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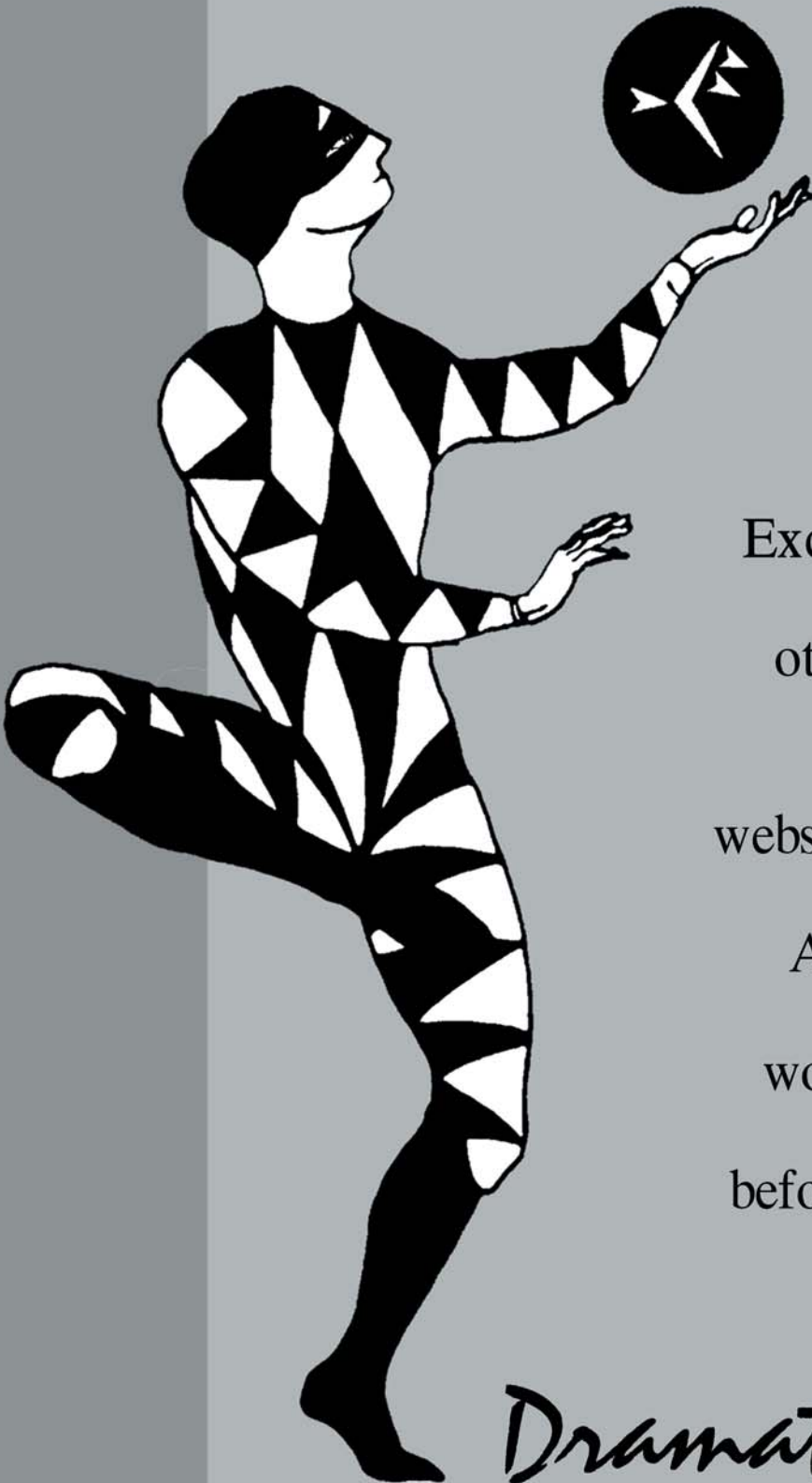
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Dramatic Publishing



A Comedy in One Act
by
MAE HOWLEY BARRY

Sisters under the Skin



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(SISTERS UNDER THE SKIN)

