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A PLAY IN ONE ACT

cagebirds

BY
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THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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MCMLXXVI by
DAVID CAMPTON

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(THE CAGEBIRDS)

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THE CAGEBIRDS
A One-Act Play
For Eight Women

CHARACTERS

THE (LONG-TONGUED) GOSSIP
THE (MIRROR-EYED) GAZER
THE (MEDICATED) GLOOM
THE (REGULAR) THUMP
THE (CONSTANT) TWITTING
THE (GREAT) GUZZLER
THE WILD ONE
THE MISTRESS

The action takes place in a room with a single large door.

NOTE:

Although no character is based on a specific bird, they could have bird-like characteristics, particularly in movement. Bird-like appendages could be translated into human terms: there need be no beaks or plumage, but a long beak, for instance, could be indicated by a walking stick, or extravagant plumage by a fan.

Although each bird seems to have its own particular song, the intent behind the words should be made plain. It is possible to say "pass the salt" aggressively, longingly, with passion or fear: so with these speeches, even though the meaning of the scene cuts across the words.

David Campton. . .

The authoritative reference guide to living playwrights **CONTEMPORARY DRAMATISTS** quotes this playwright's comments on his work:

"It seems to me that the chaos affecting everyone today—political, technical, sociological, religious, etc. etc.— is so all pervading that it cannot be ignored, yet so shattering that it can only be approached through comedy."

THE CAGEBIRDS

A room with a large, locked door. Several LADIES sit or stand around the room. This could almost be a committee meeting, except for the fact that each LADY is totally absorbed in her own thoughts. There is a long, long pause. Suddenly THE THUMP, in response to some brooded-upon indignity, says 'Huh!' very loudly. Then she is lost in her thoughts again. Pause. THE GAZER gets out a compact mirror, and looks at herself in it-almost as though she needed urgent reassurance that her face was still there. She touches a curl or smooths an eyebrow, then puts the mirror away again. Pause. THE TWITTING clears her throat as though about to say something, then changes her mind. THE GLOOM puts a hand to her forehead, and sighs. THE GOSSIP has a sudden intake of breath as of someone receiving dire and important news. THE GUZZLE burps. Then there is a pause again. All of which, in entirely human terms, should try to suggest the occasional tweets and shuffles of birds roosting.

GOSSIP: So she said to me...(Slight pause)

GLOOM: Camphorated oil. (Slight pause)

GAZER: Rinse and set.

GUZZLE: With double cream.

THUMP: Disgusting.

TWITTING: I don't know, I'm sure.

THUMP and GAZER: (Speaking together) Ugh! Ah!

GUZZLE, GOSSIP, GLOOM: (Speaking together) Not forgetting the cherry on top. All of which is a matter of

opinion. What else can I expect at my age?

TWITTING: I don't know. I really don't know.

(Pause. THE THUMP gets up; strides to the other side of the room; looks around with mingled suspicion and aggression; then strides back and assumes her original position as though nothing had happened)

GLOOM: (Suddenly, to no one in particular) It's the knee, you know. It locks. Rigid. (She sticks her leg out in front of her to demonstrate) In the most awkward places—where one hesitates to call a boy scout for assistance. Supposing a boy scout happened to be handy. And the chances of one having a first-aid badge are astronomically against. What use is woodcraft when dealing with a locked knee-cap? It's the cap that's responsible, of course. The cap. This. The lining wears. Lubrication helps from time to time. Embrocation. Rubbed in with vigour. But can one ask a boy scout to embrocate with vigour? After the home help refused. "Table legs, yes" was the reply. "Other legs, no." She advised an elastic bandage. "Only the angels know what a comfort my elastic bandage has been," she told me. But when a knee-cap locks, it locks. There's no permanent relief short of amputation. One hesitates to have one's knees removed. There's nothing for the rest of the leg to hang on to without the knee. Who'd sacrifice half a leg to a locked knee-cap? Not that there's much to lose—corns, bunions, ingrowing toe-nails, fallen arches, athlete's foot. Legs are a trouble from one end to the other. Yet one hangs on to them. For sentimental reasons, I suppose. They have supported one. Except when the knee locked. (She subsides, thinking about knee-caps)

TWITTING: You'll have to put me down among the "don't knows".

THUMP: Organization. That's what's lacking. I'll organize 'em.

