag of soccer balls, etc. This is a hoarder who has kept things with the idea she will use them all someday. The room is not marked by garbage or squalor but an inability to let go of possessions and a compulsion to shop and add to the various collections. There have been essential pathways carved out of the piles that lead to the front door, kitchen and hallway. The entrance to the hallway is stacked with bags and unopened boxes to

suggest the back rooms have been filled and are spilling into the main room. Still, it is possible to get past, but not without edging through.

CASSIE and KATHRYN will unpack boxes and bags when they cannot see the contents. The remainder of the hoard is in see-through containers or piles out in the open. The contents of the boxes will go into a common pile that will be “set on fire” at the end of the play. A hidden fog machine can be used to create “smoke.”

Next to the front door are several years of coats hanging on the pegs. One peg is empty. Beneath the coats is a pile of shoes where people have kicked them off and left them.

In the living room, there is a couch, a well-worn recliner and an overstuffed chair. The overstuffed chair is piled with mail, old phone books, etc. There is an empty space on the floor where it’s clear someone has been sorting through the stuff. Between the chair and couch there is a side table and lamp. There is nothing on the side table. The emptiness of the peg and the side table stands out in stark contrast to the rest of the room. There is another side table next to the recliner covered with glasses and coffee mugs. A floor lamp sits behind the recliner. There is an old lampshade on the floor next to the floor lamp. Next to the recliner there is unfinished knitting sticking out of a reusable grocery bag filled with yarn and knitting supplies. There is a television underneath so many other things that it is unrecognizable as a television.

There is a picture window by the front door covered by a plastic garbage bag taped in place.

This is the house CASSIE and her mother have shared for the last 10 years. Her mother was the hoarder with a stranglehold on her right to keep anything and everything she wanted.

If there is a curtain that reveals the space, CASSIE should wait a couple of beats before entering to allow the audience to fully absorb the stage.

Unpacking Mother

ACT I

(CASSIE enters a darkened room. When she opens the door, the afternoon light floods in until she shuts the door.)

She is dressed neatly. She removes her sensible, black, dated coat and hangs it on the one empty peg. Beneath her coat, she is wearing a plain black dress and sensible black pumps, again, dated.

She passes through the living room, ignoring the mess as she has done day after day. She continues to the kitchen and exits to pour a cup of coffee. Then, she re-enters with the cup in her hand.

She stands, looking at the mess, sipping her coffee. It is unexpectedly bitter. She has forgotten to put cream in. She sighs, sets the coffee on the nearest free spot and returns to the kitchen.

From the front door, KATHRYN backs into the room, rolling her suitcase and wearing business/funeral garb, which includes a jacket.)

KATHRYN *(with her back to the room)*. You know, you have trees growing out of the gutter.

(KATHRYN shuts the front door and turns to see an outline of the mess. She tries to take it in. To get a better look, she tears down the plastic bag covering the window just as CASSIE re-enters with cream.)

KATHRYN *(cont'd)*. Holy fuck.

(Pause.)

CASSIE. It's been so long I forgot.

(CASSIE looks over to KATHRYN, who is still stunned.)

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. Kathryn.

KATHRYN. Cassie.

CASSIE. Hi.

KATHRYN. Hello.

(CASSIE breaks ... smiles ... crosses to KATHRYN and awkwardly hugs her. KATHRYN awkwardly returns the hug.)

CASSIE *(showing KATHRYN the bottle of cream)*. I forgot the cream. *(Pause.)* I didn't think you would really come.

KATHRYN. To our mother's funeral?

CASSIE. Yes.

KATHRYN. I said I would. Besides *(Indicating the boxes.)* ... this.

CASSIE. Yes. This.

KATHRYN. I wish you hadn't scared away that cleaning group I sent.

CASSIE. Mom scared them away, not me.

KATHRYN. They specialize in hoarding.

CASSIE. They just made things worse.

KATHRYN. How is that possible?

CASSIE. You didn't tell me. They showed up while I was working.

She totally freaked. She called me at work. I had to rush home.

Mom was a mess. I couldn't leave her side for days. Thank God my job is understanding.

KATHRYN. I'm sorry ... I didn't mean to make things worse.

CASSIE. At least you tried. Of course, if you had read one of the articles I sent ... listened to a podcast ... joined a group.

KATHRYN. I get it. I messed up.

(Pause.)

CASSIE. Well ... *(Pours cream into her coffee and goes back into the kitchen. Talks from offstage.)* There's coffee ... want some?

KATHRYN *(quietly, surveying the room)*. Sure.

CASSIE *(offstage)*. Was that a ...

KATHRYN. Hmm?

CASSIE *(sticking her head back in)*. What did you say?

KATHRYN. What did you say?

CASSIE. When?

KATHRYN. Just now.

CASSIE. What did you say?

KATHRYN. That's what I'm asking.

CASSIE. That's what I'm asking.

KATHRYN. Are you mimicking me?

(CASSIE takes a breath. Smiles.)

CASSIE. Do you want some coffee?

KATHRYN. I said "sure."

CASSIE. I didn't hear you.

KATHRYN. You know what ... it's too much trouble ... forget it.

CASSIE. It's no trouble.

KATHRYN. It seems to be.

CASSIE. It's not.

KATHRYN. Well, it seems to be.

CASSIE. Well, it's not.

(They look at each other for a moment.)

KATHRYN. Then, sure.

CASSIE. OK.

(Silence.)

CASSIE turns and goes back into the kitchen.

KATHRYN goes back to surveying the piles of junk.

CASSIE returns with a cup of coffee and hands it to KATHRYN.

CASSIE looks around and realizes there's nowhere to sit. She sets KATHRYN's coffee on a side table, picks up a stack of magazines from the recliner, looks for a place to set them and then just drops them on the floor. She picks up another stack from the couch and drops them on the floor. This creates two free places to sit.)

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. Sit ... sit.

(KATHRYN sits.)

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. First thing I'm doing is buying one of those Keurig things.

KATHRYN. We have one.

CASSIE. Do you like it?

KATHRYN. Love it.

CASSIE. Mom would never ... I'm still using the percolator we had when we were kids.

KATHRYN. Really?

CASSIE. Really.

KATHRYN. You'd think it would have died by now.

CASSIE. You'd think.

KATHRYN. That's gotta be what ... ?

CASSIE. I think Mom and Dad got it as a wedding present.

KATHRYN. So thirty-eight years.

CASSIE. Thirty-eight years.

KATHRYN. Thirty-eight years.

CASSIE. Thirty-eight years.

KATHRYN. Huh.

CASSIE. Yep.

KATHRYN (*looking at her coffee*). Cream's in the fridge, right?

CASSIE. Oh ... sorry. Let me get it for you.

KATHRYN. I can get it.

CASSIE. No ...

KATHRYN. I can get my own cream.

(KATHRYN crosses to the entrance to the kitchen and stops.)

CASSIE (*rising and going toward the kitchen*). I'll get it for you.

(KATHRYN returns to her seat and sets her coffee on the table next to her.)

KATHRYN. I'll just drink it black.

CASSIE. Are you sure?

KATHRYN. Yes! Yes. You know what ... I think I've had enough coffee.

CASSIE. Oh.

KATHRYN. I'm shaking.

(CASSIE looks at her.)

CASSIE. I get like that sometimes. You want some water?

KATHRYN. No.

CASSIE. It helps me.

KATHRYN. I'm fine.

CASSIE. You sure?

KATHRYN. I'M FINE.

(CASSIE takes KATHRYN's coffee cup and exits into the kitchen.)

CASSIE *(offstage)*. You still drink?

KATHRYN. Sometimes.

CASSIE *(entering holding a bottle of wine)*. Is this one of those times?

KATHRYN. Sure.

(CASSIE finds a red Solo cup from the stack of stuff in the living room, hands it to KATHRYN and fills the cup with wine. KATHRYN takes a drink.)

KATHRYN *(cont'd, taking another drink)*. Ahhhhhh. That's the good stuff.

(CASSIE sets the bottle next to KATHRYN, picks up her coffee cup and puts it in the kitchen. She returns with another bottle of wine and drinks directly from the bottle. CASSIE sits as she continues taking drinks from the bottle. KATHRYN watches her, shakes her head and takes a drink from her cup. CASSIE looks at her daring her to judge her. Awkwardly long pause.)

CASSIE. So ... how's Atotcha? *(Pronounced A-tot-cha.)*

KATHRYN. Fine.

CASSIE. Last time I heard from you, you two were getting married.

KATHRYN. Hard to believe that was ten years ago.

CASSIE. Not hard for me. She didn't wanna come with you?

KATHRYN. She had a work thing.

CASSIE. She couldn't get out of it? Her mother-in-law died.

KATHRYN. It was an important work thing.

CASSIE. She's in marketing.

KATHRYN. Yeah, so?

CASSIE. So, how important could it be?

KATHRYN. What are you saying?

CASSIE. As your wife, she should've been here to support you.

KATHRYN. I don't need support.

(CASSIE looks at KATHRYN until KATHRYN looks away.)

CASSIE. Everything OK with you two?

KATHRYN. Why wouldn't it be?

CASSIE. Because you're answering questions with questions.

KATHRYN. Everything's fine.

CASSIE. Now I know something's wrong.

(Another awkward pause.)

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. OK ... well, if you need to talk ...

KATHRYN. I don't need to talk.

CASSIE. Gotcha.

(Another awkward pause.)

KATHRYN. We bought a house.

CASSIE. You're a homeowner! I thought you were solid apartment dwellers.

KATHRYN. I know. And we got a dog. Actually, that's why Atotcha didn't come.

CASSIE. Because of the dog?

KATHRYN. We're training it.

CASSIE. Couldn't you just have someone dog sit?

KATHRYN. She didn't want to leave it.

CASSIE. Why didn't you just say that?

KATHRYN. I thought you would think that ... that's dumb.

CASSIE. I do.

KATHRYN. Oh.

CASSIE. I thought you were more of a cat person.

KATHRYN. Atotcha is more of a dog person. It's a rescue.

CASSIE. At least there's that.

(CASSIE looks at her.)

KATHRYN. Atotcha thought it would be good for the baby.

CASSIE. Is Atotcha pregnant?

KATHRYN. Surrogate.

CASSIE. A house, a dog AND a baby? Look at you being all normal and stuff.

KATHRYN. What does that mean?

CASSIE. You know ... ahhhhhhh life.

KATHRYN. After ten years together, we should be gettin' on with our "ahhhhhh life."

(Another awkward pause.)

KATHRYN *(cont'd)*. How about you?

CASSIE. What about me?

KATHRYN. Life.

CASSIE. I met someone. It's relatively new.

KATHRYN. That's nice.

CASSIE. It is.

KATHRYN. Where'd you meet?

CASSIE. Hoarders' support group.

KATHRYN. I didn't know there were so many crazy people in this town.

CASSIE. Mentally ill.

KATHRYN. That's what I said.

CASSIE. You said "crazy."

KATHRYN. You know what I meant.

CASSIE. Yeah.

KATHRYN. Don't say it like that.

CASSIE. Whatever.

KATHRYN. Whatever ... does this guy have a name?

CASSIE. Norman.

KATHRYN. He sounds old.

CASSIE. Well, he's not.

KATHRYN. Well, he has an old name.

CASSIE. It's a family name.

KATHRYN. Was he the guy sitting next to you at the funeral?

CASSIE. I would've introduced you, but you slipped in right before we started.

KATHRYN. I didn't slip in.

CASSIE. What would you call it?

KATHRYN. My plane was late.

CASSIE. Uh-huh.

KATHRYN. Why isn't Norman here helping us?

CASSIE. It's not his mess. I asked him to wait for me at my apartment. I'll give him a call when we're done so he can meet us at the storage unit and help unload.

KATHRYN. You have an apartment now?

CASSIE. I couldn't stay here. I had to have somewhere to live. And before you ask, Norman is *not* living with me.

KATHRYN. I wasn't going to ask.

CASSIE. Yes, you were.

KATHRYN. So you're not sleeping with him?

CASSIE. Christ, Kat.

KATHRYN. You can tell me ... I'm your sister.

CASSIE (*under her breath*). Only when it's convenient.

KATHRYN. What was that?

CASSIE. Nothing.

(Pause.)

KATHRYN. You did a good job with the funeral.

(CASSIE takes another drink.)

CASSIE. Thank you.

KATHRYN. The flower arrangements were nice.

CASSIE. Nice ... I guess you would've done it better.

KATHRYN. I said they were nice.

CASSIE. I asked you if you wanted to help.

KATHRYN. You did fine.

CASSIE. So, now it's "fine"?

KATHRYN. I thought ...

CASSIE. What?

KATHRYN. Didn't Mom like daffodils?

CASSIE. Daffodils? Daffodils are a spring flower. It's fall. I asked for fall flowers.

KATHRYN. You didn't ask for a specific flower?

CASSIE. What would you suggest?

KATHRYN. I don't know ... something that didn't make it look like the homecoming dance.

CASSIE. Mom liked chrysanthemums.