Sisters under the Skin

A Comedy in One Act

FOR FIVE WOMEN

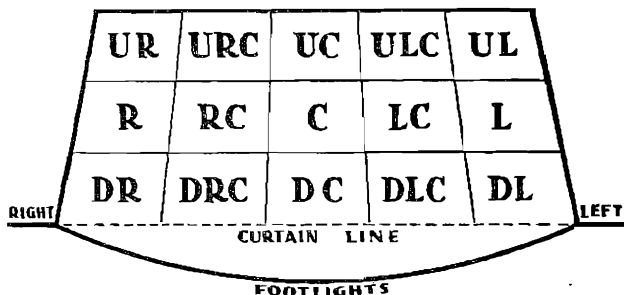
CHARACTERS

SANDRA . . . proprietor of "*The Sandra Salon for Social Success*"
TESSIE, *the timid one*
KATIE, *the calm one*
MAGGIE, *the mad one*
ALLIE, *the awkward one* } four scrubwomen

PLACE: *An office in a skyscraper in a large city.*

TIME: *The present. Eleven P.M.*

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

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

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

PROPERTIES

GENERAL: Large sign: THE SANDRA SALON FOR SOCIAL SUCCESS; desk, with lamp, telephone, and other accessories; light switch on wall; divan; afghan on divan; large easy chair and footstool; another large easy chair; small straight chair; console radio; small table below divan; drapes on windows; rug on floor.

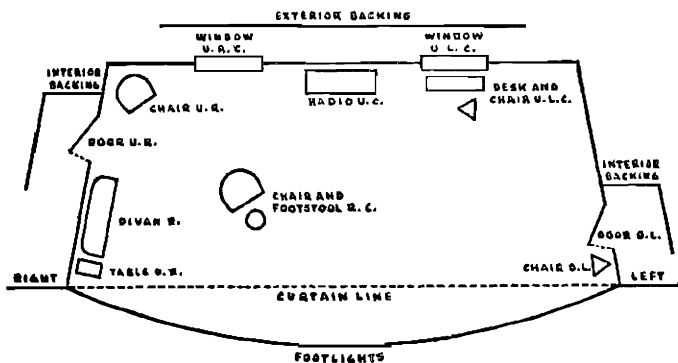
KATIE: Mop and pail against the wall D R, large book ("How to Be a Lady").

TESSIE: Mop and pail.

ALLIE: Mop and pail, heavy book on table D R, man's handkerchief.

MAGGIE: Mop and pail, small book on desk.

STAGE CHART



Sisters under the Skin

SCENE: *One room of a two-room suite occupied by "The Sandra Salon for Social Success." There is a door D L, opening in from the corridor, and another door, U R, leading to the other room. Near the door U R is a light switch. On the back wall, between two windows, is a large sign: THE SANDRA SALON FOR SOCIAL SUCCESS. Sandra's desk, with a lamp and telephone on it, among other accessories, is in front of the window U L C. A divan is against the R wall. At R C are a large easy chair and footstool. Another large easy chair is upstage of the door U R, and a small straight chair is downstage of the door D L. There is a console radio in the room, U C, and a small table below the divan, at D R stage. The room is used as a proving ground for the students. Each individual piece has been selected as an example of a period or a style.]*

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: *The room is in darkness, except for a thin stream of light that flows through the open door U R. KATIE's mop and pail are D R. For a moment there is no movement in the room, and then the door D L opens slowly. The light from the corridor outlines a woman's head as it is thrust into the room, peers cautiously around, and then is withdrawn. Almost immediately the door opens wider and two women slip noiselessly into the room. They close the door and stand motionless beside it.]*

ALLIE [*in a stage whisper*]. Hist, Katie!

TESSIE [*her voice quivering*]. I'm afraid.

KATIE [*from the room U R*]. Come on in, Allie.