(THE GUZZLE and THE GAZER appear to converse with each other. In ping-pong dialogue one makes a statement and the other seems to respond to it. It just happens that they are talking about different subjects)

GUZZLE: Gravy is most important.

GAZER: Oh, indeed. Never back-brush too hard.

GUZZLE: Dark brown and smooth it should be.

GAZER: That's what I tell them. There's no point in spending a small fortune on a permanent if you brush it all out again.

GUZZLE: Exactly. How can bumps get into the gravy? Criminal carelessness.

GAZER: Not that I expect a permanent to be too permanent.

GUZZLE: No, indeed. There's no excuse for lumps.

GAZER: This year's fashion is next year's old hat. But I have such fine hair.

GUZZLE: Even in times of economic stress my gravy was exemplary.

GAZER: Mine is like spun gossamer.

GUZZLE: Speaking as a consumer.

GAZER: Bobby pins tomorrow.

GUZZLE: A gravy user.

GAZER: With gossamer.

GUZZLE: Gravy.

GAZER: What there is of it.

TWITTING: I was never given to opinions.

(THE THUMP rises and strikes an attitude as though about to deliver an important announcement, then changes her mind, and sinks down again. THE GOS-SIP stands)

GOSSIP: No use coming to me with your tales, I told her. I'm not one of your lines of communication. I really don't know where she gets it all. Though I've seen her myself with an ear to the bedroom wall. Don't ask me how, because I've never been one to divulge a source of information. A secret with me is as safe as the graveyard. Not like some people we know. We've seen their telescopes, haven't we? And their periscopes. To say nothing of gyroscopes, microscopes, and thermometers. We know who conveys those tasty titbits from keyhole to keyhole. Don't look at me. I'm not one of your talkers. You won't catch me hanging round the cooked-meat counter. I keep myself to myself—which is the

safest place when all's said and done. Honi soit qui mal y pense. You've heard that one, haven't you? Of course you have. I'm always coming out with it. It's from the French. Not that I'm given to the French. Not like someone we all know. It's in her blood. You don't have to take my word for it; you can see by the way she carries on. Oh, I could tell you a tale or two. (She returns to her place)

TWITTING: Don't ask me. Please.

(THE MISTRESS'S voice is heard off. Ideally this would be an amplified whisper)

MISTRESS: (Off) Sweeties. Sweeties, sweeties, sweeties.

(THE LADIES look at each other, then immediately try to appear as though they had not)

(Off) Where are my sweeties? (THE LADIES get up and move rapidly, but aimlessly—talking, but never listening)

GUZZLE: Surely it must be tea-time. Where are the muffins and crumpets? Where are the toasted tea-cakes? Where is the thin-cut bread and butter? Where is the tea?

GLOOM: Warm wrapping. That's the only answer. Lagging, if you look at it from the plumber's point of view. Why should we cosset our pipes, but neglect our torsos? Medicated wool is the answer. Yards of it.

GAZER: I've been experimenting with underwater shades—pearl, coral, and anemone. Youthful tints. Far too youthful to be left to mere youth. Pearl, and coral, and sea something. Has anyone noticed?

GOSSIP: Only one leg. That's a fact. I heard it myself. That makes you think, doesn't it? Someone has some explaining to do if you ask me. All those years and only one leg.

THUMP: The rot must be stopped. That's what a dentist does with a decaying tooth. He stops it. This is a decaying society. It must be stopped before the rot spreads.

TWITTING: This is all so unsettling. Nothing stays the same for more than two seconds running. Even the barometer goes up and down like clockwork. How can one trust in anything when everything is always changing?

(Pause. There is the amplified sound of a key being turned in a lock. THE LADIES move about and talk even faster)

GUZZLE: Tea-cakes. Tea-cakes. Tea-cakes. Cream buns and puffpaste. Tea. Tea. Tea.

GLOOM: Warm. Warmer. Warmest. Wrap up. Avoid draughts. Keep warm. Warmer. Warmest.

GAZER: Beautiful for ever. Health and beauty. Home and beauty. Sleep. Beauty. Sleep.

GOSSIP: No. No. Not a word. Listen to this. Did you ever? No, no.

THUMP: Stop. Stop. Stop. Down with it. Out with it. Away with it. Stop. Stop. Stop.

TWITTING: Not again. Oh, not again. This is too much. Much too much. Not again.