KATHRYN. I never heard her say that.

CASSIE. She did. You weren't here.

(CASSIE, noticing the room has grown darker, turns on the lights.)

KATHRYN. Oh. *(Pause.)* The pictures ...

CASSIE. Hmmm?

KATHRYN. The picture ... at the funeral.

CASSIE. Yes?

KATHRYN. Mom and Dad looked so young ...

CASSIE. People don't take pictures anymore.

KATHRYN. Right. Well ... they do ... it's just ...

CASSIE. They use their phones. I guess it's nice ... you don't have to worry about carrying around a camera.

KATHRYN. But you don't get pictures like that with your phone. When was it taken?

CASSIE. Which one?

KATHRYN. The one in front of that old hotel.

CASSIE. The Howard Johnson?

KATHRYN. Is that what it was called?

CASSIE. Yep.

KATHRYN. Not many of those around anymore.

CASSIE. No.

KATHRYN. You sometimes see one driving through a small town.

CASSIE. There's always like one car in the parking lot.

KATHRYN. Right.

CASSIE. I like to imagine they're people like Mom and Dad trying to recapture the moment.

KATHRYN. What moment?

CASSIE. You know ... the moment in the picture.

KATHRYN. I don't.

CASSIE. You don't what?

KATHRYN. Imagine.

CASSIE. You don't.

KATHRYN. Nope.

CASSIE. Nothing.

KATHRYN. Not a thing.

CASSIE. Huh.

(CASSIE looks at KATHRYN. KATHRYN shrugs. They both take a drink.)

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. Sometime after they were married.

KATHRYN. What?

CASSIE. It was taken sometime after they were married.

(KATHRYN looks at her like, "What are you talking about?")

CASSIE *(cont'd)*. The picture ... at the funeral.

KATHRYN. Right.

CASSIE. They used to take day trips before we were born.

KATHRYN. That's right. Dad talked about those all the time.

CASSIE. I think he really missed those little trips.

KATHRYN. They looked so happy.

CASSIE. They did.

KATHRYN. There was another picture with two people in the picture with them ...

CASSIE. Harry and Betty ...

KATHRYN. I remember them.

CASSIE. Once a month, they came over and played cards.

KATHRYN. I don't remember them having many friends.

CASSIE. I only remember those two. He wore the same aftershave Dad did.

KATHRYN. Old Spice.

CASSIE. Is that what it was?

(KATHRYN nods "yes.")

KATHRYN. Oh my God, do you remember how loud they would get when they played cards?

CASSIE. I remember Mom and Dad arguing a lot.

KATHRYN. That's how they played.

CASSIE. All I remember is them screaming at each other, Dad stalking off to his office ... Mom to the bedroom and doors slamming.

KATHRYN. They made up later. Sometimes it took a few days.

CASSIE. Days? Weeks ... I remember weeks of strained silences.

KATHRYN. It wasn't weeks. At most, it was three days.

CASSIE. I swear it was weeks.

KATHRYN. And it wasn't strained. I think they kinda liked fighting.

I remember them glancing at each other when the other person wasn't looking as if they were testing the waters.

CASSIE. I remember them shooting daggers at each other.

KATHRYN. Then they would have this very passionate, very loud sex.

CASSIE. How do you know?

KATHRYN. I could hear them. My wall was right next to their room.

CASSIE. I don't remember that.

KATHRYN. That's cuz you were a kid.

CASSIE. So were you.

KATHRYN. But I was older.

CASSIE. I don't understand why they kept playing if it made them so mad?

KATHRYN. It's what people did.

CASSIE. They could've done other things ... bowling.

KATHRYN. I don't think any of them were big bowlers. Whatever happened to them?

CASSIE. Harry and Betty? There was a falling out.

KATHRYN. Why do you say that?

CASSIE. They were cut out of all the pictures in the photo album.

KATHRYN. Really?

CASSIE (*nodding*). That picture was in a box hidden in the back of Dad's office closet.

KATHRYN. Hidden? You make it sound so nefarious.

CASSIE. Well, it was behind a bunch of stuff with a pile of files on top of it. I would say that's hidden.

KATHRYN. Maybe it was just forgotten.

(*CASSIE shrugs.*)

MLM Is for Murder (or, Your Side Hustle Is Killing Us)

By
JOHN BAVOSO

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MLM Is for Murder (or, Your Side Hustle Is Killing Us) received its world premier production at Center Stage Theatre at the Midland Center for the Arts in Midland, Mich., opening on Feb. 25, 2022.

CAST:

MINERVA ROSS Aja Jade Philpot
FELICITY EVANSTON Ashley Potts
JASON EVANSTON Dan Kettler
SIENNA ROSS Stephanie Wimer
WOMAN..... Lindsay Van Arsdale
UNDERSTUDY..... Rebecca Krohn

PRODUCTION:

Director Chad William Baker
Dramaturg Kathy Pingel
Scenic Design..... Evan Lewis
Lighting Design JR Bornemann
Sound DesignMaxie Froelicher
Costume Design.....Stephanie Wimer
Properties Design..... Chad William Baker
Intimacy Director..... Elaine Dougherty
Fight Director..... Tommy Wedge
Stage ManagerKatie Short

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“MLM Is for Murder (or, Your Side Hustle Is Killing Us) was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Center Stage Theatre at the Midland Center for the Arts in Midland, Mich.”

MLM Is for Murder (or, Your Side Hustle Is Killing Us)

CHARACTERS

FELICITY EVANSTON: A white woman. Stay-at-home Mormon mother and the latest independent fashion consultant for Linen & Fate. Outwardly bubbly and mild-mannered, she was very popular in high school.

MINERVA ROSS: A woman of color, the same age as Felicity. Never fit in in her small, Utah hometown and is proud of how far she's come—even if she desperately wants out of her “career.” Easily obsessed, she's searching for her passion.

JASON EVANSTON: A white man, Felicity's husband. An unassuming but well-meaning man who's happy acting out the script that's been written for his life. Is more than a little wary of his wife's new business venture.

SIENNA ROSS: A woman of any race, Minerva's wife. Has a time-consuming job she loves, but works to find some balance. Encouraging of her wife's passions to a point, but also concerned about how they threaten to consume her.

WOMAN: A woman of any age and race who plays a variety of unnamed characters as well as **FOUNDER**, **CHERYL**, **BIANCA** and **AMBER**.

TIME: Right now.

PLACE: A small town in Utah; Washington, D.C.; the Internet; memory.

PRODUCTION NOTES

There are a variety of voices (mostly those of podcasters) and projections. These are merely suggestions. If you'd like to replicate these with an actor on stage or a similarly low-tech solution, go for it.

“Work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.”

—Studs Terkel

“America loves a whore. We’re a nation of whores, after all—just try holding down a job in this great land of ours without compromising your values and shortchanging your best ideas.”

—Heather Havrilesky

MLM Is for Murder (or, Your Side Hustle Is Killing Us)

Scene 1

(A single spotlight appears on a dark stage into which the FOUNDER walks. She is wearing way too much makeup and brightly colored clothing in an array of cacophonous prints in stark contrast to the darkness that surrounds her. Some generically New Age or innocuously upbeat music plays softly in the background.)

FOUNDER. Linen & Fate. *(Beat.)* Linen ... and fate. I'm here to tell you what those two little words mean to me. Linen. And fate. The number-one question I get from new independent fashion consultants is, "Why the name 'Linen & Fate'?" So, let's break it down for a moment. Linen. *(Puts her right hand out.)* Fate. *(Puts out her left.)* I see them as two sides of the same coin. *(Brings her hands together like she's praying.)* Because this company—this *opportunity*—isn't about clothes, not really. Clothing is temporary—although Linen & Fate fine apparel is made from only the highest-quality fabric using the most state-of-the-art techniques to last a lifetime ... given proper care. Fashion changes by the season, but we give you, our independent fashion consultants, something that will last a lifetime—the freedom and resources you need to take control of your destiny and hunt down your dreams.

(FELICITY EVANSTON enters and begins slowly and silently circling the FOUNDER. The FOUNDER does not see or acknowledge her.)

FOUNDER *(cont'd)*. I met a woman the other day at one of our Super Success Saturday workshops, and she just came right up to me, tears running down her face, saying that I changed her life. That before she joined Linen & Fate, she had been working herself to death behind a desk day in and day out at a corporate job, creating success and blessings for her bosses and their families—people who would replace her tomorrow without another thought if she

dropped dead today. The worst part, she said, was that she had to leave her only child—her beautiful baby boy, Jaxton—every morning to repeat the same day over and over. Then, one day, when he’s a little older, he called the woman at the daycare “Mommy.” Can you imagine that? I’m sorry, it just tears my heart into little pieces thinking about it.

(She takes a moment to collect herself.)

FOUNDER *(cont’d)*. Anyway, she went home that night and after she put her son to bed, she saw one of her girlfriends go live on Facebook. This woman was standing in a room full of beautiful clothes, and hundreds of people were watching her and leaving comments and buying these pieces. And, so, she immediately shot her friend a Facebook message and ... well, you can probably guess how the rest goes, can’t you?

(As she’s speaking, FELICITY exits and returns wearing the same outfit as the FOUNDER, whom she continues to circle, unseen.)

FOUNDER *(cont’d)*. So, this woman finally says to me that with the money she’s making from her Linen & Fate online boutique, she could quit that job she hated so much and spend all day with her son. And she gets to make other women—other busy moms—smile with comfortable, stylish clothing that fits their bodies and makes them feel gorgeous. And by now she’s stopped crying and she’s beaming ear to ear, and she says, “And that’s how you changed my life.” And I took her by the hands and I looked into her big, beautiful eyes and I said, “No, that’s how *you* changed your life!” And then we both just turned into the biggest crybabies you’ve ever seen! Am I telling you this to toot my own horn? Of course not. *I’m* just the messenger—and Linen & Fate is merely a way of tapping into your true potential and opening doors for your family you never dreamed possible. And so, my fellow #BossBabes, I’m here to welcome you to the Linen & Fate family, and let you know that I will walk with you every step of the way. The only question left to ask is: Where will this journey take you?

(The spotlight on the FOUNDER goes out and flashes on FELICITY, standing behind bars, as the sound of a jail cell door being closed can be heard. Then, blackout.)

Scene 2

(Lights up on MINERVA ROSS sitting at a computer at a nondescript desk. She's scrolling through her Facebook news feed, then her Twitter feed. She switches back and forth aimlessly until CHERYL appears over her shoulder, causing her to jump in her seat.)

MINERVA. Cheryl, hi! You scared me.

CHERYL. Sorry! I tend to sneak up on people. My husband says I should wear a bell. *(Beat.)* You know, like a cat.

MINERVA. Got it, yeah. Not a bad idea.

CHERYL. I'll be sure to tell Todd you think so!

MINERVA. So, uh, is that it / or ... ?

CHERYL. Sorry! I have a terminal case of the Mondays! I'm here to chat about the Peterson report, if you've got a minute?

MINERVA. I'm actually kinda buried—

CHERYL. Don't worry, this will only take a minute.

MINERVA. Alrighty then ...

CHERYL. Awesome! So, you know I think you do great work here, and we're *so* lucky to have you—

MINERVA. But ...

CHERYL. But, well, we've been working on this project for months, and we really want to “wow” this client—it's a big one, you know.

MINERVA. I've heard.

CHERYL. Yeah, so, the draft you sent us this morning—

MINERVA. Yeah?

CHERYL. Well, we were hoping for something more ... design-y?

MINERVA. Design-y?

CHERYL. You know. A little ... jazzier?

MINERVA. Jazzier?

CHERYL. More bells and whistles? Maybe an icon or two? There's just so much ... *white space*. Could we maybe add some photos, to break up the text a little bit?

MINERVA. I looked in the folder and I didn't see any / photos—

CHERYL. Yeah, we don't have any. We just figured you could ... find some?

MINERVA. Where, exactly?

CHERYL. How should I know? You're the expert, aren't you?!

MINERVA. Am I?

CHERYL. Look, I would never tell you how to do your job—there’s a reason I sit upstairs, not down here—but we can’t show this to the client. We promised them a slick, highly designed product / and ...

MINERVA. *We* promised them?

CHERYL. It doesn’t matter who promised them—a promise was made. And if we want them to ever hire us again, we need to deliver on our promise. When can I have a new draft?

MINERVA. Hmmm, sorry, Cheryl, I’m totally slammed this week. I can probably get you something to look at by COB Friday?

CHERYL. There’s no way we could get it sooner?

MINERVA. Sorry, I’m juggling several other deadlines.

CHERYL. OK, I’ll give the client a heads-up that the designed draft will be a few days late. Any strings you could pull would be much appreciated.

MINERVA. Yeah, sure. I’ll keep you posted.

CHERYL. Thanks, Minerva. I don’t know what I’d do without you!

MINERVA. No worries. Happy to help.

(CHERYL exits. MINERVA returns to her social media feeds and generally wasting time. Then, a message pops up on her Facebook page. As she reads it, FELICITY enters to narrate, using hand gestures to indicate what’s being typed. The WOMAN stays on stage and recites the names of the emojis in an affectless voice.)