[*The two women relax but keep their positions by the door until KATIE, the calm one, enters U R. KATIE pauses for an instant in the doorway to turn on the switch for the overhead lights, and then comes slowly D C. KATIE looks as though*

she might be in her middle years, but her general appearance is baffling. From the waistline up she resembles a woman of refinement: her gray hair is carefully arranged; her make-up more or less skillfully applied; her earrings inexpensive but in fashion; and her blouse, though not new, is becoming. The lower part of her dress, however, is in sharp contrast. She wears a work apron over a nondescript skirt, cotton stockings, and shabby shoes. As she comes D C she is reading from a large book. Its title, HOW TO BE A LADY, is printed in heavy black letters on a white background. TESSIE and ALLIE are dressed in faded house dresses, work aprons, baggy sweaters, and shapeless shoes. Each carries a mop and pail—the symbols of her calling. ALLIE, the awkward one, is a bit on the plump side but not worrying too much about it. Her hair has a natural wave but is carelessly combed, and her skin might be smooth if it were cared for—which it isn't. ALLIE'S flares of ambition are sporadic. Every now and then she tries the high road but always drifts back to the low road because it's easier to travel—and, besides, her feet hurt. This is one of her journeys on the high road. TESSIE, the timid one, is the youngest of the group. She is small and stringy. Her hair is bedraggled and so is her skirt, and she has a nervous habit of brushing her nose with her index finger. She is pathetically eager to become a lady—object matrimony. She speaks with a Cockney accent.]

ALLIE [*as KATIE comes D C*]. I brought Tessie along with me. She's new on this floor.

KATIE [*eyeing TESSIE dubiously*]. I don't know should we let any more come.

TESSIE [*brushing her nose*]. I'm afraid, though.

ALLIE [*at ease, now that KATIE is here*]. Sure, there's nothin' to be afraid of, now that Katie's here. She cleans these offices an' nobody'll be the wiser if we stop in to see her when our own work's done. [*She gives KATIE a broad wink and comes over to C. The handle of her mop catches between her legs and trips her.*] Blast that mop! I been carryin' it for

more years than I got fingers an' toes, an' it's still trippin' me.

KATIE. It don't look like you been practicin' your walkin' like it says here. [*She reads the title of the book.*] "How to Be a Lady."

ALLIE [*cheerfully*]. Well, nobody can say I didn't try. But the old man came in on me. "What's that you're doin'?" says he. "I'm learnin' to walk," says I. "You don't say," says he. "An' what's that you been doin' for the last fifty years?" [*She laughs good-naturedly at herself.*] I guess I was born with two left feet, an' I'll be dyin' with 'em. Come on, Tessie, an' I'll show you where to put your mop an' pail.

TESSIE [*not moving from the door, speaking to KATIE*]. Are you sure as 'ow you can make me a loidy?

ALLIE [*to TESSIE*]. She don't have nothin' to do with it. We just follows the book. [*She continues, as TESSIE still hesitates.*] You want to learn how to ketch a husband, don't you?

TESSIE [*venturing timidly into the room*]. 'Ow long will it take to make me a loidy?

ALLIE [*pointing to the book in KATIE's hand*]. Three months, that book says. An' if you're no lady by that time, I'll buy you a new mop.

KATIE [*not caring much about having TESSIE join the "select" group*]. We ain't sure of nothin' ouselves, so Allie can't promise you nothin'. [*She moves to R stage, sits grandly on the divan, and reads her book.*]

TESSIE. You said as 'ow there was a teacher 'ere.

ALLIE. I never said Katie was a teacher. I said she worked in this saloon.

TESSIE [*disappointed*]. 'Ow can we learn if we ain't got no teacher?

ALLIE. We don't need none. We can read the book. [*She points to the book KATIE is reading.*]

KATIE [*to ALLIE*]. You best go fix yourself, Allie—so's we can start when Maggie gets here.

ALLIE [*to TESSIE*]. Suit yourself then—go or stay. [*She goes*

out U R, grumbling.] That's all the thanks a body gets. Hereafter, I'll mind my own business.

[As ALLIE disappears off U R, there is a crash off, and then ALLIE's voice.]

ALLIE *[offstage]*. Blast that mop!

TESSIE *[nervously, brushing her nose as she comes to C]*. I'd like to be a loidy an' 'ave fine jools an' a motor car of me own an' a 'usband—but three months is a long time.

KATIE *[not encouraging her]*. I don't know as this book'll get you all them things.

TESSIE. But Allie says yer all goin' to be loidies, an' I wants to be a loidy, too, an' ketch a husband.

