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Dramatic Publishing

DRAMA

HOUSE OF CARDS

CONCEIVED BY
STEPHEN GUNDERSHEIM

DRAMA

HOUSE OF CARDS

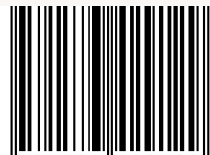
Drama. *Conceived by Stephen Gundersheim and written by Seth Aganski, Tom Austin, Tara Bowman, Sarah Corbin, Emily Dignan, Lee Gabriel, Greg Hall, Amanda Hannoosh, Jaci Keimach, Chris Keyser, Dan LaBroad, Brian Lee, Jennifer MacLean, Andrew Markos, Emily Pierce, Phelan Wolfendon, Adam Yerman, Amy Bartlett, Anthony Beatrice, Jess Bryant, John Clevesy, Brian Fitzgibbons, Rachel Keimach, Peter Leonard-Solis, Kristin Minichiello, Tiffany Owsiak, Kerrin Rhuda, Cathy Thomas and Stephen Gundersheim.*



Cast: 8m., 9w., 1 either gender. Seventeen students arrive at school in the morning and go through their day from opening their lockers, to passing in the hallways between classes, to lunchroom encounters, to their exit at the end of the day. Each character is a number representation from a deck of cards, and that number is their character name and value in the hierarchy of the student body. With ace being the lowest and king being the highest, we see, through intermingled scenes and monologues, the characters expressing their individual positions and feelings as to what it is like to be the value of the card that they represent. The entire action of the play is controlled by a joker who serves as the narrator. *Minimal set. Approximate running time: 50 minutes. Code: HG2.*

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STEPHEN GUNDERSHEIM

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House of Cards was originally produced at Pentucket Regional High School in West Newbury, Mass., on May 2, 2002. Prompted by an Augusto Boal exercise during Pentucket's advanced acting class, the director conceived this idea for a play using the journal reactions of the class. These initial journal entries were formed into monologues with the class that were edited, rewritten and shaped to become the skeleton of the play that was created by the director and the cast during the rehearsal process. Improvised dialogue became scripted, and the version here is from the final performance.

Cast

The Joker.....	Emily Dignan
Ace of Spades (AS).....	Cathy Thomas
Two of Spades (2S).....	Brian Fitzgibbons
Five of Spades (5S).....	Jess Bryant
Ten of Spades (10S).....	Greg Hall
King of Spades (KS).....	Seth Aganski
Four of Diamonds (4D).....	John Clevesy
Six of Diamonds (6D).....	Peter Leonard-Solis
Jack of Diamonds (JD).....	Kerrin Rhuda
King of Diamonds (KD).....	Rachel Keimach
Three of Clubs (3C).....	Tom Austin
Six of Clubs (6C).....	Amy Bartlett
Eight of Clubs (8C).....	Anthony Beatrice
Queen of Clubs (QC).....	Kristin Minichiello
Ace of Hearts (AH).....	Andrew Markos
Seven of Hearts (7H).....	Jennifer MacLean
Nine of Hearts (9H).....	Tiffany Owsiak
Queen of Hearts (QH).....	Amanda Hannoosh

Production Staff

Director	Stephen Gundersheim
Stage Manager	Jill Domings
Stage Manager	Ryan Murray
Light Board	Mike Barreiros
Spotlight Operator	Will Hall
Spotlight Assistant	Danielle Dombrowski
Lighting Designer	Ryan Murry
Sound Engineer	Ryan Murray
Costumer Designer.....	Connie Rhuda
Curtain.....	Jill Domings
Ushers	Danielle Dombrowski, Leah Sheehan
Poster Designer	Jill Domings
Public relations.....	Jennifer Leonard-Solis
Refreshments.....	Theatre Parents Group

To the theatre community of Pentucket,
who made my time there a blessing.

And to Karina and Jackie, who shine from above.

All profits from any royalties will go to scholarships at
Pentucket Regional High School in their memory.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An incredible thanks to Pentucket Regional High School's 2002 advanced acting class for their initial work, commitment and writing, for listening to my and one another's pieces and for helping to shape the monologues.

A special thank you to the cast for their ability to improvise and then set the dialogue for our scenes so that we could take the initial readings from class and create this actual play—you all helped realize my idea into a live production and are co-authors.

Special thanks to Johanna Smith and Barbara Maier for presenting the workshop that prompted me to use the card exercise with my own students, to Jen Leonard-Solis for her time transcribing the scenes for me and to Emily Dignan for all of her work with me on the Joker's monologues; it was a true collaboration.

Another special thanks to Connie Rhuda for the production's costumes, and a special thank you to all the teachers and directors (too many to mention here) who have influenced my work as both a teacher and a director.