FELICITY. Minnie Meyers! *[Three waving hand emojis.]*

MINERVA *(out loud)*. Ugh, not this bitch.

FELICITY. It’s Felicity Buck!! *[Sun with face emoji.]* From high school!! *[School emoji; women with bunny ears emoji; sparkling heart emoji.]*

MINERVA. Hey, Felicity. Yeah, I remember. It’s Minerva Ross now ... nobody’s called me Minnie since I was a teenager.

FELICITY. Congrats!! *[Party popper emoji.]* I’m married, too!! *[Ring emoji; couple with heart emoji; family: man, woman, boy, boy emoji.]* U remember Jason?? *[Flexed bicep emoji.]* From the swim team?? *[Man swimming emoji; 1st place medal emoji.]*

MINERVA. You married Jason Evanston?

FELICITY. About two weeks after he got back from his mission!!
[Latin cross emoji; airplane emoji; wedding emoji.] But u were long gone by then. *[Woman running emoji.]* What's ur lucky guy's name?? *[Exclamation question mark emoji.]*

MINERVA. Her name's Sienna.

FELICITY. Oh ... ur still ...

MINERVA. Going to hell? Yep. You still Mormon?

FELICITY. We just did Baptism for the Dead last week. *[Smiling face with halo emoji.]*

MINERVA. *[Thumbs up emoji.]*

FELICITY. I know it's been a minute since we've chatted, *[Hourglass not done emoji.]* but I wanted to personally invite u to join my group!! *[Women holding hands emoji.]*

MINERVA *(out loud as she cracks her knuckles)*. Here we go! *(Via Messenger.)* What kind of group?

FELICITY. Oh, it's just a group of rly gr8 gals who like to chit-chat about fashion and silly stuff!! *[Nail polish emoji; dress emoji; woman tipping hand emoji.]*

MINERVA *(out loud)*. Come on... you can do it... close the loop.

FELICITY. Have u heard of a company called Linen & Fate?
[Shopping bag emoji.]

MINERVA *(out loud, with her hands over her head)*. The eagle has landed! *(She realizes she's shouting and pretends to be working intently. She resumes typing.)* Nope. What's that?

FELICITY. It's only the comfiest clothes in the whole world!!
[Woman's clothes emoji.] Their leggings are INSANE!! *[Jeans emoji; raising hands emoji.]*

MINERVA. I don't wear leggings ... I have a job.

FELICITY. Lol *[Rolling on the floor laughing emoji.]* Ur not in the office 24/7 are you? *[Woman office worker emoji; office building emoji; five o'clock emoji.]*

MINERVA. You got me there.

FELICITY. So, can I add you to my group? No strings! *[Woman gesturing NO emoji.]* But once u see how cute and flattering the clothes are, I promise I'm not going to be able to stop u from ordering. *[Money with wings emoji.]* I swear!! *[Raised hand emoji.]* They're ah-mazing!! *[Heart exclamation emoji.]*

MINERVA. Sure, go ahead. I'm always down to help a friend.

FELICITY. Really?! [*Astonished face emoji.*] Omg, thank u! [*Folded hands emoji.*] I promise u won't regret it! [*Heart eyes emoji.*]

(FELICITY and the WOMAN exit as MINERVA clicks away from the website.)

MINERVA. You bet I won't. *(Her cellphone rings, and she answers.)*
Hey, babe. Not much, just watching a car crash in real time. No, sorry, never mind. Yeah, I'll pick something up on the way. Get home as soon as you can. Love you. Bye.

(She hangs up the phone and turns off her computer, putting her earbuds in and grabbing her messenger bag as she walks out. As she walks, she listens to a series of podcasts and stops to pick up some takeout food. The following can either be a voiceover recording, or the actors can come out and perform them live.)

PODCASTER 1 (*V.O., could be SIENNA*). Yo, yo, yo, welcome to another episode of *Homicide Makes Me Horny!* (*Kiss and moan sound effect.*) I'm your hostess with the moistest, Jen.

PODCASTER 2 (*V.O., could be WOMAN*). And I'm her bosom buddy, Jackie. And today we're playing our favorite game—"Who'd You Rather: Serial Killer Edition."

PODCASTER 1 (*V.O.*). OK, let's go big with the first one. Jackie, who'd you rather: Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer.

PODCASTER 2 (*V.O.*). Oh, damn! This is tough!

PODCASTER 1 (*V.O.*). Come on, just talk it out with me.

PODCASTER 2 (*V.O.*). I mean, Dahmer is like a Nordic god, all blond-haired, blue-eyed snackiness. And, um, he'd know how to eat me out ...

PODCASTER 1 (*V.O.*). OMG, you're so bad!

PODCASTER 2 (*V.O.*). But Bundy has that hot-professor-on-spring-break kind of look? You know I love a zaddy.

PODCASTER 1 (*V.O.*). I know you do, girl! But you've got to choose one.

PODCASTER 2 (*V.O.*). This is so hard! OK, this is a total cop-out, but ... I'm pretty obviously not Jeffrey's type—so, I'm gonna go with Ted!

PODCASTER 1 (*V.O.*). Winner, winner, you're no man's dinner!

(Radio static.)

PODCASTER 3 (*V.O., could be JASON*). How well do you know your neighbors? What secrets are hiding behind front doors and lace curtains? That's what we're going to try to discover during this season of *Small Town Sleuth*. My name is Tom, and I have no journalistic or investigative experience, but you'll come with me as I wander around an unsuspecting rural area, annoying everyone with questions about a very old cold case while talking in this voice, which is meant to convey how serious I am about this project. Follow along in real time—since I don't know how this story will end, I'm gonna keep going until neither of us are satisfied and we both just kind of give up.

(Radio static.)

PODCASTER 4 (*V.O., could be FELICITY*). Welcome to *Bad, Bad Man*, a last-ditch attempt by a failing print newspaper to stay relevant with people who don't like to read. The story you're about to hear would take about five minutes to tell you in a bar, but we're going to stretch it out to at least eleven forty-minute episodes, each of which are approximately sixty-five percent ads for mattresses and meal kit delivery services. This will still not get you to subscribe to our newspaper. *Please* subscribe to our newspaper.

Scene 3

(MINERVA arrives home to find SIENNA ROSS waiting for her.)

MINERVA. Hey! What are you doing here?

SIENNA. Nice to see you, too!

MINERVA. I thought you had a ton of work to take care of ...

SIENNA. I do, but I heard the disappointment in your voice and decided it could wait until tomorrow.

MINERVA. Huh. I'll have to keep that in mind for the future.

(They kiss.)

SIENNA. What's for dinner?

MINERVA. New Vietnamese place opened on the corner. The orange shrimp looked phenomenal.

SIENNA. It smells *incredible*. Thank you.

(The following occurs as MINERVA goes about transferring the food from the takeout container to two plates, and SIENNA opens a bottle of wine and pours two glasses.)

SIENNA (*cont'd*). So, how was your day?

MINERVA. Oh, you know, living the nightmare.

SIENNA. That bad?

MINERVA. Not really, just the same. Cheryl again. She actually used the word “design-y” today.

SIENNA. Oh! I think that’s the last square on my bingo card! The one of things not to say to a graphic designer.

MINERVA. I don’t know why I spent all that money on art school when, apparently, everyone with an Instagram account is an expert at design.

SIENNA. I’m sorry. You know how talented I think you are—

MINERVA. You wanna hire me instead?

SIENNA. Sure. But then we’d need to stop sleeping together.

MINERVA. Ugh. Not worth it. (*Beat.*) How was *your* day?

SIENNA. Oh, um, the absolute worst. It’s like ... every five minutes Mark comes running into my office screaming about fire drills and tight deadlines, and it’s like, well if you didn’t sit on the syllabus for eight days, then we wouldn’t have any fires to put out / in the first place—

MINERVA. *Such* a Mark move.

SIENNA. So, yeah. Just terrible.

MINERVA. It’s super adorable, but you don’t have to pretend to hate your job just to make me feel better.

SIENNA. OK, thank you, because Mark is actually *very* responsible. (*Beat.*) I’m sorry. Is it time to start job searching again?

MINERVA. I don’t know. I’m just not sure I’m ever going to find something better.

SIENNA. Don’t say that! There’s gotta be something out there that’s the right fit.

MINERVA. Does there, though? I’m not so sure anymore. You know that bullshit cliché, “Do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life?” I’m starting to feel like I could be doing my favorite thing in the whole world, but because some

middle manager with a God complex is telling me when to do it and what to wear while doing it, I'll end up hating it. It's like how I despised every book I read in college, even though they were objectively very good books, just because they were assigned to me by some professor. No offense.

SIENNA. OK, but you've still gotta work ...

MINERVA. Only because you're not holding up your end of the sugar mama bargain.

SIENNA. Ha! You're shit out of luck, kid.

MINERVA. In that case, you're lucky you're hot. *(They kiss.)* I just ... I get so sad thinking about how many years' worth of boring, unfulfilling workdays I have in front of me.

SIENNA. You know what, let's change the subject. Anything good happen today?

MINERVA. Yes! I got to play my favorite game again!

SIENNA. Field hockey?

MINERVA. Ha ha. Even better: Fucking with a hunbot!

SIENNA. Come again?

MINERVA. This girl I went to high school with—who I hated, obviously, because she was a girl who went to my high school—invited me to join her Linen & Fate group.

SIENNA. Linen & Fate? That sounds like a farm-to-table restaurant in Shaw.

MINERVA. Nowhere near that cool. It's just the latest in a long line of pyramid schemes my former classmates have been scammed into joining. Eye-searingly ugly leggings is the flavor of the month, I think.

SIENNA. Ohhhh. One of those ... there's an acronym for that, I think?

MINERVA. MLM—multilevel marketing. Or “direct sales” if you're trying to be fancy and/or fool the FTC.

SIENNA. Right, yes! I got asked to join one of those once.

(MINERVA gestures for her to go on.)

SIENNA *(cont'd)*. This woman in grad school I had a huge crush on invited me to this wine-and-cheese party at her apartment. And when I get there, all dressed up and chenin blanc in hand, there's this lady doing a presentation about some snake oil skincare products. At one point, she actually pointed to me and told me I could “really benefit from the Hydro Blast Rejuvenation Serum.”

MINERVA. She didn't!

SIENNA. She did, which is just a small step below “bless your heart” on the passive-aggressive scale.

MINERVA. What did you do?

SIENNA. After about ten minutes of her driveling on, I walked up to the hostess and said, “Don't ever invite me to a party where you expect me to buy something again,” grabbed the bottle of wine I brought and stormed out. We never spoke again.

MINERVA. Badass! (*They high-five.*) Is that seriously the only time you've been hit up?

SIENNA. Yeah, I think so.

MINERVA. That's amazing. I get like three invites a day. And there's an MLM for everything now—makeup, jewelry, clothes, essential oils, weight loss shakes, body wraps, supplements, candles, sex toys—you name it! Before we met, I used to join all the groups just to mess with them until they kicked me out.

SIENNA. Mess with them how?

MINERVA. Just stupid stuff. I'd try to add a bunch of dudes to the group or leave dumb, random comments on their albums. Sometimes, if I was really annoyed, I'd claim tons of items and then never pay my invoices. It wasn't exactly mature, but it helped to pass the time. I mostly stopped when we got together, because I had you to entertain me.

SIENNA. I can't believe you got propositioned enough to make a game of it.

MINERVA. Sometimes I forget you didn't experience the joy of growing up in the beehive state.

SIENNA. What does that have to do with it?

MINERVA. Fun fact—direct sales is the number-two industry in Utah, and it has more MLMs per capita than any other state.

SIENNA. OK, random.

MINERVA. Except not really. Utah has lots of Mormons and they are every MLM's wet dream.

SIENNA. I bet you're gonna tell me why ...

MINERVA. Just think about it ... a huge number of well-educated stay-at-home moms, evangelists who know how to have a door slammed in their face and keep on smiling, and a community already accustomed to a hierarchical structure that preaches the prosperity gospel.

SIENNA. That's ... wow. I guess I never thought of it that way.

MINERVA. The saddest part is, a huge number of these companies are owned by members of the LDS church, so they're taking advantage of their own communities. It's a perfect storm of predation.

SIENNA. If I didn't know any better, I'd think you ... felt bad for these women?

MINERVA. In general, sure. It's fucked. The specific women who made my life a living hell in high school? Let's just say their exploitation isn't keeping me up at night.

SIENNA. *You* let the Stepford Daughters push you around?!

MINERVA. Again, you obviously didn't grow up as an atheist, [actor's race/ethnicity], baby dyke in the middle of Mormon Disneyland.

(A school bell rings. FELICITY enters, dressed as she would be in high school. MINERVA throws on a black hoodie and becomes the younger version of herself as well, all nervous introversion.)

YOUNG FELICITY. Hey, Minnie.

YOUNG MINERVA. M-me?