[TESSIE stops talking abruptly and her body stiffens. She listens at the door D L an instant and then drops her mop and pail and scurries to hide behind the chair R C. The door D L opens with a jerk, and MAGGIE, the mad one, enters. There is nothing timid or awkward about MAGGIE. She is tall and bony and her hair is pulled back and twisted into an uncompromising knot at the back of her head. Her clothes are old and worn, but even after hours of cleaning they still have a rigid neatness. She slams the door behind her, drops her pail against the wall L, and tosses her mop across it.]

MAGGIE *[furiously]*. The stinker! Givin' me two extra rooms to clean when she knows I'm doin' more than my share! I'd like to strangle her. *[She spies the top of TESSIE's head behind the chair and springs toward her.]* Come out of there, you dirty spy!

[TESSIE's head disappears, to reappear at the right end of the chair as she crawls frantically toward the door U R.]

MAGGIE. Grab her, Katie! *[She starts toward TESSIE.]*

KATIE *[crossing to TESSIE]*. Wait a minute, Maggie! She ain't spyin' on us. *[She helps the trembling TESSIE to her feet.]* She cleans on this floor. Her name's Tessie.

MAGGIE *[demanding, as she comes to R C]*. Then what's she hidin' behind the chair for?

TESSIE. Let me go out! [*She starts toward D L.*]

KATIE [*to TESSIE*]. You don't need to be afraid of Maggie.

Her bark's worse than her bite. If you want to stay, you can take your mop an' pail into the other room. Allie'll show you what to do.

MAGGIE [*to KATIE*]. She'll never amount to nothin'. She ain't got the brains of a rabbit.

TESSIE [*showing promise*]. I 'ave, too! An' I can be a loidy as quick as you. [*She speaks to KATIE.*] Can I lock the door while we're learnin'?

KATIE [*humoring her*]. If you want to. You just set the catch—it locks itself.

[*TESSIE runs to the door D L and sets the catch. MAGGIE drops into the chair R C.*]

MAGGIE. I'm too mad to fix up tonight, Katie. I'll just stay as I am.

TESSIE [*pushing the D L chair against the door D L*]. I'll make sure as 'ow no un'll ketch us.

MAGGIE. I tell you, Katie, I won't stand that Drubble woman much longer. Some day I'm goin' to hawl off an' smack her one. [*She sits back comfortably in the chair.*] Can you imagine havin' a chair like this in your parlor? [*She savors the thought for a moment, and then suddenly jumps to her feet.*] I bet Drubble's got one—the rat! I bet she sets in it while she's thinkin' up ways to make me work harder.

[*As MAGGIE jumps to her feet, TESSIE grabs her mop and pail in fright and scuttles across the room. As she goes off U R, MAGGIE shakes her head in contempt.*]

MAGGIE. She's a scared rabbit if ever there was one. What does she want here?

KATIE [*sitting on the divan*]. She says she wants to be a lady with fine jewels, an' a motor car. An' oh, yes, she wants a husband, too.

MAGGIE. Whoever put them ideas in her head?

KATIE. I don't suppose nobody did. I guess she's like the rest of us—wantin' to be better than we are.

MAGGIE. I don't want to be no better than I am. All I want to be is independent. An' if bein' a lady'll get that for me—then I'll be a lady. An' do you know what's the first thing I'm goin' to do when I am a lady?

KATIE. No—what is it?

MAGGIE [*vehemently*]. I'm goin' to march into every black hole of an office on my floor—in the middle of the day—an' whoever's settin' at the desk, I'm goin' to tell 'em to go straight to—

KATIE. Maggie! You wouldn't!

MAGGIE. Wouldn't I, though! You just watch me. [*She moves to the desk U L C.*]

KATIE [*rising, crossing to her*]. But no lady'd be doin' such a thing as that.

MAGGIE. Them's the ones that do it. They ain't afraid to say what they think.

KATIE [*glancing at the book in her hand*]. I ain't so sure this book is goin' to help any of us.

MAGGIE. That Sandra sells it, don't she?

KATIE. She must, or she couldn't be buyin' all the stuff that's in here.

MAGGIE. Well, she couldn't keep on sellin' it if it didn't do *somebody* some good.

