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**American Association of
Community Theatre AACT
NewPlayFest Winning Plays:
Volume 6 (2024)**

Criminal Mischief by
WILLIAM CAMERON

The Red Flags by
CATHERINE CASTELLANI

I Thought I Knew You by
PHILIP J. KAPLAN

Eating Blackberries by
PAM HARBAUGH

Tennessee Wet Rub by
KIM E. RUYLE

The China Shop by
RICHARD MANLEY

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The China Shop

By
RICHARD MANLEY

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(THE CHINA SHOP)

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The China Shop was premiered by the Lincoln Community Playhouse (Lincoln, Neb.) in November 2024.

CAST:

MARY.....Victoria K. Lininger
LUCILLE.....Sandy Van Pelt
DERBY.....Chris Berger
ERNIE.....Scott Shomaker
CHRISTINE.....Rachel Barlow
UNCLE MAX.....Scott Glen

PRODUCTION:

Director & Scenic Design.....Jamie Bullins
Costume Design.....Maralee Maldavs
Lighting Design.....Obadiah Harvey
Tech Director.....Jeff Maldavs
Props.....Julie Enersen
Sound Design.....Barb Armstead
Charge Artist.....Dustin Witte

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 China Shop* was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Lincoln Community Playhouse in Lincoln, Neb.”

The China Shop

CHARACTERS

MARY SCUNZIO: 40, an executive with a large ad agency.

LUCILLE FRENCH: Late 60s, publisher and editor-in-chief of a prestigious quarterly poetry magazine. Mary's mother.

DERBY WALTERS: Mid-40s, disheveled, poet.

ERNIE FRANK: Early 40s, attorney, neat and tidy.

CHRISTINE FRANK: 30s, Ernie's wife, a trophy.

UNCLE MAX: Late 60s, sophisticated. Ernie's uncle.

TIME: The present.

PLACE: A prewar New York co-op. All of the action takes place in two adjoining apartments, the hallway in front of those apartments and the waiting area for the elevator on that floor.

The stage is divided perpendicularly by a partition that serves as the wall between two well-furnished, prewar high-rise apartments. The front wall of the apartments faces downstage and is open to the audience—except for staging that suggests a front door.

The ethnicity of the cast is arbitrary.

The China Shop

ACT I

Scene 1

(The lights come up on the L apartment. DERBY WALTERS, disheveled and unkempt, sits reading in a period leather chair. Next to the chair are two tall stacks of books. It is mid-evening, and the room is darkened except for a strong reading light that hangs over DERBY's chair. He reads in silence for about thirty seconds with a pen in hand and a small journal on the arm of the chair. As he begins to make a note in his journal, the landline rings on a nearby table. He tries to ignore it and continues to write. The phone rings perhaps a dozen times before stopping.)

The light has come up R on the sixth or seventh ring [but dimmed on L], and we realize MARY SCUNZIO, who lives next door, is calling DERBY's apartment. She is fit and dressed for yoga, with a mat laid out on the floor. Her living room is decorated with an eclectic but interesting blend of arts and crafts. She continues to let it ring, while staring at the adjoining wall. Another call comes up on her cellphone. She hangs up from the first, checks the display to see who is calling and answers.)

MARY. Hi, this isn't a good time ... I'm about to do some yoga ... yes, Mother, that's the "downward facing dog business" ... no, it doesn't make me want to get a pet ... Mother, I ... listen ... lis ... yeah, maybe more people would do it if the stuff had prettier names ... Mom, really I gotta go ... I don't know, maybe later ... I love you too ...

(Beat—brief silence.)

MARY (*cont'd*). Mom, everything's OK? ... No, just checking, all right, good night.

(MARY ends call as the lights slowly come up on DERBY's apartment. We see him pacing with a book in hand. Hearing the muffled sound of what seems like shouting, MARY leans against the wall, trying to make sense of the commotion. DERBY's voice rises as the lights come all the way up and the scene shifts to his apartment. MARY strains to make out the words through her wall.)

DERBY. A thousand ties, perhaps there're more,
 Are fastened to my casket door.
(He breaks off, irritated by his reading, and tries again.)
 As of ... as of metaphoric gavel rapping,
 Meting sentence on the sinner herein coffered ...