YOUNG FELICITY. Yeah, of course you, silly. Do you know any other Minnies? *(Beat.)* How fun was the cast party this weekend?!

YOUNG MINERVA. W-what cast party?

YOUNG FELICITY. Wait, you weren't there?

YOUNG MINERVA. I didn't know there was a cast party?

YOUNG FELICITY. How could you not know? We announced it at the preshow prayer circle. *(Beat.)* Oh, that's right, you refuse to join those.

YOUNG MINERVA. This is a *public* school, Felicity.

YOUNG FELICITY. So, you think that makes it OK to be *(Shouting.)* a devil worshiper?

SIENNA. Wait, she straight-up called you satanic?

(FELICITY exits, and MINERVA takes off the hoodie.)

MINERVA. That may have been some editorializing on my part, but those were the vibes, yeah.

SIENNA. Wow. I had no idea. So, no high-school reunions for you?

The Café Mocha Murders

By
DEANNA STRASSE

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(THE CAFÉ MOCHA MURDERS)

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The Café Mocha Murders received its world premier production at Golden Chain Theatre in Oakhurst, Calif., on March 25, 2022.

CAST:

SOMA..... Cassie Longcor
IAN..... Nicholas Bubb
NEIL..... Jason Walle
MEL..... Paige Ferbrache
CATHI..... Shannon Brewington
IVY..... Kaley Marsh
BEVERLY..... Janet Jones Johnson
BEN..... Ayden Simonich
EDDIE..... Adam Greenwood

PRODUCTION:

Director..... Jennifer Janine
Assistant Director..... Jennifer Olsen
Backstage Manager..... Grace Mierkey
Assistant Stage Manager..... Lina Shaw-Huey
Assistant to the Director..... Allyson Ferbrache

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“The Café Mocha Murders was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Golden Chain Theatre in Oakhurst, Calif.”

The Café Mocha Murders

CHARACTERS

SOMA (w): 30s. Loud, a bit abrasive, likes to shout. She's a veteran barista at The Bean Shack and is good at her job but doesn't like to get bogged down by the rules. She acts like she hates it but secretly enjoys working at The Bean Shack and likes her customers.

IAN (m): 20s. Sweet and naïve. He's the newest employee and still learning the ropes.

NEIL (m): 40s. A regular at The Bean Shack.

BEVERLY (w): 50s to 60s. Your typical sweet Midwestern lady. A regular at The Bean Shack.

CATHI (w): 50s to 60s. The owner of The Bean Shack. She has an excellent mind for business but not always for people.

IVY (w): 20s to 30s. Another seasoned veteran barista. Very prim. Adheres ardently to the rules and expects others to do so. She doesn't let her emotions get to her, but she does have a soft side underneath it all. She isn't mean, she's just very logical and doesn't understand that she may come off as condescending.

BEN (m): 20s. Another barista. A bit of a buffoon. He is madly in love with Mel and doesn't hide it very well.

MEL (w): 20s. Another barista. She is apparently oblivious to Ben's feelings.

EDDIE (m): 20s. A pizza delivery guy who stumbles into the wrong place at the wrong time.

TIME: Present.

PLACE: A city in the Midwest.

For all the baristas of the world.

The Café Mocha Murders

ACT I

Scene 1

(A small coffee shop known as The Bean Shack. The stage is broken up into two parts: the lobby and the area behind the counter. A storm rages outside. BEVERLY sits in the lobby, sipping a cup of tea and reading a book. NEIL waits in front of the counter, watching SOMA work on his pour-over coffee.)

NEIL. I forgot to tell you, Soma! Pickles got hit by a car yesterday.

SOMA. Oh my God! Seriously? Is he OK?

NEIL. Well, OK, it was less of a *hit* and more a *tap*.

SOMA. Your dog got *tapped* by a car?

NEIL. Yeah! He just wandered out into the street like it was nothing.

Darn dog is going senile. He's never done that before. He *is* fifteen years old.

SOMA. Is he OK?

NEIL. Yeah. The car stopped just in time. Like I said ... just a little tap.

SOMA. Poor Pickles. You always say that you're going to bring him here, but you never do.

NEIL. It's not like I can bring him in the store.

SOMA. Why not? Pretend he's your service animal. I won't tell.
(Pours more hot water over the grounds.)

(IAN enters from the backroom.)

IAN. Ahhh! Soma, you're doing a pour-over and didn't tell me!
(Pulls out a small notepad and pen and runs to her side. He stares at the setup.) Interesting.

(SOMA pours more water over the grounds.)

NEIL *(looking at IAN)*. What is he doing?

SOMA *(not looking up from the pour-over)*. Taking notes.

NEIL. Why?

SOMA. Because he's an idiot.

IAN. Hey!

(NEIL laughs.)

IAN *(cont'd, to NEIL)*. I don't believe we've met, Mr. ... ?

SOMA. This is Neil. He's trouble.

NEIL *(with a smile)*. Oh, and look who is talking. *(Gesturing to SOMA while looking at IAN.)* Miss Sass.

SOMA *(walking to the counter with the cup of coffee)*. Your dark roast, *sir*.

NEIL. Thank you, Miss Sass.

SOMA. Neil here is a regular, Ian. Every day. Like clockwork. If you work more night shifts with me, you'll be seeing a lot of him.

NEIL. Oh, a new employee, eh?

SOMA. Yep.

IAN. Nice to meet you, *sir*.

NEIL. Just Neil. So when did you start working here?

IAN. I just finished my barista training on Monday, and I'm officially an employee here.

NEIL. Barista training?

IAN. In order to work at The Bean Shack, all new employees must undergo two weeks of intensive training. I've never worked in a coffee shop before so I had a lot to learn. It can be a little overwhelming, but I'm so excited to learn. I think coffee is so interesting, don't you?

NEIL *(taking a sip of his drink)*. Sure.

IAN. Part of my training consisted of a brief history of the coffee plant starting with its discovery in Ethiopia during the eleventh century. Would you like to hear some key points?

NEIL *(taking a sip of his drink)*. No.

IAN. Oh. That's fine. I see that today you chose our Sumatra blend. Would you care to know the scientific name for—

NEIL *(to SOMA)*. Cathi is really putting these new baristas through the ringer.

SOMA. Ivy trained him.

NEIL. Oh geeze. Ivy.

IAN (*to NEIL*). I see that you prefer the paper cone method of brewing coffee. Have you ever tried a moka pot?

SOMA (*to IAN*). Down, boy. We get it. You know your coffee. You can stop trying to impress us now.

NEIL. What's new with you, Soma?

SOMA. Nothing new since yesterday.

NEIL. Wanna hear about my bunion?

SOMA (*sarcastically*). Boy, do I?

NEIL. It's getting worse. I'm wearing one of those corrector things.

I got it at the Major Mart, but I don't know. I don't think it's working. You wanna see it, Soma?

SOMA. No thanks.

NEIL (*to IAN*). You wanna see?

IAN. I'm flattered that you'd offer, but I'm ... I'm OK.

(NEIL turns to BEVERLY. She speaks with a very distinct "Minnesota dialect.")

NEIL. Beverly! Want to see my bunion?

BEVERLY. Do you want to see mine?

(They both laugh.)

BEVERLY (*cont'd*). I can do better! Want to see my lymphedema?

NEIL. I've got an abscess on my back.

BEVERLY. My hip replacement scar hasn't quite healed— (*Begins to pull up her skirt as if she's going to show it off.*)

SOMA. OK! We get it! Your bodies are disgusting!

NEIL. It's just age, dearie. Wait. Your time is coming. You can choose to cry about it or laugh about it. (*Laughs loudly.*) You know, Soma, I don't think I've ever seen you laugh.

SOMA (*looking at her phone*). Retail has killed my ability to feel joy.

IAN. I laugh all the time. I love laughing.

NEIL (*ignoring IAN*). Soma, I can't remember the last time I saw you really smile.

SOMA. Am I expected to smile brightly because I'm a woman?

NEIL. You know that's not what I mean.

SOMA. Take your coffee and leave me be.

NEIL. What have you got to be so miserable about?

SOMA. I'm not miserable. This is just how my face looks.

NEIL. All right, all right. I'll go sit with my good friend, Beverly. We talk about death candidly, and we laugh about it. (*He sits with BEVERLY.*) Don't we, Bev?

(The wind howls outside.)

BEVERLY. Geeze Louise. This is not normal for this time of year.

IAN (*to BEVERLY and NEIL*). Are you two going to be OK getting home?

BEVERLY. My sister Pamela is picking me up. She is running late, though.

NEIL. I can give you a lift if you want. The old Ford hasn't let me down yet.

BEVERLY. That's very kind of you, Neil. I'm sure Pamela will be here any minute now.

(BEVERLY and NEIL talk between themselves.)

IAN. Soma, I have some questions.

SOMA. Like what?

IAN. Well, when you were doing Neil's pour-over, I noticed that every once in a while, you would pause when pouring the water, as if you were allowing the grounds to breathe. Is that standard practice? What do you think are the benefits of a pour-over brewing process as opposed to a drip?

SOMA. Ian, you do realize that you're taking this all way too seriously?

IAN. What? No! Coffee is an intricate journey of notes and flavors. I find it all very fascinating. Can you explain to me what a red eye is?

SOMA. Cup of coffee with a shot of espresso in it.

IAN. Wow. And an espresso con pana?

SOMA. Shots of espresso with whipped cream on top.

IAN. Espresso macchiato—

SOMA. Why don't you go clean a toilet or something?

IAN. I already did.

SOMA. All of them?

(IAN nods.)

SOMA *(cont'd)*. Fresh cakes in the urinals and everything?

(IAN nods.)

SOMA *(cont'd)*. And the back freezer is all stocked?

IAN. Yep.

SOMA. Well, make me a mocha or something.

IAN. Oh, I couldn't possibly do that. I'm not ready.

SOMA. What does that mean?

IAN. Well, that's what Ivy tells me.

SOMA. Ivy! You gotta start thinking for yourself, Ian. Ivy may be a shift manager here, but she's not the boss of you.

IAN. Technically, she is. And she knows so much. I'm really very inspired by her. Did you know that she's a three-time world coffee-tasting champion? She told me.

SOMA. I don't even know what that means.

IAN. Neither do I. But it sounds impressive.

(A pause. SOMA is on her phone, and IAN just stands there, looking around.)

IAN *(cont'd)*. I feel as though I should be doing something.

SOMA. There's nothing to do. Relax.

IAN. I just think ... you know ... with the employee meeting being tonight and everything, the store should look extra special so that when Cathi walks in, she'll be like, "Oh wow! The store looks extra special!" And then she'll know we're doing a good job.

SOMA *(not looking up from her phone)*. So go sweep the lobby.

IAN. Really?

SOMA *(not looking up from her phone)*. Yeah.

IAN. I can do that! *(Happily dashes into the back.)*

BEVERLY. He seems like a nice boy.

SOMA. I'm sure he is.

BEVERLY. A little stupid, but nice.

SOMA. I couldn't agree more, Beverly. He's new. You know how they are.

(IAN enters carrying a broom and a dustpan. Throughout the conversation, he is busy sweeping in the lobby.)

IAN. What is this employee meeting going to be about?

SOMA. Probably just normal stuff.

IAN. Like what?

SOMA. Cathi just wants to touch base: “Be extra nice to customers and don’t forget to sell, sell, sell.”

IAN. I really admire Cathi. She built this shop with her two bare hands.

SOMA. Not literally.

IAN. No. Some construction workers did that. But she’s an entrepreneur.

SOMA. Ian, do you just basically like everyone?

IAN. Yep.

(The front door bursts open and in walks CATHI. She walks toward the counter.)

CATHI. Lovely weather, eh?

IAN. Hi, Cathi! I was just sweeping the floors!

CATHI. That’s nice. Hi, Beverly.

BEVERLY. Evening, Cathi. Hi there.

(CATHI exits to the backroom. SOMA walks to the bar.)

IAN. Are you going to make something? *Can I watch?!* Please!

SOMA. No, you’re not going to stand there and gawk at me. If you want, you can come back here and make me something if you’re so eager to learn.

IAN. Ivy says I’m not allowed to touch the bar.

SOMA. Well, Ivy can suck it.

(CATHI re-enters from the back without her coat or boots. She’s dressed in a Bean Shack T-shirt, just like IAN and SOMA.)

CATHI. What was that? I hope we aren’t speaking ill of our fellow baristas.

SOMA. No. Never. *(To IAN.)* Hop to it, man.

IAN. OK, OK, OK. *(Walks to the bar.)* I’m so excited. I haven’t made anything since my training. Don’t mess this up, Ian. Do not mess this up.

SOMA. You haven't made anything?

IAN. I've watched people make stuff. I've taken notes, but I haven't made anything really. I work mornings mostly ... with Ivy, and she always puts me on register. Or lobby duty. Or bathroom duty.

SOMA (*giggling*). Duty. Bathroom. Duty.

CATHI. Ivy has been with the company since it started. She was one of my first employees, and so she knows this place backwards and forwards. She just has high standards, and I think that's admirable. She's even given me a few pointers.