KATIE. There's an awful lot of things it says you got to do in three months' time.

MAGGIE [*with determination*]. I'll learn to do 'em. An' the minute I'm a lady I'll throw up this job an' get a decent one.

KATIE. Maybe it won't be so easy to find another job—an' then what'll you do?

MAGGIE. I won't starve. There's always dirt to be cleaned up.

[*ALLIE appears at the door U R.*]

ALLIE. Katie, can you come here a minute? I can't do a thing with this Tessie. She's like a string bean.

[*ALLIE has combed her hair, and done things to her face with rouge, lipstick, and powder. The results, while not inspired, are adequate. TESSIE now appears behind ALLIE.*]

TESSIE. I'll never be no loidy. I looks 'orrible. [*And she does. Her rouge accentuates the hollows in her cheeks, and her hair, freed from its net, hangs limp around her shoulders. She has taken off her sweater and apron, but her dress, without a confining belt, sags like a shapeless bag from her shoulders to her ankles.*]

KATIE [*crossing U R*]. I'll help Tessie if I can, while you and Maggie start the lessons. [*She hands the book to ALLIE.*]

ALLIE [*reluctantly, taking the book*]. Where'll we start, do you think?

KATIE. I guess maybe you better start with them walkin' exercises again.

[*KATIE goes off U R, pushing TESSIE ahead of her.*]

ALLIE [*coming to C*]. I feel sorry for the poor creature. She's so young to be scrubbin'. And she wants a husband.

MAGGIE [*snorting*]. An' does she think a husband'll keep her from scrubbin'? [*She comes to L C.*]

ALLIE [*flipping the pages of the book*]. I'd like to pick out a settin' exercise—my feet's killin' me—but Katie thinks we oughta walk.

MAGGIE [*resigned*]. I guess we oughta, then. How does the book say to do it?

ALLIE [*hunting without too much enthusiasm for the page*]. It's my mother should of read the book when I was at the creepin' stage. [*She finds the page.*] Here 'tis. [*She reads slowly and with difficulty.*] "Put—a—book—on—your—head. Keep—you—shoulders—back—your—chest—out—and—your—stomach—in. Now—walk—in—a—straight—line. Put—one—foot—directly—in—front—of—the—other—toes—straight—ahead. Do—not—look—down—at—your—feet."

[*MAGGIE has picked up a small book from the desk U L C, crossed L C again, and is holding it on her head. She is trying to get her feet in position. ALLIE puts down the book she has been reading, in the chair R C, and picks a heavy book from the table D R. She is about to put it on her head,*

and then changes her mind. The book is heavy, so she shifts it from one arm to the other as she sways back and forth, trying to walk in a straight line from D R to D L stage.]

MAGGIE [*looking straight ahead, at the same time trying to look at her feet*]. I can't tell if my toes are straight. [*Her feet are spread wide.*]

ALLIE [*looking down at MAGGIE's feet*]. It's your shoes that are turned out. [*She isn't watching her own step and bumps into the footstool at R C. She gives the footstool a kick.*] Blast that footstool! There ain't enough room in here so you can walk in a straight line.

MAGGIE [*who is walking from L C to R stage*]. I don't believe no lady spends her time walkin' around the house with a book on her head.

ALLIE. They must! It says so in the book.

MAGGIE. The book says your chest out an' your stomach in.

[*They throw out their chests but their stomachs follow through, too. MAGGIE takes her free hand and pushes in on her stomach.*]

ALLIE [*shaking her head, as she comes back toward C stage*]. That won't work. You only push it out in the back. Let's see what does the book say. [*She gets the book and reads as before.*] "Your—back—should—be—a—straight—line—from your—shoulders—down."

[*MAGGIE, at R stage, is trying hard to follow directions, but she is not having much success.*]

MAGGIE. If I had my other corsets on . . .

ALLIE [*reading*]. "Stand—against—a—wall—your—shoulders—touching—the—wall—feet—together." [*She stops reading.*] Let's start that way.

[*They go stand against the wall, one on either side of the radio U C, their heads back, their eyes staring straight ahead. ALLIE has a book in each hand now. She holds the one, "How to Be a Lady," at arm's length in front of her as she reads.*]