(The landline starts ringing as MARY calls again—DERBY pulls the jack from the phone, disconnecting the call.)

DERBY *(cont'd)*. As the gravesite penitently swallows
 All the absolution offered.
 My eternal doubt, my will be done,
 The vanquished and the victor,
 One.

(MARY leaves her apartment and goes to the door of his, knocking softly at first, but to no effect. After a moment, she knocks hard and long. DERBY goes to the door and opens it quickly and aggressively.)

MARY. Hey, you're not Jeffrey!

DERBY. Correct. You win the living room set and the big screen TV
 ... *(Starts to close the door.)*

MARY. What? *(Pushing it back open.)* Hold on, where's Jeffrey?

DERBY *(looking at his watch)*. I'm guessing he's in a taxi
 somewhere between Charles de Gaulle airport and his apartment
 in the 5th, disrupting or monetizing or some such on his iPhone
 or iPod or—

MARY. iPad, he wouldn't be using an iPod.

DERBY. Thank you for the clarification, and now—

MARY *(holds the door)*. Wait! Then who're you? And why didn't
 you answer his phone?

DERBY. Is there a written questionnaire, perhaps, which you could pick up in a month or two?

MARY. I'm serious, I live next door and there's all this yellin', but when I call to complain, the phone rings forever, but you're there ... or here. Who are you and what's goin' on?

DERBY (*beat, to look at her closely for the first time*). Why are you dressed as Pan?

MARY. Who?

DERBY. The Greek God of pastures and flocks.

MARY. I was doing yoga, answer my question.

DERBY. Derby Walters. I'm housesitting for Jeffrey while he's in France.

MARY. Derby?

DERBY. Assume my parents were fond of hats. Are we done?

MARY. Derby, Derby, oh yeah, I'm on the board, we approved Jeffrey's housesitting application about three months ago, I forgot.

DERBY. Thank you in retrospect and good ni—

MARY (*still holding the door*). But why not answer the phone?

DERBY. Obviously, I didn't want to speak with anyone and no one I know has this number.

MARY. So send it to Jeffrey's VM.

DERBY. VM?

MARY (*beat, incredulous*). VM ... voicemail.

DERBY. Of course, abbreviate whenever possible ... Jeffrey must have turned it off so I could record my own message. I'll rectify the oversight as soon as you go away.

MARY. Brilliant, but one more thing. Who were you yellin' at?

DERBY. Whom.

MARY. What?

DERBY. Not what, *whom*. At *whom* was I yelling.

MARY. I asked you first. (*Beat as he looks at her blankly*.) It's a joke.

DERBY. I wasn't yelling at anyone, Ms. ...

MARY. Scunzio.

DERBY. I was reciting poetry, Ms. Scunzio. I shall try to do so more quietly.

MARY. Why?

DERBY. Why? Based on your choice of the word “yelling” I would think that’s obvi—

MARY. No, I mean why are you reciting poetry?

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, I’m pressed for time, so ...

MARY. Right, sorry, try to keep the noise down ... bye.

(As they both close their doors from the inside, they pause to stare at the wall that separates their two apartments. Lights dim.)

Scene 2

(The next evening at about the same time. Same setting ... lights come up on DERBY’s apartment. MARY has just called DERBY’s landline, but she is calling from an offstage phone. He’s reading, making notes, as the phone rings once and the VM picks up.)

DERBY *(recorded VM greeting)*. Speak. *(Followed quickly by a beep, indicating it’s time for the caller to start talking.)*

MARY *(offstage—she is not seen to facilitate costume change)*. Hi, Mr. Walters, this is Scunzio again ... Mr. Walters? ... You there? *(Short pause followed by end of message beep.)* Wha? ... that’s your message, “Speak?” *(She ends the call.)* You can NOT be serious!

(The same activity again—it answers.)

DERBY *(recorded VM greeting)*. Speak. *(Beep.)*

MARY *(offstage)*. Walters, Scunzio.

(DERBY then picks up the phone—MARY assumes she’s still talking to the recording.)

MARY *(cont’d)*. Googled your name, ordered your book ... spoke.