IAN. Seriously?

CATHI. Sure. Ivy is what you might call an aficionado. She studied coffee in Italy.

SOMA. I beg your pardon.

CATHI. You never knew that, Soma? Yeah. She worked at a few different roasteries all over Europe.

IAN. What's a roastery?

(CATHI sighs loudly.)

CATHI. Clearly your training has failed you.

SOMA. Hey ... not everyone here is an Ivy. Some of us just need a job. I'm sorry we're not coffee Alfredos or whatever, but we do our job well just the same. (*Turns to IAN.*) You were taught about Ethiopia; I'm sure you were taught about roasteries. You remember this stuff. Remember? First the coffee gets harvested.

IAN. Right. The cherries, but they're not really cherries.

SOMA. Then the cherries are ...

IAN. Dried and husked?

SOMA. Right. Then what happens?

IAN. Uh ... (*Panicking.*) I forgot!

SOMA. They are roasted and roasting a coffee helps determine its taste, its flavor, its boldness. A blonde roast coffee is not roasted for as long, thus retaining some of its natural acidic and bright flavors while a darker roast coffee is roasted for a longer period of time, giving it a smooth and bold flavor.

IAN (*taking notes*). Fascinating.

CATHI (*smiling at SOMA*). What do you mean you're only here for the job? You sound like an aficionado yourself.

SOMA. I've been here for two years, Cathi. I know the basics.

(Looking to IAN.) Now make me a mocha!

IAN. Do you care what kind of milk I use, Soma?

SOMA. What's standard?

IAN. Whole.

SOMA. Very good.

IAN. So you want whole?

SOMA. Heck no. Almond milk please.

IAN. OK. *(Pours some almond milk into a pitcher and begins to steam it.)*

CATHI *(still beaming at SOMA)*. You are a good little barista, aren't you?

(A loud hissing sound emerges from IAN's machine.)

SOMA. Pull the pitcher down, Ian. You need to aerate it more.

(IAN does as he's told and the sound vanishes. NEIL rises and walks toward the bar.)

NEIL. Cathi, I have a very important question for you.

CATHI *(with a bright, almost fake smile)*. Fire away, Neil.

NEIL. When was the last time you saw Soma laugh? Or even smile?

CATHI. Soma hasn't been smiling? Oh no. We can't have that. *(To SOMA.)* Even a simple smile can help make someone's day. It enhances the customer experience.

SOMA. I really hate this conversation.

NEIL. I don't care about the customer experience, but I do care about my favorite barista. I say to her, "What have you got to be so miserable over?"

SOMA. And I tell him that I was in a horrific accident in my youth—

(NEIL bursts out laughing.)

SOMA *(cont'd)*. And this is just how my face is!

NEIL. See? I like you, Soma. You're a smart aleck. Like me. Miss Sass! You don't put on airs or try to be something you're not. At the same time, though, you're too young to be so glum all the time.

SOMA. I told you—retail!

NEIL. Nah. Underneath it all, I think you like it here. You choose to be miserable. Remember what I said before? You can laugh, or you can cry. And crying sucks.

SOMA. I believe you left out the “crying sucks” part before.

NEIL. All right, all right, all right! I see that my old-man wisdom is wasted. I know when I’m not wanted. I’m off before the weather gets any worse. Be safe, everyone! (*Passing BEVERLY.*) Are you sure I can’t give you a ride home, Bev?

BEVERLY. Thanks, Neil, but I’m just fine.

CATHI. Drive carefully, Neil.

NEIL. Old Ford hasn’t let me down yet! Night! (*He exits.*)

IAN. That’s a strange man.

CATHI. Are you excited, guys?

SOMA. For what?

CATHI. For the meeting!

SOMA. Not particularly. Should I be?

CATHI. It’s always nice when everyone is together. Don’t you think? The openers get to see the closers and all that.

SOMA. Yeah. I can’t wait.

CATHI. The weather is getting colder, and there’s something about the cold weather that just makes people want a hot cup of something.

SOMA. Uh-huh.

CATHI. And we’re here to give it to them.

SOMA. Yep.

CATHI. Plus, this is our busiest time of the year. Sales have been booming. We were up forty percent from last week! Forty percent! And it’s only going to get busier. (*Looks up to see SOMA fiddling on her phone.*) No phones on the floor!

SOMA. I was texting my mother to tell her that I love her.

CATHI. You were not.

SOMA. You’re right. I wasn’t.

(IAN hesitantly approaches SOMA with a mug.)

IAN. Soma?

SOMA (*turning to IAN*). Wow! That is some nice whipped cream action, Ian.

IAN. I know it's almond milk, but you didn't tell me not to put whipped cream on it. I hope you like it.

SOMA (*takes a sip*). Very good, Ian. That's a fine mocha.

IAN. Thank you.

CATHI (*examining IAN's drink*). That is a good-looking drink. Care to make me one?

IAN. Geeze, would I?! I'd love to!

CATHI. Do it exactly to standard.

IAN (*thinking*). OK. Exactly to standard. Exactly to standard. (*Walks to the bar again.*)

CATHI. Why isn't the radio on?

SOMA. You've got it locked so it only plays John Denver. I've been here since eleven this morning. There's only so much banjo a person can take before they lose it.

(IAN approaches the two of them.)

IAN. Oh, please turn it back on. I love John Denver. His voice is so soothing and his music so uplifting. It's a beautiful homage to the great outdoors and family. We come together. We live a good life. We love each other. Camaraderie. Inner peace.

SOMA. You're an idiot. You know that, Ian? Right?

(IAN walks back to the bar.)

SOMA (*cont'd*). How long is this employee meeting going to be, anyway?

CATHI. Only two hours.

SOMA. Two hours?! (*Considering her drink.*) I should have gotten an extra shot. What on God's green earth do we have to talk about that will take two hours?

CATHI. Oh, you know ... things.

SOMA. My shift ends at seven. I'm leaving at seven.

CATHI (*sing song*). No, you're not.

SOMA. Could you have given me a heads up about this? What if I had plans?

CATHI. You don't.

SOMA. But what if I did? I've been with The Bean Shack for two years, Cathi. What new information could you possibly have?

CATHI (*trying to hide her excitement*). Oh, you'll see!

(IAN approaches CATHI and SOMA with a drink.)

IAN. Here you are, Cathi. I hope you like it.

CATHI (*assesses the drink and then takes it, smiling*). It looks just fine. Thank you.

SOMA. The next time Ivy tells you what to do, you tell her to shove it up her—

CATHI. Soma, watch it. We don't speak ill of our coworkers. Besides, one day Ivy may be running this place. Just you wait and see.

SOMA. What does that mean?

(IVY enters. She's about SOMA's age but tidy and prim.)

IVY (*walking toward the counter*). Good evening.

CATHI. Hey, Ivy.

IAN. Hey, Ivy! Look at the mocha I made!

SOMA. A very nice mocha indeed.

IVY. Is there foam?

IAN. Uh ... yes ... I think.

IVY. Rookie mistake. Mochas don't get foam. And I see that your whipped cream is going in a counter-clockwise motion, when the handbook clearly states that drizzles and other toppings should be applied in a clockwise motion.

CATHI (*beaming at IVY*). You're right, Ivy. The guidebook *does* state that. Like I said, guys, she even teaches me things!

IAN. Oh man.

IVY. What have I been telling you, Ian? You're not ready for the bar.

SOMA. Now hold on, Ivy. How is he going to learn if he doesn't practice?

IVY. Oh, he can practice all he likes, but as long as his mochas look like *that*, he won't be on *my* bar during the morning rush any time soon. (*Exits to the backroom.*)

(SOMA is about to open her mouth when CATHI interjects.)

CATHI. Tread lightly, Soma. (*Exits to the backroom as well.*)

Of Men and Cars

By
JIM GEOGHAN

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(OF MEN AND CARS)

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Of Men and Cars received its world premier production at Midland Community Theatre in Midland, Texas, on Oct. 21, 2022.

Cast:

JIM..... Daniel Collins
DAD..... Daryl Berry
ENSEMBLEJeri Morgan, Brent Mealer
Brandon Thomason, Sarah January,
Elijah Rivera, Melanie Collins

PRODUCTION:

Director Ben Spencer
Scenic Designer A Chris Barton
Sound/Lighting Designer Edward W. Taylor
Costume Designer..... Nikki Harada
Scenic Charge Artist..... Rebecca Jacobs
Props Designer/Production Manager Tracy Alexander
Stage Manager Sarah Cotton
Dramaturg Kathy Pingel, David A. VanCleave

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“*Of Men and Cars* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Midland Community Theatre in Midland, Texas.”

Of Men and Cars

CHARACTERS

JIM (m): 20 to 30.

DAD (m): 40 to 65.

MOM, ANNA, N.Y. WOMAN, DOROTHY (w): 40 to 65.

FRANKIE TWO FINGERS, SALESMAN, WARREN, SHRINK,
MONTAUK MAN (m): 40 to 65.

GIRL NEXT DOOR, COLLEGE GIRL, L.A. WOMAN,
SALESWOMAN (w): 20 to 30.

DOMINIC, N.Y. MAN, JACK (m): 20 to 30.

RUSSO, POT HEAD (m): 20 to 40.

“Everything in life is somewhere else,
and you get there in a car.”
—E. B. White

Of Men and Cars

ACT I

(The set is four identical chairs arranged to represent a number of different four-door sedans throughout the years. As we begin, we find DAD repairing his Ford with a large pair of pliers. After a few beats, JIM enters and watches DAD for several beats.)

JIM. I've owned the car I currently drive for three years, and it occurred to me the other day I've never looked at the engine. So I opened the hood and damn it, I looked at the engine. I'm glad to report it was there. All six cylinders. Or is it eight? I've got to look that up. Anyway, I know it's a gasoline engine because I have put gasoline into my car. The car's a hybrid which means it also has electric motors *somewhere* powered by batteries *somewhere* and a computer *somewhere* connected to a satellite that makes a map on my dashboard that tells me where I can buy frozen yogurt. Dad's car didn't do any of that. It was a 1939 Ford. Dad liked Fords.

DAD. Dependable. Gets you home.

JIM. As a four-year-old, it was always great fun to watch Dad fix his fifteen-year-old car every time it broke down.

DAD. It didn't break down! It just needs maintenance!

JIM. 'Kay.

DAD. The exhaust pipe.

JIM. What's that?

DAD. It runs from the manifold to the muffler.

JIM. What's a man fold?

DAD (*points*). It's over there.

JIM. What's a mudler?

DAD (*points*). There.

JIM. 'Kay.

DAD. The exhaust pipe needs an L-bracket.

JIM. What's that?

DAD. A bracket shaped like an L.

JIM. What's a L?

DAD. A letter shaped like this.

(DAD shows JIM with a finger and a thumb.)

JIM. 'Kay.

DAD. The old one broke.

JIM. Why?

DAD. Potholes.

JIM. Why?

DAD. The city don't give a crap.

JIM. Why?

DAD. It's part of the oath they take when they're elected.

JIM. 'Kay.

DAD. Bracket broke and I'm replacing it.

JIM. You buy a new one?

DAD. No, they cost a fortune!

JIM. There's the man at the gas station.

DAD. Carmine charges a fortune!

JIM. To Dad, the repair of anything always cost the same amount of money ... a fortune.

(DAD wipes his hands on a rag.)

DAD. Done!

JIM. You fixed it?

DAD. I replaced the bracket with some wire.

JIM. What kind?

DAD. Thick.

JIM. How thick?

DAD. A wire hanger.

JIM. Where'd you get it?

DAD. Your mother's closet. Don't tell her.

JIM. 'Kay.

DAD. Good boy.

(JIM picks up a small piece of metal.)

JIM. Is this what broke?

DAD. Yeah.

JIM. What does it cost?

DAD. No idea but whatever it is, it's too much. Listen to me, Jimmy. To reach into your wallet and take out money to replace a piece of metal when you've got half a ton of metal crap hanging around doing nothin' is insane! It's wasteful! It's more than that, it's a sin! It's a mortal sin in the eyes of the Catholic church to waste money buying a bracket you don't have to. If I went to confession, I'd have to tell the priest, "Forgive me Father, I bought an L-bracket for my thirty-nine Ford!" He'd say ... (*Bad Italian accent.*) "How mucha you pay?" I'd tell him it was sixty cents, and he'd say ... (*Bad Italian accent.*) "Wassa matter! You no have no wire somewheres?"

JIM. Why's he talk like that?

DAD. Because he's Italian! All these priests are Italian! You'll know what I'm talking about when you turn seven and start confessing your sins.

JIM. What are sins?

DAD. Sins are evil acts that make the Devil happy. If we don't confess them before we die, we're sent to Hell forever where you burn in fire and little guys poke you with sharp sticks.

JIM. Dad had a sunny streak a mile wide.

DAD. Wasting money is sinful. In the Depression you had to get by with whatever you had. People had nothing. Nothing! Everyone had one pair of shoes, one pair of socks, an undershirt if they were lucky, and no one ever rode on a bus or went to the movies.

