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UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE



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from the book by BEL KAUFMAN



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"Full-length Comedy"

BEL KAUFMAN'S

Up the Down Staircase

DRAMATIZED BY

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(UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE)

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UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE

A Full-Length Comedy

For Twelve Men and Eighteen Women

CHARACTERS

DR. MAXWELL CLARKE . . . *High School principal*

SYLVIA BARRETT
BEATRICE SCHACHTER
PAUL BARRINGER

} . . . *members of the
faculty*

J. J. MC HABA
ELLA FRIEDENBERG
FRANCES EGAN
CHARLOTTE WOLF
SAMUEL BESTER

} . . . *members of the
school staff*

SADIE FINCH
LOU MARTIN
LENNIE NEUMARK
CAROLE BLANCA
ALICE BLAKE
VIVIAN PAINE
RUSTY O'BRIEN
LINDA ROSEN
JOSE RODRIGUEZ
CARRIE BLAINE
HARRY KAGAN
JILL NORRIS
RACHEL GORDON
ELIZABETH ELLIS
CHARLES ARRONS
EDWARD WILLIAMS
JOE FERONE

} *students in
Room 304*

HELEN ARBUZZI
FRANCINE GARDNER
KATHERINE WOLZOW

} *other students*

ELLEN *Sylvia's friend*

PLACE: Calvin Coolidge High School, New York City.
TIME: The present.

"And gladly wolde he lerne,
and gladly teche."

Chaucer's
Clerke of Oxenford

ACT ONE

SCENE: The stage is divided into several sections which provide several playing areas. The set stands throughout the play. There is no need for shifting scenery and accordingly the play can move quickly without technical complications or delays.

While it's easier to understand the set from the diagram, a description follows:

There is a divider or wall-section coming from the back part of the stage toward the front. It is about one-quarter of the way in from the left and it has a door in it or at least an opening that can suggest a door.

Between the divider and the right side of the stage is the main playing area, Classroom 304 of Calvin Coolidge High School. At R are a desk and chair for the teacher; and URC, facing the audience, is her blackboard. The remainder of this area is taken up by student desk-chairs, or small chairs with desks. There should be twelve --four fewer than the number of students, the point being to suggest an overcrowded classroom.

The final feature of this set is one that makes the fast pace of the play possible, and it adds

both fun and excitement to the show. Then, too, it offers an opportunity for the director and cast to use their own imagination in arranging this part of the set. Basically it's a raised platform running across from R to L at the back of the stage. The front of this platform has a series of cut-outs of various sizes and arrangements behind which actors can remain concealed from the audience, and then appear by raising their heads or standing up. (This part of the set can be made even more interesting by having some small doorways which can be swung open by the actor behind, the line delivered, and the door closed. There can also be holes in the cut-outs large enough for an actor to put his head through.)

The cut-outs at the far R and far L sides of the raised platform will later be labeled "Suggestion Box." They are at the two sides to make it easy for a number of actors to get to them easily for a series of quick "suggestions." If there is room enough backstage, there can also be access to the platform by steps directly behind it.

The fronts of the cut-outs may be decorated as desired by the cast and the director. Probably bright colors should be used and there may be a number of things written on them such as "Hi, Teach!" - "Let it be a challenge" - "Please Do Not Erase" - "A for Effort" and so forth as desired.

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: Light comes up with its emphasis on the classroom section of the stage.

SYLVIA BARRETT, an attractive and sensitive

young teacher about to teach her first class, comes on L and enters the classroom. She's carrying a load of material, but at the moment it seems light, for she's so happy to be here. She crosses to the desk, puts down her load, and then looks about, a bit uncertain, but also eager and optimistic.

During the above, DR. MAXWELL CLARKE, the principal of Calvin Coolidge High, stands up from behind the center cut-out on the upper level. His head and shoulders should be visible and perhaps he picks up a hand microphone, suggesting that he's using a P. A. system--though an actual P. A. system should not be used.

SYLVIA pays only casual attention to DR. CLARKE's speech, as she arranges her materials on the desk.

DR. CLARKE (speaking in an "official" tone). Attention, please. This is your principal, Dr. Maxwell Clarke. I wish to take this opportunity on the first morning of the first day of school to extend a warm welcome to all faculty and staff, and the sincere hope that you have returned from a healthful and fruitful summer vacation with renewed vim and vigor ready to gird your loins and tackle the many important and vital tasks that lie ahead--undaunted. Thank you for your help and cooperation in the past and future.

(As he's talking, BEATRICE SCHACHTER, another attractive but older and more experienced teacher, comes in L.)

BEA (nodding toward sound). The same message every September. I'm Bea Schachter----
(Points up.) I have room 508.

SYLVIA. Sylvia Barrett. (Nods toward sound.)
First time for me.

BEA. Our Dr. Clarke always gives us his pearls in pairs--aims and goals, guide and inspire, help and encourage, new horizons and broader vistas.

SYLVIA (excited; confiding). I'm about to teach my first class.

BEA. First ever? (SYLVIA nods.) You're prepared?