(He hesitates, and she hangs up before he can respond. Lights down on MARY’s apartment as DERBY searches his boxes for a copy of that first and only book. He finds it and handles it with nostalgic love. He paces the floor with it in hand and finally sits beneath the reading lamp and begins to tear up as he reads slowly and silently. Lights out.)

Scene 3

(Early evening, ten days later. In the hallway, lights down on the apartments. MARY, dressed elegantly, with a coat over her arm and an envelope in one hand, closes her apartment door and then stoops to push the envelope under DERBY's door. She is walking toward the elevator as DERBY opens the door with the envelope in hand.)

DERBY. Ahh, the inquisitive Ms. Scunzio. What's this?

MARY. Didn't call, wanted to give you time to get your message down to less than five letters.

DERBY. Fewer than five letters. *(Holding the note in the air, he continues to stare at her.)*

MARY *(short beat, shaking her head and staring in disbelief, then turning away toward the elevator)*. I read your book, and I wanted to be sure you knew.

DERBY. That makes an even dozen of you.

MARY *(turns back to him for a moment)*. From what I read, there were a helluva lot more than that, anyway, I liked it.

DERBY *(beat)*. Thank you. *(Beat)* You look stunning, by the way, but I'm sure you know that as well as I.

MARY. I'm being feted tonight, stunning is required.

DERBY. How do you spell that?

MARY. Spell what?

DERBY. "I'm being F-E-T-I-D," or "I'm ... "

MARY *(laughing as she turns to walk toward the elevator)*. Feted, as in honored, but it's an award for copywriting, so maybe you can use both. Good night, Mr. Walters, and stop staring at my ass.

DERBY *(as she gets into the elevator and the door closes)*. I'm NOT staring at your ...

(Lights dim.)

Scene 4

(That night, several hours later, same hallway. MARY is returning from the awards dinner a little drunk, but far less than she pretends to be. She is holding two small, oddly shaped statuettes in one hand and struggling with the door key in the other. DERBY returns from having taken the recycling down the hall opposite the elevator.)

MARY (*giggling while she fumbles with the key*). Ahhhh, if it isn't his belligerrrrency ... free of reci-all-a-bulls. (*DERBY ignores her and opens the door to his apartment.*) I read your second book too.

DERBY. There was no second book.

MARY (*puts her key in the door but doesn't open it*). Why not?

DERBY. What?

MARY. Why no book two, too?

DERBY. I thought you said you ...

MARY. It was a ruuuuse.

(As DERBY starts to enter his apartment, she rushes over and pushes him slightly back into the hall so that she can close his door. Balancing one hand on the door sill, she raises one foot in front of him.)

DERBY. What are you doing?

MARY. I'm about to rest my scrunched feet and thus bare my sole. (*She takes off that shoe and hangs it on a statuette.*) Lemme introduce my toes, the Longfellows. Ummmm, that's better.

(She starts to giggle and slides to a sitting position on the floor, leaning against his door. DERBY grabs the knob and opens the door. Her weight pushes it quickly open and she falls onto her back, her upper body and head on his floor, her legs in the hall.)

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, your behavior is outrageous.

MARY. I'm not *prone* to argue.

DERBY. I would like you to leave my apartment this instant.

MARY. Well, first of all, nothin's gonna happen "this instant." It'll take a buncha in-stants just for my brain to grab the attensshun of my appendixes ... appen-da-ges.

DERBY (*turns her key and opens her door*). Please get up and go home.

MARY (*struggles to her feet*). And next of all, this ain't *your* apartment, it's Jeffrey's, and he wouldn't ask me to leave. He'd invite me in and hope I was drunk enough for 'im to make a pass.

DERBY. Jeffrey is gay.

MARY. Yeah, well, I know that. I just mean he wouldn't be such a jerk.

DERBY (*tries to move her out of the way*). How tender, now ...

MARY. HOLD ON! I've got one more thing to say! (*Pause.*) Do you know what I do?

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, I ...

MARY. I'm the senior copywriting exec for the biggest goddamned ad agency in the city, and probably made more money last week than you made all last year.