JIM. Why not?

DAD. It cost a fortune! Breakfast was some oatmeal slop, dinner was a big potato and that was it! You bought nothing because there was no jobs, no money, nothing. If something broke, you fixed it. If you needed parts you either made them or found them. And it was all because we had a Depression!

JIM. Do we still have it?

DAD. No.

JIM. If we don't have it ...

DAD. Yeah?

JIM. Why don't you buy stuff?

DAD. Good God! It's like talking to a brick wall! I give up! (*As he exits, he shouts to MOM.*) Do something with your son! Tell him money doesn't grow on trees!

(MOM and DAD argue offstage.)

MOM *(offstage)*. Leave him alone for Christ sake, he's only four! He doesn't know about money! He can't even count to ten! He doesn't understand half the crap you say! You get all worked up and pick on the kid! Get a beer and relax before you drive me crazy!

DAD *(offstage)*. I'm just trying to learn him we're not made out of money! He has no idea that things cost money and someone's gotta earn it before you spend it! To him money is just there! Like we're millionaires! Next time the car has trouble he'll want me to buy a new one!

JIM. Thinking of times like that makes me feel terrific. In the Bronx, people who yell at you are people who love you. Watch ... *(Calls to offstage.)* Dad! Why did you yell at me?

DAD *(offstage)*. Because you're worth it, goddamn it!

(JIM smiles.)

JIM. The Bronx was like a romantic comedy full of nutty people falling in love and yelling. A borough of blue-collar dreams. For me, dreams began and ended in a place called City Island, a small island off the coast of the Bronx. The most remarkable thing about City Island is that in four hundred years it has avoided the deadly trap of becoming trendy.

(FRANKIE TWO FINGERS enters. He stands in place and surveys activity offstage.)

JIM *(cont'd)*. There's a "fraternity of men" that live on City Island, and they like things the way they are. My dad's Army friend Frankie Two Fingers was one of them. Frankie and his friends wanted City Island to stay just the way it was.

FRANKIE *(speaks to an unseen neighbor)*. Hey! This house you're buildin'! Is it gonna look trendy? 'Cause me and my friends, none of us like trendy. If this house looks trendy, there's gonna be problems. And is that a second story you're buildin'? No, I don't think so. It'll block my view. You block my view, there's gonna be problems. You want a second story, make a *basement*. Build *down*, not *up*. You pick a color yet? I don't wanna look at no stupid color, you understand? Show it to me before you put it on.

(FRANKIE begins to exit, then stops and turns back around.)

FRANKIE *(cont'd)*. One other thing, this section of curb, that's my parking space, even when I'm not here. I come home and someone's in my space, there's gonna be problems.

(FRANKIE exits.)

JIM. Today, City Island looks pretty much the way it always has. Cute homes, ancient trees, narrow streets, all of them leading to the water ... water that turns inky black at night offering a floor for the lights of Manhattan to dance on. I knew my girlfriend would like it there. That's where I was headed the first time I drove a car. I was four years old. Yeah, I stole my father's car when I was four. But I wanted to take my girlfriend somewhere romantic. What can I tell you? I was a player.

(THE GIRL NEXT DOOR enters. She carries a coloring book.)

JIM *(cont'd)*. That's The Girl Next Door. She had a coloring book and a box of sixty-four crayons. Yeah, sixty-four. She was beautiful *and* she came from money. You don't let a woman like that get away.

(JIM approaches THE GIRL NEXT DOOR.)

JIM *(cont'd)*. Hi.

GIRL. Hi.

JIM. I'm Jim.

GIRL. I'm The Girl Next Door.

JIM. Told you. What are you coloring?

GIRL. Pictures.

JIM. What kinda pictures?

GIRL. Kittens.

JIM. I love kittens.

GIRL. Me too.

JIM. I had one.

GIRL. What happened?

JIM. It ran away.

GIRL. So did mine.

JIM. You'll notice we're both four, standing on the sidewalk, not one adult in sight. If it were present day, we'd both be on the six o'clock news by now. *(Then.)* You want to color in my dad's car?

GIRL. 'Kay.

(JIM and THE GIRL NEXT DOOR sit in the back seat.)

GIRL *(cont'd)*. It's nice in here.

JIM. Yeah. Sometimes I hide in the back seat and scare my father when he gets in.

GIRL. How?

JIM. Like this. *(Loudly.)* YAAAAH!!!

GIRL. 'Kay.

JIM. He doesn't like surprises.

GIRL. Why not?

JIM. He was in the war.

GIRL. What's the war?

JIM. I don't know. But it makes people nervous.

GIRL. 'Kay.

JIM. You color good.

GIRL. Thank you.

JIM. How do you stay inside the lines?

GIRL. When I think I'm going outside the line ...

JIM. Yeah?

GIRL. I stop.

JIM. Why's the kitten purple?

GIRL. I like purple kittens.

JIM. So do I. *(Then.)* Even though I was four, I knew it wasn't worth disagreeing with women over trivial things. *(Beat.)* Or important things.

GIRL. I like this car.

JIM. My dad lets me drive it whenever I want.

GIRL. Really?

JIM. Yeah. Wanna go somewhere?

GIRL. 'Kay.

(JIM and THE GIRL NEXT DOOR get out of the back seat and into the front seat.)

JIM. Where you want to go?

GIRL. I don't know.

JIM. How about City Island?

GIRL. What's that?

JIM. It's a nice place.

GIRL. 'Kay.

(JIM fiddles with the dashboard.)

GIRL *(cont'd)*. What are you doing?

JIM. Finding the thing that makes it go.

GIRL. 'Kay.

(SFX: Loud car horn.)

JIM. That's the horn.

GIRL. Yeah.

JIM. Loud.

GIRL. Yeah.

JIM. Funny.

GIRL. Yeah.

(JIM tries again.)

MUSIC: "Hound Dog" by Elvis Presley, or something similar.)

JIM. That's the radio.

GIRL. Yeah.

JIM. That's Elvis Presley.

GIRL. Yeah.

JIM. My dad hates him.

GIRL. Mine, too.

(The music fades.)

JIM. It turns out Dad had taken out the key but didn't turn the car off. If the car was in gear, and it was, it would go forward powered by the starter. *(Pushing buttons.)* This one doesn't work ... this one doesn't do anything. I wonder what this one does?

(JIM pushes a button.

SFX: gear grinding and a mild car crash.

The sounds continue as JIM and THE GIRL NEXT DOOR sway wildly and scream.)

JIM & GIRL. Noooo! Ahhhh! Stop!

(THE GIRL NEXT DOOR jumps out of the car and exits crying.)

GIRL. Mommy! Mommy!

JIM. We traveled about forty feet and stopped when we hit Mister Russo's fig tree. The car was fine but Mister Russo had just planted the fig tree, and he was not pleased.

(RUSSO enters.)

RUSSO. My fig tree! Look what you did! My God! I just planted this! Cost me twelve dollars! Look what you did! It's dead! You killed it!

JIM. Mind you I'm semiconscious and bleeding.

RUSSO. Oh, my God! I don't believe this! Look at the dent! Look how the bark is scraped off! *Un bambino colpito così giovane!* *(New thought.)* Burlap! I need burlap! *(Screams offstage.)* Anna! Where's that roll of burlap!

ANNA *(offstage)*. I dunno!

RUSSO *(as he exits)*. Dumb bitch!

JIM. For the next three years, Mister Russo wrapped burlap around the wound on his tree and changed it every other month. At night you could hear him screaming at his wife and kids.

RUSSO *(offstage)*. You're so frikkin' stupid it's pathetic! Blah blah blah! Shut your mouth! I'm so tired of listenin' to your crap!!

ANNA *(offstage)*. Drop dead! I'm stupid because I married *you!* Jerk! Go to hell, Carmine! Blow it out your ass! Eat crap and live!

JIM *(cont'd)*. Mister Russo was hated by everyone who knew him including his own family. When the neighborhood found out I damaged his stupid fig tree I became a minor celebrity.

(DOMINIC enters.)

JIM (*cont'd*). Even my friend Dominic was impressed.

DOMINIC. You go driving?

JIM. Yeah.

DOMINIC. In the car?

JIM. Yeah.

DOMINIC. Your daddy's car?

JIM. Yeah.

DOMINIC. You hit this tree?

JIM. Yeah.

DOMINIC. I hate this tree.

JIM. Yeah.

DOMINIC. My father hates it, too.

JIM. Everyone does.

DOMINIC. You drive alone?

JIM. No.

DOMINIC. With someone?

JIM. Yeah.

DOMINIC. Who?

JIM. The Girl Next Door.

DOMINIC. The one over there?

JIM. No, the one next door.

DOMINIC. Oh.

JIM. Yeah.

DOMINIC. She's pretty.

JIM. Yeah.

DOMINIC. I like her.

JIM. We listened to music.

DOMINIC. What kind?

JIM. Elvis.

DOMINIC. My father hates Elvis.

JIM. Mine too.

DOMINIC. Yeah.

JIM. I'm going to marry her.

DOMINIC. Who?

JIM. The Girl Next Door.

DOMINIC. OK.

JIM. Then I'm going to drive us to City Island.

DOMINIC. Why?

JIM. So we could be happy.

DOMINIC. Can I come?

JIM. OK.

(DOMINIC exits.)

JIM *(cont'd)*. The Girl Next Door, that's where she went and stayed . . . forever. Next door. Our relationship lasted all of twenty minutes. As I became an adult I was astonished to learn I would have relationships with women even *shorter* than that. And without crashing a car.

(DAD enters and drives the car as JIM rides shotgun.)

JIM *(cont'd)*. Dad pretended to be angry, but I could tell he wasn't. I think, down deep, he was proud of me. His four-year-old son had logged his first forty feet.

DAD. More like fifty actually. Maybe sixty.

(RUSSO enters carrying some burlap.)

JIM. Dad especially liked the fact I hit Russo's stupid fig tree.

DAD. He planted it on city property.

JIM. What's that?

DAD. Dirt he doesn't own! Just dug a hole and put it there!

JIM. Mister Russo is putting a Band-Aid on his tree again.

DAD. He's an idiot.

RUSSO *(yells at DAD)*. What'd you say?

DAD. I said you're an idiot.

RUSSO. Well, if this tree dies you're buyin' me a new one!

DAD. Eat me!

RUSSO. You drunken, shanty Irish bum!

DAD. Shut your yap, you fat slob!

RUSSO. Your kid's a maniac! He's out of control! He's all over the neighborhood doin' all kinds of stuff!

DAD. My kid's a maniac? How's Tony doin'? Huh? He outta jail yet? Can't find someone to kill the witness?

RUSSO. Where the hell were *you*? Nowhere! Inside drinkin' beer you shanty Irish pig! I spend money makin' the neighborhood look better and this is the thanks I get? Your idiot kid tryin' to kill my tree?

DAD. This neighborhood was fine until *you* moved in! Go learn to read and write, see what that's like! You want to make the neighborhood better? Move the hell out! And take your fuckin' fig tree with yuh!

(RUSSO exits.)

JIM. Dad felt if I was going to steal his car every now and then, I might as well learn some basics about driving.

DAD. And the pedal on the left is the clutch. You press the pedal down, select a new gear, pedal up . . . did you feel that? That surge in speed?

JIM. I guess.

DAD. It's because we went from second to third gear.

JIM. 'Kay. *(Then.)* I had no idea what he was saying but it was still nice, the two of us driving on a warm day, windows down, listening to the Yankees on the radio. And if the Yankees weren't playing, there was always music.

(JIM turns on the radio.)

MUSIC: "Good Golly Miss Molly" by Little Richard, or something similar.)

DAD. What is that?!

JIM. Music.

DAD. You like that?

JIM. Kinda.

DAD. That's not music. That's screaming. Nothing more than noise. Turn it off.

JIM. Why?

DAD. Because I said so.

JIM. Why?

DAD. Because it's awful!

JIM. No, it's fun.

DAD. Rock and roll is music of the Devil.

JIM. No.

DAD. It's a plot by the communists to make everyone in America insane so we have no idea what's going on when they invade us.

JIM. I don't know what that means.

Launch Day **(Love Stories From the Year 2108)**

By
MICHAEL HIGGINS

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(LAUNCH DAY [LOVE STORIES FROM THE YEAR 2108])

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Launch Day (Love Stories From the Year 2108) received its world premier production at Theatre Tuscaloosa in Tuscaloosa, Ala., on Oct. 21, 2022.