Thanks to my colleagues at Pentucket Regional High School, especially my friend Marcia Nadeau-Tanner and my department head and biggest advocate, Ellen Hart. Finally, thanks to my parents who supported me in theatre from my early days and to my wife, Susan, and my children, Hannah, Rebecca and Doron, who make it all worthwhile.

SETTING

House of Cards was originally done on an empty stage with simple lighting effects. Contemporary music was used for the beginning of the play and during the curtain call. A magical bell sound was used each time the Joker froze the action. As a convention, characters remained in the frozen tableaux and would step out to deliver their monologue and then step back in. The cafeteria scene was done by rolling actual tables on-stage from the cafeteria—this is easily borrowed from your own school lunch room.

COSTUMES

Costumes consisted of simple jeans and white T-shirts with each member of the cast wearing a T-shirt with the number and symbol of their card and value (e.g., the number nine with two hearts on a T-shirt can be used for the Nine of Hearts character).

PRODUCTION NOTE

Pop culture references may be altered and updated to current social trends.

House of Cards

CHARACTERS

(7m., 8w., 3 either gender)

JOKER: either gender.

ACE OF SPADES (AS): woman.

TWO OF SPADES (2S): man.

FIVE OF SPADES (5S): either gender.

TEN OF SPADES (10S): either gender.

KING OF SPADES (KS): man.

FOUR OF DIAMONDS (4D): man.

SIX OF DIAMONDS (6D): man.

JACK OF DIAMONDS (JD): woman.

KING OF DIAMONDS (KD): woman.

THREE OF CLUBS (3C): man.

SIX OF CLUBS (6C): woman.

EIGHT OF CLUBS (8C): man.

QUEEN OF CLUBS (QC): woman.

ACE OF HEARTS (AH): man.

SEVEN OF HEARTS (7H): woman.

NINE OF HEARTS (9H): woman.

QUEEN OF HEARTS (QH): woman.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

House of Cards is a piece that came about quite by accident. I led an exercise with my advanced acting class in the fall of 2001 based on a workshop I attended. The session was based on Augusto Boal's work dealing with social issues of power, and we did an exercise with a deck of cards exploring how people treat one another when each card is given a value, thereby creating a social class structure. I asked the students to write a journal entry at the end of the session, and when I read them, I thought that they would make interesting monologues. For two weeks we conferenced in small and large groups to edit these pieces, which were then performed.

I decided to make them into a short play—some of which was created during the rehearsal process with those who are in the cast. The result is a patchwork of individual perspectives on how people are valued in a world or society (in this case, students in a high school). Regardless of whether you or others label you an ace (lowest value) or a king (highest value), we all are equal and, to some extent, misunderstood. *House of Cards* has been an incredible learning experience for me as a director, teacher and playwright (yes, I wrote some of the pieces in the play). I loved collaborating with the students using improvisation to create realistic dialogue within the scenes. I always try to push students to work outside of their comfort zone while still feeling safe. We accomplished this together, and I have thoroughly enjoyed writing, editing, creating and working with these young people. I hope that in these difficult and turbulent times, *House of Cards* will remind us of the value of every human life.

House of Cards

SCENE 1: MORNING ARRIVAL

(Stage is empty. Contemporary music begins playing as ACE OF SPADES enters L and pantomimes opening a locker and taking out a notebook. She then sits down and begins scribbling in the notebook.)

SIX OF DIAMONDS enters L and SIX OF CLUBS enters R and meet at imaginary lockers.)

6D. Oh, hey, how's it going?

6C. Not bad, how are you?

6D. Well ... all right. So, did you do the math homework?

6C. Do I ever do the math homework? No. *(Pause.)* Can I borrow yours?

6D. Well, what period do you have it?

6C. I don't know, 5th, maybe.

6D. I'll check. It says you have it 3rd and I have it 5th.

6C. I can get it back to you around 4th.

6D. Well, OK.

6C. Thanks. I'm failing that class.

(The other playing cards enter at various points during this conversation—some alone, some in groups. They pantomime typical early morning school activities: going to lockers, unloading backpacks, checking locker mirrors, greeting and talking with friends. Those in groups are segregated by rank—Kings, Queens and Jacks together; Aces, Twos and Threes together, etc.)

EIGHT OF CLUBS and NINE OF HEARTS are opening their lockers.)

8C. So, I was waiting at the bus stop this morning when Queen and Jack passed by in Queen's new Camaro; and they laughed at me!

9H. Don't you hate that? I'm so sick of having to wait for the bus. You know the other day when it was raining? Well, I was waiting and there was this huge mud puddle and somebody drove by and splashed water all over me.

8C. Don't you hate when that happens?

9H. Yeah, I had to come to school soaking wet and wait for my mom to bring me some dry clothes.

8C. That stinks!

(TEN OF SPADES approaches QUEEN OF HEARTS at her locker.)

10S. Hey, Queen, did you do that English homework last night?

QH. I don't have to.