DERBY. I'm sure that's true ... (*He tries again to guide her out.*)

MARY. BUT! ... Listen, LISTEN to me, (*A pause to gather herself, she recites from memory.*)

“She's eggshell frail.

She weighs no more than gathered autumn leaves ...”

BUT, I said, a year from now, nobody's gonna remember anything I wrote, but those two lines from one of your poems are stuck in my head now, because doors opened, pictures ...

DERBY. What should that mean to me?

MARY. That, that, I don't know, it means somethin'.

DERBY. It means, it means nothing, I'm not writing for you, Ms. Scunzio, I'm writing only for me.

MARY. Mary.

DERBY. What?

MARY. Either it's my first name, Sherlock, or I'm gettin' the jump on Christmas.

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, why are you doing this?

MARY. Doing what?

DERBY. Sarcastically patronizing me. Are you hoping to impress your not-for-profit advisory board friends by sharing quips with a real poet. Ms. Scunzio, I have things to do.

MARY. Wait! Wait, that's not fair.

DERBY. Not fair to whom?

MARY. To whom, jeez, not fair to meem, that's whom. I didn't mean any of what you said. I loved what happened when I read that poem, that's all, and maybe I didn't say it the way I wanted, and I'm sorry you took it that way, but it's not as if your side of this was civilized.

DERBY. While drunk, you block the door to my apartment with your body, and I'm uncivilized?

MARY (*beat*). Well, there is *that*, but goddamn it, Derby, gimme a break! I'm trying to tell you about this very personal stuff, and you talk to me like I just delivered the wrong take-out order.

DERBY. A perfect metaphor! You brought your very personal things to the wrong door. I don't need any more than I already have.

MARY. Derby!

DERBY. Ms. Scunzio, please.

MARY. All right, all right, here's the truth. I bought your out-of-print marvel in hard copy 'cause Google said it was a big deal when it came out, and I thought it'd look cool on my coffee table and make me sound *cultured* to drop your name in a client meeting and then throw in a coupla lines or whatever to make it seem like you and I talk about this stuff over glasses of a French Burgundy. (*DERBY seems about to talk.*) Shut up, Derby, or go inside if you want. This is as honest as I've been in a while, and it feels good, so I'm not stopping till I finish this little speech, even if I end up giving it to your goddamned door. So I read the blurbs on the back and the first poem, so that I'd have somethin' to quote, and then the next one, and the next, and then the whole damn book, and then I read it again. I didn't get all of it, but something happened to me anyway because of the sound of the words or a phrase called up something in my memory. When I read "she's eggshell frail, she weighs no more than gathered autumn leaves," I saw me as a little girl raking leaves with my dad and jumping on the pile, but it was layered over my grandmother's last year, when she was so bent over she could hardly see me and she sobbed every time I hugged her little curved body because she had so little time left, and I could feel every bone of her spine through her clothes. I cry every time I read that poem. It pisses me off. You shouldn't be allowed to write another book if you don't give a shit that you can do that to people you don't even know.

DERBY. Is there a reason why you're telling me this now?

MARY (*beat as she begins a stream of consciousness*). Because I just came from this award dinner, where I won two of these, (*Holding up the two statuettes.*) one for the copy in an ad that sold potato chips, and the other one for a cheap vodka that's gonna convince twenty-

five year olds they'll sound sophisticated saying the name, and while I'm repeating the lines from your poem in my head, the tears well up as they call my name, and I gotta go up on stage and say something, and they think I'm crying because of the award, so everybody's applauding and going "awwwww," and I want to scream. I want to quote the lines from your poem and say, "*Listen! Listen to these words*" ... (*Beat as she stares at him.*) It's all just bouncing off, isn't it? You ordered *foie gras* and I showed up with pizza.

DERBY. "Matches struck unexpectedly in the dark."

MARY. What?

DERBY. From a Virginia Woolf novel. The poems, for you, were "*matches, struck unexpectedly in the dark.*"

MARY (*a flash of recognition*). Yes, yes, exactly.

(*DERBY turns to go in.*)

MARY (*cont'd*). That's it? I just spilled my guts out here on the floor and you walk away?

DERBY (*more reflective, withdrawn*). Am I somehow responsible?

MARY. Unless somebody forced you to publish these things, yeah, you are.