Cast:

JADA.....Margaret Carr
ZEGGGabriel Carden
GARALAmaria Jackson
QUILLNEY Ebony Wesley
REBISSAJessica Briana Kelly
VANDER.....DeAnthony Mays
DARGE Sam Hodo
KEERA..... Brandy Johnson
BRYLO Kazarius Brown
TAZ..... Mileidy Crespo-Jones
BRITTLEY Hallie Grace Hamner
GREVIN.....Steven Yates
VOICE OVERS..... Ava Buchanan, Charles Prosser, Tina Turley

PRODUCTION:

Executive Producer/Director.....Tina Turley
Managing Director Adam Miller
DramaturgKathy Pingel, David A. VanCleave
Technical Director..... Wheeler Kincaid
Stage Manager Ashlyn Lambert
Movement Coach.....Rebecca Kling
Scenic Design.....Jameson Sanford
Costume Design..... Jeanette Waterman
Lighting Design Lyndell McDonald
Sound and Props Design Charles Prosser
Hair and Make-Up Design.....Ava Buchanan

In addition to the information on the Important Billing and Credit Requirements page (p. 3), all producers of the play must include the following acknowledgment on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and on all advertising and promotional materials:

“Launch Day (Love Stories From the Year 2108) was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Theatre Tuscaloosa in Tuscaloosa, Ala.”

Launch Day

(Love Stories From the Year 2108)

CHARACTERS

JADA (w): 20s to early 30s. A brilliant engineer. Disillusioned with life on Earth.

ZEGG (m): 20s to early 30s. Junior assistant at a large military contractor. JADA's ex-boyfriend.

LOUDSPEAKER (a): A lifelike computerized voice broadcast from offstage.

GARAL (a): Late 20s. An unemployed computer geek.

QUILLNEY (w): Late 20s. A police officer.

REBISSA (w): 20s to early 30s. A struggling artist.

VANDER (m): 20s to early 30s. A man who screens potential astronauts.

DARGE (m): Late 20s to 30s. A construction worker.

KEERA (w): Late 20s to 30s. A high-tech product designer.

TAZ (a): 20s to 40s. A working-class bartender.

BRYLO (m): 30s to 40s. An astrophysicist.

BRITTLEY (w): 20s. A zookeeper.

GREVIN (m): Late 20s to 30s. The manager of a zoological research facility.

TIME: Various times during a single day in the year 2108.

PLACE: Six locations in and around the Jarkus Bass Spaceport, a rocket launching facility.

PRODUCTION NOTES

CASTING: All characters can be played by actors of any ethnicity. Diverse casting is recommended. Gendered references to gender neutral characters may be updated as needed.

SETTING: The sets, which can be minimally suggested, include an outdoor break area on the grounds of the spaceport, a gravel road outside the spaceport's perimeter fence, a small apartment, a strip club, a bar that serves intoxicants and a zoological research facility.

COSTUMES: Although the play is set in the future, costumes need not be overly futuristic. A slight variation on current styles with thought given to each character's job and status will work best.

THE LAUNCH TEAM: During scene transitions, while lights are down for set changes, the voices of The Launch Team can be heard running through final checks before liftoff. The voice of the Launch Director is crisp and professional. The four other voices also suggest competence, but can be various personalities (e.g., confident, apprehensive, nerdy, excited).

THE VOICE STIMULATOR: The voice stimulator, introduced in Scene 3, is a device that causes a person to slip preloaded advertising copy into conversations. When an ad plays, it should not be blatantly obvious. Instead, the ad should sound like normal human speech, but in the slightly artificial way that TV and radio commercials portray "normal human speech."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to the talented artists at Chicago Dramatists, Capital Stage in Sacramento and Benchmark Theatre in Denver for staged readings and other help in the development of this play. Much appreciation, also, to everyone at Theatre Tuscaloosa and the AACT's NewPlayFest 2022 for launching *Launch Day* out into the world. And finally, unending gratitude to my wife, Lisa, for her love and encouragement, for reading every draft, and for saving the life of the pandaroo.

To all the good people who don't yet exist.

Launch Day

(Love Stories From the Year 2108)

Scene 1: The Basstronaut

(Lights up on JADA and ZEGG sitting on a bench. They're in an outdoor break area on the grounds of the Jarkus Bass Spaceport, a rocket launching facility. ZEGG wears a long-sleeve shirt with the right sleeve pushed up to his elbow. JADA examines ZEGG's right forearm and hand, very impressed.)

JADA. So this is the future.

ZEGG. Awesome, huh?

JADA. Two generations ahead of anything I've seen.

ZEGG. That's my own skin. They grew it in a lab.

JADA *(touching his hand briefly to her cheek)*. It's even warm.

ZEGG. Ninety-eight degrees. Unless I turn it down to save battery.

JADA *(stroking his right forearm)*. How's that feel?

ZEGG. Nice. *(Pause.)* I mean, like it should.

(JADA pushes up his left sleeve and looks at his forearms side-by-side, holding him by the wrists.)

ZEGG *(cont'd)*. If you didn't know, could you tell which was real?

JADA. The one with the pulse?

ZEGG. Jada Giles, engineering genius.

JADA. Squeeze my hand.

(ZEGG squeezes. JADA is impressed.)

ZEGG. So how have you been?

JADA *(laughs, not sure where to start)*. Me? Busy. Thrilled.

Terrified. *(Notices he is still squeezing.)* You can let go.

ZEGG. Sorry. *(Releases her hand.)* I missed you.

JADA. Let's not ...

ZEGG. What?

JADA. Zegg, I'm glad you're here. But I just want a nice goodbye.

ZEGG. It's true. I've thought about you every day for the past ten months.

JADA (*indicating his arm*). How did it happen?

ZEGG. In battle.

JADA. *Battle?* I thought you had a desk job.

ZEGG. I got up from my desk.

JADA. You're supposed to be a businessman.

ZEGG. For a military contractor. We're kinda in the war business.

JADA. Well, this contractor—

ZEGG. Global Power Solutions. Third biggest in the world.

JADA. They should not be putting you in harm's way.

ZEGG. It was one little training class—at our office in Turkmenistan. While I'm there, the client calls in for laser drones. They launch clean. But two clicks up, we lose them. The techs think it's a radar glitch. But I run outside, look up and the drones are coming *back at us*.

JADA. You got hacked through the guidance satellite.

ZEGG. *Jada ...*

JADA. What?

ZEGG. That took us two days to figure out. (*Pause.*) Anyway, I yell “incoming” in time for the tech guys to take cover.

JADA. But not in time for you.

ZEGG. Laser hit my arm. It kind of exploded, but also evaporated. I lost eight pints of blood.

JADA. *Eight*. How?

ZEGG (*points outward from his shoulder*). Out this way. Mostly.

JADA. I mean how'd you live?

ZEGG. That's what my boss wanted to know. We promise clients a perfect kill shot within two thousand meters.

JADA. Saved by marketing hype.

ZEGG (*uncomfortable for a short beat*). Yeah. Anyway it turns out Glo Pow (*Pronounced “glow pow.”*) is also working on this awesome prosthetic arm. Way secret. They had to raise my security clearance just to give it to me.

JADA. So that's how you got in here.

ZEGG. I'm a trusted guy now. (*His right arm twitches a little.*) So trust me when I say I've been thinking about—

JADA. Your arm just moved.

ZEGG. It's thought-controlled. I must've had a stray thought.

JADA. Interesting.

ZEGG. I would've come sooner, but I was technically dead. Then unconscious for the surgery. Then dead some more. Then—

JADA. Well, you just made it. We launch in five hours.

ZEGG. So where's Professor Mendicott?

JADA. I don't know. Where should he be?

ZEGG. Saying goodbye to his star protege. I half-expected him to be going with you. To mentor you across the galaxy.

JADA. That's not how it was.

ZEGG. Jada, why are you doing this?

JADA. Why am I taking part in humanity's greatest adventure?

ZEGG. It may *not* be great. It may be terrible.

JADA. That's the adventure.

ZEGG. I'm serious.

JADA. I am, too. Look at that ship. (*Points in the far distance, toward the audience.*) Anti-matter propulsion. Simulated gravity. The most expensive machine ever built.

ZEGG. All I see is an egomaniac looking for the flashiest way to spend his money. (*News reader voice.*) "Jarkus Bass announced today that his new spaceship, the *Jarkus Bass*, will carry six hundred so-called 'Basstronauts' to a planet light-years from Earth to found the first interstellar colony, Jarkus Bass City."

JADA. When you're a trillionaire, you can be more modest.

ZEGG. You'll be old by the time you get there.

JADA. *You'll* be old. At the speed I'm going, my aging slows down.

ZEGG. You'll be sixty-five at best.

JADA. But if I'm standing on the surface of another planet? Watching a new sun rise in the morning sky?

ZEGG. I don't trust this new planet.

JADA. Confirmed liquid water. Earth gravity. We're gambling a little on the atmosphere, but—

ZEGG. What if it's inhospitable?

JADA. You mean like ours?

ZEGG. Ours is going to be OK.

JADA. Who's going to save it? Global Power Solutions?

ZEGG. What if you can't find food?

JADA. We're bringing our own. Genetically modified to live in harsh conditions.

ZEGG (*unimpressed*). The buffadillo.

JADA. The buffadillo is genius. Half buffalo. Half armadillo. It can survive heat, dust storms, radiation. Its milk is an acquired taste. But—

ZEGG. Those things are creepy.

JADA. The babies are cute. I got to pet one of the cubs—or pups, or whatever.

ZEGG. What about all the pee?!

JADA. The pee?

ZEGG. The whole ship seems to run on pee. The drinking water comes from pee. The oxygen comes from pee.

JADA. It's called recycling, Zegg. Urine is mostly water. And water is one-third oxygen, so—

ZEGG. You're breathing pee!

JADA. We're not.

ZEGG. You're breathing oxygen, whose former main purpose was to be part of pee.

JADA. OK. Yes. We are.

(ZEGG's right hand twitches again. JADA notices.)

ZEGG. Jada, you can bail out. You're not flight crew. You're just a colonist.

JADA. We are as important as the crew.

ZEGG. You're not the person who should do this.

JADA. I'm exactly the person. No family. No kids. Nothing to leave behind.

ZEGG. You're leaving the world behind.

JADA. Good.

ZEGG. All these people—all trying to make it work, all part of the same human struggle.

JADA. I'll wave at them from the ship.

ZEGG. You're leaving me.

JADA. Don't even. You left *me*, OK? It's nice you're here. But—

ZEGG. I messed up. I know. But this isn't you.

JADA. It is me.

ZEGG. *You care about the world. This one. That's why you signed up for Mendicott's big project, worked all those sixteen-hour days. (Puts his right hand on her shoulder.)* When I found out you volunteered for this, I was just ... I mean ... there's twelve billion people on this planet. But you ... to me, you're—

(His right hand twitches suddenly and smacks JADA on the side of the head. It's a firm whack, but she's more surprised than hurt.)

JADA. Ah!

ZEGG. Shit!

(ZEGG's right arm jerks about wildly. He tries to grab it with his left hand but misses. The arm smacks him hard in the face.)

ZEGG *(cont'd)*. Ah!

(They both grab at ZEGG's flailing right arm but miss.)

JADA. *Think.*

ZEGG. I am. It's not listening.

JADA. You've been hacked.

ZEGG. They said that couldn't happen.

(ZEGG misses, misses again, then grabs his right forearm.)

ZEGG *(cont'd)*. Got it.

(He stuffs his right forearm under his left armpit and clamps down, holding the renegade arm in place.)

ZEGG *(cont'd)*. The controller is in my pocket.

(JADA reaches into ZEGG's pocket and pulls out a small, futuristic tablet computer. [This is the controller.] She taps buttons as ZEGG struggles to keep his arm subdued.)

JADA. It won't power off.

(ZEGG's right arm breaks free and swings at JADA.)

ZEGG. Look out!

(ZEGG tries again to corral his flailing right arm.)

JADA *(looking at the controller)*. There's a product manual. Have you read it?

ZEGG. If I have trouble, I just turn it off and back on.

(The arm swings at him, but he blocks it with his left arm.)

JADA. Be careful.

ZEGG. I got this.

(ZEGG reaches for the renegade arm, but it evades his grasp and punches him in the groin. He groans and falls. ZEGG's right hand grabs his throat and starts choking him.)

JADA. Oh God.

(JADA drops the controller and jumps on ZEGG. They struggle to pry his right hand off his throat. JADA pokes at the inside of his right elbow.)

JADA *(cont'd)*. There's a kill switch in the elbow.

ZEGG *(the words squeaking out)*. Hit the kill switch.

JADA. I'm trying.

ZEGG. Press harder.

(JADA squeezes hard.)

JADA. They buried it way inside.

ZEGG. Let me try.

(ZEGG uses his left hand to squeeze his right elbow. But the choking just gets tighter.)

JADA. How else can we override?

ZEGG. You're the genius.

JADA *(pause)*. I'm going to let go.

ZEGG. Don't let—!

(JADA lets go of ZEGG's right arm. The right hand tightens its grip. JADA plants her foot on the arm and pushes with all her might.)

JADA. Push.

(Together, they pry ZEGG's right hand off his throat.)

JADA (*cont'd*). Now stretch.

(Together, they stretch ZEGG's right arm lengthwise on the ground. Quickly, JADA bounces up and lands—butt first—on the renegade arm. ZEGG groans. The arm twitches, but it can't escape. JADA has trapped it against the ground with her butt.

A long pause, as they catch their breath.)

ZEGG. Stay on this planet.