SYLVIA (diffidently). I thought I might begin with First Impressions: importance of appearance, manners, speech--on which I'll build a case for good diction, correct usage, fluent self-expression. From there it's just a step----

BEA (a smiling interruption). You're sure you've come to the right school?

SYLVIA (puzzled). Calvin Coolidge. Room 304.

BEA (concerned). When I said prepared----

SYLVIA (quickly). I majored in Middle English literature. Two courses in Philosophy of Education. My master's thesis was on Chaucer.

BEA (not letting herself laugh; cheerfully). Well, good luck, Sylvia. If you need help, just holler. (Points.) I'm right up there. (She's starting off L.)

SYLVIA. Thanks, but----

BEA (has paused at door L). Better you'd studied karate!

(SYLVIA looks after her a bit concerned before deciding it was a joke. She smiles and crosses to the blackboard. She picks up a piece of chalk and takes a breath. This is a lovely moment in

her life and in a bold hand she writes on the blackboard, "Miss Barrett." As she finishes, STUDENTS start pouring in through the classroom door L. Their individual characteristics, described in "Notes on Characters and Costumes," will become more evident later. At the moment they're a confused mass, coming into their first class on the first day of school. They're noisy, exuberant, tending to talk over each other, asking questions without waiting for the reply. It's important to remember, however, that in addition to first-day excitement, there's also a strong element of testing the new teacher.)

LOU MARTIN (calling cheerfully as he comes in).

Hi, teach.

LENNIE NEUMARK. Looka her! She's a teacher?

CAROLE BLANCA. Is this room 304? Are you Mr. Barringer?

SYLVIA. No, I'm Miss Barrett.

ALICE BLAKE. I'm supposed to have Mr. Barringer.

VIVIAN PAINE. You the teacher? You so young.

LENNIE. She's cute! Hey, teach, can I be in your class?

SYLVIA. Please don't block the doorway. Please come in.

CAROLE. Good afternoon, Miss Barnett.

SYLVIA. Miss Barrett. My name is on the blackboard. Good morning.

RUSTY O'BRIEN. Oh, no! A dame for home room?

LOU MARTIN. You want I should slug him, teach?

LINDA ROSEN. Is this home room period?

SYLVIA. Yes. Sit down, please.

LINDA. I'm not sure I belong here.

(JOSE RODRIGUEZ comes in shyly and edges over

to the far corner.)

CARRIE BLAINE. We gonna have you all term?

Are you a regular or a sub?

HARRY KAGAN (pompously). There's an insufficiency of chairs!

SYLVIA. Take any seat at all.

JILL NORRIS. Is this room 309?

LOU. Someone swiped the pass. Can I have a pass?
(Dying of thirst.) I gotta get a drink of water!

RACHEL GORDON. What's your name?

SYLVIA. My name is on the board.

RACHEL. I can't read your writing.

LOU (in mock agony). I'm dying!

LENNIE. Don't believe him, teach. He ain't dying.

HARRY. Stop your inconsideration of the teacher,
you bums.

RUSTY. Can we sit on the radiator? That's what
we did last term.

LENNIE. Pipe down, you morons. The teacher's
trying to say something.

SYLVIA. Please sit down. I'd like to----

ELIZABETH ELLIS. Will you be teaching *avant-*
garde creative writing? (A bell rings.)

SYLVIA (about to answer ELIZABETH but interrupted by bell). That bell is your signal to
come to order. Will you please----

LENNIE. When do we go home?

CARRIE. The first day of school and he wants to
go home already.

LINDA. Maybe this is the wrong room. What room
is this?

SYLVIA. This is room 304. My name is on the
board. Miss Barrett. I'll have you for home
room all term, and I hope to meet some of you
in my English classes. Now, someone said that
first impressions----

JILL. English! No wonder!

RACHEL. Who needs it?

LINDA (suspiciously). You give homework?

SYLVIA. First impressions, they say, are lasting.
What do we base our first----

(Stops as she sees a girl, FRANCINE GARDNER, who approaches her with a slip of paper.
FRANCINE is bored, looking about indifferently.)

SYLVIA. Yes?

FRAN. Mr. McHabe wants Ferone right away.

SYLVIA. Whom does he want?

FRAN. Joe Ferone.

SYLVIA. Is Joe Ferone here?

LENNIE. Him? That's a laugh!

RUSTY. He'll show up when he feels like it. (FRAN exits L.)

SYLVIA. I see. Now. We all know that first impressions---- Yes?

(HELEN ARBUZZI is standing in the door L.)

HELEN. Is this 304?

SYLVIA. Yes. You're late.

HELEN. I'm not late, I'm absent. I was absent all last term.

SYLVIA. Please sit down. (Noting lack of chairs.)
I mean--stand up. (Points to back of room.)

HELEN. I can't. I'm dropping out. You're supposed to sign my Book Clearance from last term.

SYLVIA. Do you owe any books?

HELEN (handing her paper; impatiently). I'm not on the blacklist. That's a yellow slip. This is a green! (SYLVIA signs, and HELEN exits

L.)

LOU (during above). Isn't the pass back yet?

LENNIE. Don't you ever give up?