DERBY. How?

MARY. By completing some kinda circle. You put *you* into the words and sent them out there in a book, and I read 'em and put *me* into 'em and came away with *somma you and somma me*, and you had to know that, maybe had to want that to happen when you put them in a book, you can't pretend something else.

DERBY (*long beat as he realizes she has opened a wound*). I, I can't do this right now.

(*DERBY exits quickly into his apartment, closing the door.*)

Lights dim.)

Scene 5

(*MARY's apartment. Same night, a little later. MARY's phone rings several times offstage. She answers it offstage to facilitate costume change.*)

MARY (*offstage*). It's not a good time, Mother. (*Beat.*) That isn't true, there are times I'd welcome a call from you.

(MARY enters in a robe, holding the phone. She is also holding a roll of toilet paper slipped over one end of an award statuette, as if trying to determine a use for it. She places the base of the award against a wall, as though seeing how it would look as a bathroom fixture. On and off during the conversation, she continues to play with at least one of the statuettes—she has a shelf full of them. She walks to a side table where she pours a martini and tries stirring the drink with the inverted end of the statuette.)

MARY (*cont'd*). If there's an emergency, like if one of your slave-driven interns found your casket in the daytime and drove a wooden stake through your heart ... I'm in advertising ... I have to exaggerate, it's a law, you have to sign something ... I don't know ... you always seem to call when I'm pissed about somethin'.

(She goes to a cupboard and pulls out a new jar of olives, which she tries to open but cannot.)

MARY (*cont'd*). I am no more often pissed than the average affluent-but-unfulfilled, independent-but-alone, lustful-but-bored-by-most-men woman in this city.

(Bangs the edge of the jar with the statuette until the top loosens and then leaves it on the counter to pace.)

MARY (*cont'd*). No, I won't try to diagram that sentence ... this guy next door ... no Jeffrey's in France for three months ... this guy's housesitting ... his name's Derby, of all things, and, long story short, I talked to 'im for a few minutes, then Googled him later because he looked like a bum, but he has this old-money kinda name and Jeffrey's pretty fussy about his place ... found out about this one famous, out-of-print poetry book he wrote forever ago ... what? ... Derby Walters? ... Yeah, that's his name ... tell me you don't know him ... because it would piss me off ... I don't know why, but it would ... probably Freudian or Oedipusian or something, but whatever, it's definitely your

fault ... anyway, I ordered his one book online ... yes, Mom, I read a book of poetry ... so I told him how much the words stuck with me, unlike the shit I get paid to write all day, and he acts like I just stole his Sunday paper ... maybe I used a sledgehammer ... I like sledgehammers. What? ... But he's written one book in his fifty years, and that was a long time ago ... he's mid-forties? Are you sure? ... Anyway, he still hasn't written anything in years ... maybe he doesn't have anything else to say ... so his wife died ... it's been ten years ... people get over that kind of ... murdered? ... Jeez ... if I had known all that when I talked to him ... well, who do you think I learned my sledgehammer technique from? ... All right, from *whom* do you think ... I'm in advertising, "Whom" alienates the demographic ... by the way, why'd you call? ... Oh, I'm fine, and you? ... Great ... oh, yeah, the dinner ... I won two little fuckers.

(She goes back to the kitchen sink, where she tosses the remainder of her drink, then rinses the glass and dries it with a small cloth towel, which she tries draping over the statuette.)

MARY (*cont'd*). No, that *is* what they're called. It's in honor of what we copywriters do to the language. OK then, good night ... oh, I almost forgot ... at dawn, don't forget to lock the casket door from the inside ... yes, Mom, I love you too ... bye.

(Lights dim.)

Scene 6

(The next morning, outside of DERBY's apartment. DERBY is returning to his apartment with a cup of coffee in one hand, several books and the newspaper in the other. He is struggling to find his key without putting anything down. ERNIE FRANK passes him and then returns. He is holding some expensive bottled water.)

ERNIE. Mr. Walters? Darby Walters?

DERBY (*still struggling for the key*). Derby

ERNIE. I beg your pardon?

DERBY. Derby, my name is Derby Walters, not Darby, but how do you know who I am?