JADA (*gently*). Zegg ...

ZEGG. Be part of the human struggle.

JADA. Shhh. It's Launch Day.

(Blackout.

In the darkness, we hear the voices of the rocket launch team. They communicate by radio in a crisp patter.)

LAUNCH DIRECTOR (*V.O.*). This is Launch Control. Upload main flight plan to quantum computer one. On my mark: three ... two—

VOICE #1 (*V.O.*). Control, this is Security. We have a yellow alert on the perimeter fence.

LAUNCH DIRECTOR (*V.O.*). Copy that. Is there a breach?

Scene 2: The Emotilizer

(Lights up on a gravel road outside the perimeter fence at the Jarkus Bass Spaceport. GARAL enters, looking over her shoulder. She's hurrying, but trying to appear not to hurry. Her clothes are well-worn, and she carries a backpack.)

QUILLNEY (*offstage*). You with the backpack—stop!

(GARAL stops. Her back is to QUILLNEY [pronounced KWILL-nee] as QUILLNEY enters, wearing a security guard uniform.)

QUILLNEY (*cont'd*). Drop the pack.

(GARAL reluctantly drops her pack.)

QUILLNEY (*cont'd*). Raise your hands and turn around.

(GARAL raises her hands and turns to face QUILLNEY. QUILLNEY stares for a beat.)

QUILLNEY (*cont'd*). Garal?

GARAL. *Quillney*. Haven't seen you since high school. You look good.

QUILLNEY (*all business*). What are you doing here?

GARAL. Glad it's you. I was worried this might be a shakedown.

QUILLNEY. What are you doing here, Garal?

GARAL. I'm here for the launch, man! Jarkus Bass, kickin' ass.

(GARAL lowers her hands.)

QUILLNEY. Keep your hands up.

(GARAL raises her hands again as QUILLNEY starts patting her down.)

GARAL. Come on. It's me. We hung out every day senior year. Remember when we drank that hyper-alc at Yatha's party?

(QUILLNEY finds nothing and steps back. GARAL lowers her hands.)

QUILLNEY (*skeptical*). So you're just here to admire the greatness of Jarkus Bass?

GARAL. Hell, yeah. You know when he was twenty, he told everybody: "I'm going to be the world's first trillionaire." And they laughed. Because what did he have then? Nothing. Like three hundred billion. But look at him now.

QUILLNEY. The viewing area is six miles from here.

GARAL. You used to be more laid back.

QUILLNEY. I get uptight when people climb the security fence.

GARAL. Wasn't me. And who cares? Somebody wanted a closer look.
 QUILLNEY. You wouldn't know anything about the Heartless Army of Coders, would you, Garal?

GARAL. No.

QUILLNEY. Last summer, one of their hackers got over that fence. Uploaded ransomware to the launch computer. Froze everything. Told Bass if he wants his computers back, he has to send fifty billion dollars to an account on the dark web.

GARAL. That's some black-hat bullshit. Did he pay?

QUILLNEY. It took three months, but Bass cleared the virus.

GARAL. I told you he kicks ass!

QUILLNEY. What's in the backpack, Garal?

GARAL. If those hacker dudes need money, they should play World Ball. A guy in Mongolia had a super-match today. Won ten billion dollars!

QUILLNEY. Did you not hear my question?

GARAL. He's a security guard. Like you! Well, not like you. He does interrogations for a local—what do you call 'em?—warlord.

QUILLNEY. What's in the—? (*Suddenly appalled.*) Interrogations? For a warlord?

GARAL. Yeah.

QUILLNEY. So a torturer just won World Ball.

GARAL. Yeah, his friends were like, "I guess you'll retire now." And he's like, "I can't just sit around the house. I'm gonna keep torturing."

QUILLNEY. *What is in—?*

GARAL. Personal items.

QUILLNEY. Mind if I look?

GARAL. No.

(QUILLNEY picks up the backpack, but GARAL grabs it.)

GARAL (*cont'd*). I mean, no, you can't look.

(They struggle over the pack.)

QUILLNEY (*threatening*). Let go. Right now.

(GARAL lets go of the backpack.)

GARAL. You can't look without a search warrant.

QUILLNEY. So you're a legal expert now?

GARAL. No. But you asked my permission. And if you didn't need it, you wouldn't have asked.

(A pause—a standoff.)

QUILLNEY. You been drinking, Garal?

GARAL. No.

(QUILLNEY sets down the backpack. She takes a device from her pocket that looks like a futuristic breathalyzer.)

QUILLNEY. Then you don't mind blowing into this?

GARAL. Uh ... no.

(QUILLNEY hands GARAL the plastic tube that leads into the device.)

QUILLNEY. You know anything about hacking quantum computers?

GARAL. No.

(GARAL blows in the tube. QUILLNEY takes the device back and studies it.)

QUILLNEY. I think you do.

GARAL. Wait. What is that thing?

QUILLNEY. It's an emotilizer. It measures your emotional state. It can tell if you're being truthful.

GARAL. That's creepy.

QUILLNEY. If you're telling the truth, it shouldn't bother you.

GARAL. It doesn't bother me.

QUILLNEY. Blow.

(She holds out the tube. GARAL hesitates, then blows into it. QUILLNEY checks the device.)

QUILLNEY *(cont'd)*. It bothers you.

GARAL. After high school, I got into computers a little bit.

QUILLNEY. Are you really a fan of Jarkus Bass?

(QUILLNEY holds out the tube.)

GARAL. No way. I mean I am. But I'm not blowing in that.

QUILLNEY *(playing "good cop")*. Garal, we're friends, right? Yatha's party. The hyper-alc. Dancing at midnight. The firefly drones that wrote: *(Indicates skywriting.)* "Good luck, Senior Class ... You'll Sure As Hell Need It."

GARAL. I thought you were the hottest girl in that whole school.

QUILLNEY *(not buying it)*. Right.

(GARAL grabs the tube and blows.)

QUILLNEY *(cont'd)*. Hey!

(QUILLNEY checks the device and is surprised, but recovers.)

QUILLNEY *(cont'd)*. I liked you, too. But if you have anything to do with these hackers, you need to tell me. Now.

GARAL. No. *(Pause.)* I mean I don't. Have any—

(QUILLNEY pulls out a futuristic tablet computer and uses it to take a photo of GARAL's eyes.)

GARAL. Hey, leave my retinas out of this!

QUILLNEY *(typing into the tablet)*. I have to run a full background check. Criminal record. Financial records. Travel records. All digital identities. Any use of suspect encryption.

GARAL. I'll miss the launch!

QUILLNEY. It takes three minutes.

GARAL. Oh.

QUILLNEY. If there's any connection between you and the Heartless Army, I'll have probable cause to open that pack.

GARAL. Quillney ...

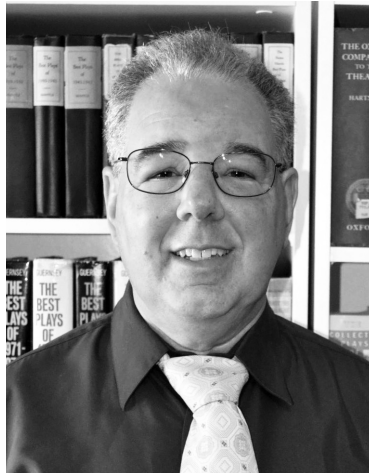
QUILLNEY. If there's no connection, you can go on your way. Deal?

(QUILLNEY reaches out her hand.)

GARAL *(pause)*. Deal.

(GARAL shakes QUILLNEY's hand.)

Author Biographies



Thomas Hischak

Thomas Hischak is the author of more than 50 published plays that are performed in the United States, Canada, Great Britain and Australia. His playwriting awards include the Stanley Drama Award (New York City) for *Cold War Comedy*, the Julie Harris Playwriting Award (Beverly Hills, Calif.) for *The Cardiff Giant* and two AACT NewPlayFest awards for *The Emperor of North America* (2016) and *Escaping the Labyrinth* (2022). Hischak is also the author of 32 nonfiction books about theatre, film and popular music, including *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical, 1939: Hollywood's Greatest Year*, *The Disney Song Encyclopedia* and *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*. He was a professor of theatre at The State University of New York at Cortland for 33 years and a Fulbright scholar who has taught and directed in Greece, Lithuania and Turkey. He is currently an adjunct professor of theatre and film at Flagler College in St. Augustine, Fla. For more information, visit: www.thomashischak.com.



Photo: Brandon Gedler.

Karen Schaeffer

Karen Schaeffer is a playwright and actress in Des Moines, Iowa. Schaeffer's plays include *Girls' Weekend*, *The Bachelorette Party (Girls' Weekend 2)*, *Choices! Choices!*, *Funny How She Forgets*, *Temporary Insanity*, *Recompense*, *All the Gravities*, *Unpacking Mother*, *Prolog* and *A Murder for Christmas*. Her work has been produced and/or developed in the United States, Canada, Germany and Australia. Schaeffer received special recognition at the 2015 Cloris Leachman Awards for *Girls' Weekend*. She is currently a member of the Dramatists Guild, the American Association of Community Theatre and Theatre Communications Group.



Photo: Ryan Maxwell.

John Bavoso

John Bavoso is a Washington, D.C.-based playwright, marketer and aspiring wrangler of unicorns. He mostly writes plays about women and queer people who are awkwardly attempting to engage with serious subject matter using only dry wit and impeccably timed combative taunts. He is a member of the Dramatists Guild, a Pinky Swear Productions company member, a 2019 Lambda Literary Fellow and a two-time District of Columbia Arts and Humanities Fellow. His plays have been produced and/or developed across the United States and in Canada, Japan, South Korea, United Arab Emirates, Australia and the United Kingdom. Bavoso's full-length works include *Olizzia*, *Over Her Dead Body: A Bluegrass Benediction* (winner of two Capital Fringe Audience Awards), *BLIGHT* (Next Stage Press), *MLM Is for Murder (or, Your Side Hustle Is Killing Us)* (AACT NewPlayFest 2022 Winner) and *Camp Mannuppia: An Alt-Masc Comedy*. For more information, please visit: john-bavoso.com.



Photo: Vincent Pelligrino.

Deanna Strasse

Deanna Strasse is a Milwaukee-based playwright who enjoys mixing the heartfelt with the hilarious. Her most notable works include *Dancing With Hamlet* (Windfall Theatre, 2018), *Summers in Prague* (Sidecar Theatre, 2018; Windfall Theatre, 2020) and *The Café Mocha Murders* (The Golden Chain Theatre, 2022). Strasse's work has been workshopped and/or produced through companies such as The Chameleon Theatre Circle (Minneapolis), Spark Creative Works (Long Island, N.Y.), Renaissance Theaterworks' Br!NK New Play Festival (Milwaukee), Macha Theatre Works (Seattle), Lake Country Playhouse (Hartland, Wisc.), Village Playhouse (West Allis, Wisc.), St. Croix Festival Theatre (St. Croix Falls, Wisc.) and more.

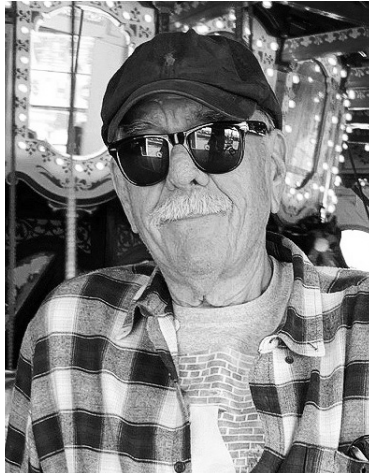


Photo: Annie Gagen.

Jim Geoghan

Jim Geoghan's play *Only Kidding* ran off-Broadway for two years and was nominated for two Drama Desk Awards, including best play. *Light Sensitive* has had 80 productions and was nominated for the Joseph Jefferson Award in Chicago. His other plays include *King of City Island*, *Two Gentlemen of Corona*, *Beehive on Broadway*, *Warren and the Polar Bear* and *Ug the Caveman Musical*, for which he wrote the book and lyrics. Geoghan also writes and produces television—he created *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* for the Disney Channel and was nominated twice for Emmy Awards.



Photo: Chris Popio.

Michael Higgins

Michael Higgins is a Chicago-based writer whose play *Launch Day (Love Stories From the Year 2108)* was a winner of AACT's NewPlayFest in 2022 and premiered at Theatre Tuscaloosa in Tuscaloosa, Ala. *Launch Day* has received staged readings at Benchmark Theatre in Denver, Capital Stage in Sacramento and Chicago Dramatists in Chicago. Higgins' play *The Chip* has been produced in New York, Chicago and Australia and appears in *The Best Ten-Minute Plays 2018* (Smith & Kraus). His play *Tracy and Her Dream Guys* was published in *The Best New Ten-Minute Plays, 2019* (Rowman & Littlefield). Higgins is a former legal affairs reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* and has a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania. A Cleveland-area native, he also has worked as a garbage collector and assistant to the guy who scrapes roadkill off the highway. He lives with his wife, Lisa, in Oak Park, Ill.