(The door is opened. Everyone stands very still, very quiet. THE MISTRESS stands in the doorway. She is a smiling and benign, but authoritative person, older than the LADIES, and, if possible, taller than any of them)

MISTRESS: Here are my sweeties. (She shuts the door behind her and advances into the room) How are my sweeties? (THE LADIES move about again, but in turn come up to the MISTRESS)

TWITTERING: It's the uncertainty that bothers me. If only I could be sure about anything. But I'm not. One day I think one way, and the next day I think the opposite.

MISTRESS: That's because you're a permanently floating voter.

TWITTING: Am I? Am I really? Oh, thank you so much.

THUMP: Sex and violence. You've seen it, haven't you? Even in comics. I've made a study of comics. Lurid with lust and bad jokes. It's a problem.

MISTRESS: But in such safe hands.

THUMP: The censor. That's what we need. Bring back the censor.

GLOOM: Have you been inoculated against rabies?

MISTRESS: Against everything.

GLOOM: How wise.

GOSSIP: Have you heard?

MISTRESS: Whisper. (THE GOSSIP does so)

MISTRESS: Incredible.

GOSSIP: Nothing but the truth.

GAZER: Have you noticed?

MISTRESS: Beautiful.

GAZER: I think so, too.

MISTRESS: And I have something for my pet Guzzle. (She hands GUZZLE a macaroon)

GUZZLE: A macaroon? I was just thinking about a macaroon. I shall keep it always to remind me of you. (She eats it)

(THE MISTRESS claps her hands. THE LADIES react with gasps, squeaks, and snorts according to their nature)

MISTRESS: Listen. (THE LADIES listen) You have a new playmate. You will be kind to her, won't you?

GAZER: It's this light. Not the kindest to my complexion.

MISTRESS: I know you will. You'll have to be specially understanding because she is a Wild One. Her little ways may not be your little ways. But I know you'll be understanding.

GLOOM: I wonder if it isn't all in the mind.

MISTRESS: Remember when I first introduced our little Twitting.

TWITTING: I would if I could, but...

MISTRESS: You made her at home almost at once.

GUZZLE: Why is it impossible to get old-fashioned tripe and onions?

MISTRESS: So I know you'll all do your best for our Wild One.

GOSSIP: I've heard. I'm passing nothing on, you understand. But I've heard.

MISTRESS: I know, my sweeties. Just a minute while I fetch your new companion. Isn't this exciting?
(THE MISTRESS goes out, shutting the door after her)

THUMP: Wild? Wild? The magistrates aren't severe enough. Let off with a caution instead of a cat.

GUZZLE: Wild things are oppressively expensive. Rice. Strawberries. Because they are luxuries. Are they luxuries because they're expensive, or are they expensive because they're luxuries?

MISTRESS: (Off) This way, my sweet.

THUMP: Wild.

GUZZLE: Rice.

GOSSIP: Paper.

GAZER: Hat.

GLOOM: Stand.

TWITTING: Aside.

(The door opens and THE MISTRESS ushers in THE WILD ONE. THE WILD ONE is possibly a little younger than the others. What really distinguishes her from them, though, is her attitude. She is receptive to what is going on around her)

WILD ONE: So this is my prison.

MISTRESS: Your home.

WILD ONE: My cage.

MISTRESS: We don't use that word. Look, everyone. Here is your new friend.

(THE LADIES want to turn and look at the newcomer, but this is not done. They steal little sidelong glances, and then pretend that they have not. They continue to suffer from curiosity, and to fall for temptation)
You'll be happy here.

WILD ONE: Is that an order?

MISTRESS: I know you'll be happy here.

WILD ONE: I was happy there.

MISTRESS: You would have died. You have enemies out there—predators whose first impulse is to tear you to pieces.

WILD ONE: And what happens to me here?

MISTRESS: You'll be looked after. Protected. I'm your friend.

WILD ONE: First rule for any prisoner: make sure the gaoler is a friend.

MISTRESS: Please don't be unhappy.

WILD ONE: Are these happy?

MISTRESS: They are contented.

WILD ONE: A different word. For locks read apathy, for bolts resignation; and the bars are called contentment. I warned you—I shall escape.

MISTRESS: And I warned you. Your choice of life or death. Do be a sensible creature. You'll soon settle down. Won't she, my sweeties? All so cosy.

WILD ONE: I won't call you mistress.