10S. Yeah, she'll pass you anyway; she loves you.

QH. Yeah.

(ACE OF HEARTS approaches AS, who is still sitting on the floor scribbling in a notebook.)

AH. You definitely did not do that math homework right.

AS. I didn't?

AH. No. You see, if you square the square root, it cancels out. Then you bring the number on the other side of the equation.

AS. Really?

AH. Yeah.

AS. Thanks.

(THREE OF CLUBS is sitting on the ground near where 8C and 9H are talking at their lockers.)

3C *(calling up to the pair)*. Hi. Hi, Eight. Hi.

(8C pauses a moment, looks disgusted, and then turns back to his conversation.)

QUEEN OF CLUBS and QH are at their lockers.)

QC. Does my make-up look all right?

QH. Yeah, it looks fine.

QC. I like your hair.

QH. Thanks.

(6D and JACK OF DIAMONDS pass each other in the hallway.)

6D. Um, hi, Jack. I like your hair.

JD. Thanks. *(To her friends behind 6D's back.)* Are you kidding me?

(QH pushes FIVE OF SPADES out of the way.)

QH. Excuse me!!

(JOKER claps hands and the action freezes.)

JOKER. At this point in time shall our story begin
About the house of cards and the people within.
Each occupant bearing upon his breast
A numerical figure, a value at best,
To decide where each lies in the grand scheme of things,
In a place where no mortal of equality sings.
But of scales, and of levels that separate friends
Into cheap definitions that each number lends,
And where intelligence, loyalty or lack of conceit
Are by one's card value made completely obsolete.
So, listen closely, my friend, to each Jack, King and Eight,
And learn your lesson well from the stories they relate.
So that if one day you find yourself in a judgmental place,
You can recall just how badly it feels to be an Ace.

(JOKER claps hands and action resumes. Cards mill around the stage in small groups or individually as if heading to class. Wind chime sounds and the action freezes. Throughout the play, as each monologue is delivered, everyone remains frozen except for the person talking.)

- 9H. Today, I was hanging with my usual group, my friends, or so I thought. I was being quiet, as always trying to blend in, laugh at the right jokes; my pathetic routine. Then Queen started telling about her party and everyone joined in with who they were going with, what they were wearing and other stupid details like that. I started to say, "I think I'll wear my new red tank top," when I was told that I was "so not invited" by King, who was being worshipped by Ten and asked me to leave. No explanation, just that I was supposed to leave, and like a coward, I did. I wish I stayed and stood up to King, but I know I never could. I've had the blow off conversation in my mind so many times, but I just can't get the strength to stand up to her. But what bothers me the most is that even though I never really "fit in" with them, without them, I'm nothing. Nothing but alone in a school of cliques, best friends and ex-friends. I guess I'm afraid that things will stay this way forever.
- 3C. Same old, same old. I come back from the summer vacation for my senior year and not a single person has changed. None of the "cool" people will even give me the time of day. It's our senior year for crying out loud. I thought that people would actually have matured over the summer. I guess there is really no use in trying to hang out with the cool people; they are all so stuck on themselves and each other. At least I know who my real friends are. So what if we watch reruns of the original *Star Trek* or play chess against ourselves, just to see who can beat themselves first. At least it's fun.
- 4D. Right, so anyway...what am I doing? Packing my backpack! Then why ... why am I packing a stuffed octopus? I guess this might be why everyone thinks of me as eccen-

tric. You know what? I like being me with my stuffed octopus. Everybody knows you need a stuffed octopus for math class, right? And of course I have Phillip, my lucky penny. Phillip is a girl, by the way. She and I have been together since preschool, and guess what? I haven't even been hit by a bus yet! Seriously! Not a single one! Oh, sure, I have been hit by a few cars, but ... the face cards were driving them. Yeah, darn face cards! They are deeply involved in a vast left-wing conspiracy designed to destroy me and the other psychopaths. I know it. But really, who wants friends like the face cards when you're more at peace without them? You know what? Yesterday, I heard Phillip talking. She said she was actually an agent for the FBI and that, when I least expect it, she would turn me in to the feds. I think she is delusional. But she listens when I talk ... Yeah, Phillip is truly a lucky penny—at least for now. Watch, tomorrow Jack will ridicule me using her third grade vocabulary as we pass each other in the hall. Whatever ...

SCENE 2: LUNCHTIME

(JOKER claps, school bell sounds, cards set up lunch tables then exit, leaving JOKER alone onstage.)

JOKER. Lunchtime. Time for the King and time for the Ace
To settle on a satisfying, comfortable place
Where they can almost feel like they belong.
But if this is achieved, it won't stay long.
For here in the house of cards, my friend,
The firm preconceptions refuse to bend
To the way, perhaps, that things should be
Without the segregational mentality.
But they come, and they sit, if they can find a seat,
And it happens each day as the patterns repeat.