SYLVIA. I'm afraid we won't have time for the discussion on first impressions. I'm passing out----

LOU (shouting; mock alarm). Hey, she's passing out! Give her air.

SYLVIA (handing out cards). I'm passing out attendance cards. Print in ink your last name first, your parents' names, your date of birth, my name--it's on the board--and the same upside down. Then I'll make out the seating plan. Any questions? (The following is almost simultaneous.)

RACHEL. In ink or pencil?

RUSTY. I got no ink--can I use a pencil? Who's got a pencil to loan me?

LOU. I don't remember when I was born.

LENNIE. Don't mind him--he's a comic.

JILL. Print or write?

CARRIE. When do we go to lunch?

LOU. I can't write upside down.

LENNIE. Ha-ha. He kills me laughing.

CAROLE. What do you need my address for? My father can't come.

RUSTY. Someone robbed my ball point!

JOSE (shyly). I don't know my address.

SYLVIA. You don't?

JOSE (with difficulty). We're moving.

SYLVIA. Where are you moving?

JOSE. I don't know where.

SYLVIA. Where do you live?

JOSE. I don't live no place.

SYLVIA (automatically). Any place.

JILL (hand raised). Teach--there's chewing gum on my seat!

RACHEL. First name last or last name first?

LOU. I gotta have a pass to the Men's Room. I know my rights. This is a democracy, ain't it?

SYLVIA. Isn't. (To VIVIAN, in back.) What's your trouble?

VIVIAN. There's broken glass back here--from the window.

SYLVIA. Don't touch the broken window. It should be reported to the custodian. Does anyone----

LENNIE (jumping up). Me. I'll go. That's Mr. Grayson--he's in the basement.

SYLVIA. Tell him it's urgent.

(As LENNIE goes out, another boy, CHARLES ARRONS, hurries in.)

SYLVIA. Who are you?

CHARLES. Sorry I'm late. I was in detention.

SYLVIA. In what?

CHARLES. The Late Room. Where they make you sit to make up your lateness--when you come late.

SYLVIA. Fill out your card, please.

CAROLE. For parents' names, can I use my aunt?

SYLVIA. Put down your mother's name.

CAROLE. I've got no mother.

SYLVIA. Do the best you can.

(FRAN has come back in L.)

SYLVIA (to FRAN). What is it this time?

FRAN (crossing to hand a piece of paper to SYLVIA). Mr. McHabe said you're to read this to your class.

SYLVIA. May I have your attention, please. There's been a change in today's assembly schedule.

Listen carefully. (Getting a bit confused herself as she reads.) "Please ignore previous instructions in circular 3, paragraphs 5 and 6, and follow the following: (Clears throat.) "This morning there will be a long home room period extending into the first half of the second period. All X2 sections are to report to assembly the second half of the second period. First-period classes will begin the fourth period. Second period classes will begin the fifth period. Third period classes will begin in the sixth, and so on, subject classes being shortened to twenty-three minutes, except lunch--(Takes a quick breath.)"--which will be normal."

LOU. I didn't hear. What did you say?

RACHEL. What's today's date?

HARRY. It's September, stupid.

JILL. This is a long home room.

SYLVIA. Please. I'm not finished. (Reading.)

"Tomorrow all Y2 sections will follow today's program for X2 sections, while all X2 sections will follow today's program for Y2 sections."

(FRAN takes announcement and hurries out, as another girl, KATHERINE WOLZOW, comes in. Her manner is impatient.)

CARRIE (whispering). Where do we go?

VIVIAN. What period is this? (LOU and CHARLES are tossing the eraser back and forth.)

SYLVIA. The two boys in the back--stop throwing the board eraser. Please come to order.

KATHERINE. Excuse me. Miss Friedenber-- from Guidance--she wants Joe Ferone right away.

SYLVIA. He isn't here. (KATHERINE exits.) Will

you pass your attendance cards down, please,
while I---

VIVIAN. I didn't start yet. I'm waiting for the pen.

RACHEL (to SYLVIA). How do you spell your
name?

LOU. Hey, he threw the eraser out the window!

SYLVIA. Will you please----

(EDWARD WILLIAMS is entering L. He is black,
sullen, suspicious, not without cause.)

EDWARD (crossing with papers). Here's my ad-
mit. He says I was loitering.

SYLVIA. Who?

EDWARD. McHabe.

SYLVIA. Mr. McHabe.

EDWARD (leaning against wall). Either way.

SYLVIA. Class--please finish your cards while I
call the roll.

(PAUL BARRINGER, a tall and handsome teacher,
is entering L.)

EDWARD. I never got no card.

PAUL (almost automatically). Any card.

SYLVIA (at the same time). Any card. (She looks
at PAUL, startled, inquiring.) You are----?

PAUL. Your fellow teacher, Paul Barringer. I
teach English in 309. (Dropping his voice.)
Sorry to interrupt, but could I borrow your
board eraser?

SYLVIA. Yes--no. I'm afraid it's gone.

ALICE (rising; the beginning of a crush). I could
go get one for you, Mr. Barringer.

PAUL (going). Never mind. (Smiles to SYLVIA.)

Anyway, we've got something in common.

SYLVIA (blankly). What's that?