

# ASYLUM

## By Dennis Bush

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**SYNOPSIS:** Set in a state-run mental institution and, at times, in the minds of the patients, *Asylum* explores the flip side of sanity. We meet a former pop star who continues to live like she's in a music video, a girl who was harmed by her best friend's boyfriend, a young man who does operations on stuffed animals and himself, a woman who believes she's in the 11th month of a pregnancy, a dessert-obsessed man with a Barbie voodoo doll, a lost boy who just wants to go home, and others. Through a tapestry of monologues that range from off-the-wall to terrifying, the characters search for their refuge, their shelter, their sanctuary...their home.

**DURATION:** 45 minutes.

**SETTING:** A state-run mental health facility and, at times, in the minds of the patients.

**TIME:** Now.

### CAST OF CHARACTERS

*(5 female, 3 male)*

TRACY (f).....	23; former pop music star <i>(16 lines)</i>
KEVIN (m).....	20; dessert-obsessed; is distrustful of nursing staff <i>(22 lines)</i>
DINAH (f).....	21; was raped by her best friend's boyfriend <i>(23 lines)</i>
GEOFFREY (m).....	18; extremely bright; fascinated by how things work <i>(14 lines)</i>
JANINE (f).....	22; believes she is in the 11th month of a pregnancy <i>(21 lines)</i>
LAURIE (f).....	21; was driving the car, when an accident killed two of her friends and an acquaintance <i>(16 lines)</i>
AUGUST (f).....	20, named for the month in which she was conceived; agoraphobic <i>(24 lines)</i>
TIM (m).....	17; a lost boy, in more ways than one <i>(11 lines)</i>

**CASTING NOTE:** With the exception of TIM, the characters' ages are fairly flexible. If younger actors are performing the play, the characters' ages should ideally be close to those listed above. If older actors are cast, the characters' ages should be closer to their ages. In the New York production in May and June, 2007, the characters ages were: Tracy, 27; Kevin, 32; Dinah, 21; Geoffrey, 26; Janine, 35; Laurie, 23; August, 27; Tim, 17.

There is also gender flexibility with some of the characters.

### **PROP LIST**

"Barbie" doll with red hair for Kevin

### **COSTUMES**

ASYLUM may be performed with basic setting and costume elements to suggest the characters. Directors are encouraged to be creative when staging the play.

### **DIRECTOR'S NOTES:**

ASYLUM can be presented with a very simple set. There are no special costume requirements. Directors are encouraged to be creative with casting, role assignments and staging.

## **PRODUCTION HISTORY**

ASYLUM was first performed in January 2007. The original cast included Nadine Lombardi (August), Kelsey Torstveit (Janine), Scott McKown (Kevin), Emily White (Tracy), Alex Knerr (Tim), Macy Cobb (Dinah), Samantha Ortiz (Laurie) and Jared Sikes (Geoffrey). The production was directed by the author.

ASYLUM had its premiere New York production in May and June, 2007. The production was directed by Lester Thomas Shane and the cast included Jenny Wales (Tracy), Krystal Blackman (Dinah), Ricky Johnston (Kevin), Tommy Buck (Geoffrey), Kiki Bertocci (Janine), Kathryn Procko (Laurie), Natalie Johnson (August) and Randy Blair (Tim). Understudies/Director's Assistants were Jean-Pierre Ferragamo and Jennifer Fouché.

The premiere New York production was named one of the Top Ten plays in the Wonderland One-Act Play Festival in New York City and the actors received the festival award for Best Ensemble Cast.

*Updated August 2023*

**AT RISE:** AUGUST, KEVIN, JANINE, GEOFFREY, LAURIE, DINAH and TRACY all begin to speak simultaneously and with equal volume, as TIM sits quietly, crying. While each character speaks with simple clarity and purpose, the overall effect should be a cacophonous babble.

**AUGUST:** My roommate is dead. On Monday night, I heard a thud in her room. It was loud. (*Quick pause.*) A loud thud. I'm not sure what happened. Her door was shut. I didn't open it. I respect her privacy. I was sitting on the sofa when I heard the thud. I asked if anything was wrong. She didn't answer. Not a word. She's quiet, though. (*Quick pause.*) Very shy. So I didn't ask her, again. I didn't want to be a pest. I waited to see if there was another thud. She could have been moving things around in her room and made a thud when a piece of furniture slipped out of her hands. It happens. People drop furniture. It makes a thud. After about five minutes, I heard a voice say, "Help!" – kind of whispered or like it was a strain to say it. It could have been a voice on the TV. I couldn't be sure. (*Insistent.*) Her door was shut. (*More insistent.*) And I wasn't going to open it. (*Even more insistent.*) And I wasn't going to call 9-1-1. I don't make outgoing calls. And I screen incoming calls. I order my food on an app. I get my groceries delivered. They make contactless deliveries. That means no contact. I add a note to the order so they know to knock three times, then, bring the food inside. I tip extra for that. I'm thoughtful. (*Quick beat.*) I run to the bathroom when they knock. I can't be in the living room or kitchen if the front door is open. (*Pause.*) So, I couldn't call 9-1-1. They'd bust down the door. It would be open. (*Quick, horrified pause.*) Wide open. The 9-1-1 people can't be trusted to wait until I get in the bathroom and shut the door before they bust the front door open. They can't be trusted. They like to ride around with their lights flashing and the siren going. People like that can't be trusted for a minute. And, anyway, I didn't hear anyone say, "Help," again. So, I didn't have to worry about calling anybody.

**KEVIN:** I hate the nurse with the red hair -- the young one who works the day shift. I hate her. She slapped me, yesterday -- backhanded me right across the face. Across the face! All said was, "I don't want to take the damn pill." That was all I said. Really. And she hit me. I almost bit her hand. If I'd have been quicker, I'd have gotten a couple of her fingers in my mouth when she slapped me. Next time, I'll be ready. I'll leave teeth marks on her hand. I've been practicing. It's kind of practicing and kind of an alternative form of revenge. *(He pulls out a red-haired Barbie doll.)* It's a voodoo doll. *(Shows it, then, pauses.)* She used her hand to hurt me, so I'll use the voodoo to hurt her. *(He bites the Barbie's hand.)* In my book about voodoo, it said to use a needle but I can't find any. I had one. I stole it from arts and crafts when we were stringing beads for friendship necklaces. But the nurse found it and took it away. *(Quick pause, to clarify.)* Not the nurse with the red hair. The other one. The one who wears too much eye shadow. I don't like her either. I don't like any of the nurses. I don't. I hate 'em. I hate 'em all. *(Quick pause.)* Except the one who gave me the extra cake, last week. I like her. I like her a lot. I like cake. I like cake a lot. I want cake, now. I want cake! *(Shouted.)* CAKE. BAKE. TAKE. *(Quick pause.)* TAKE. CAKE. I want cake! I want cake! I want cake!

**JANINE:** My boss doesn't wash his hands after he uses the restroom. (*Quick pause; firmly.*) That's not speculation. It's a fact. I've had my suspicions about him for a while. (*Quick pause.*) I've suspected. I've presumed. My office is directly across from the men's room. I can hear what goes on in there. I can tell when there's water running. I can hear when someone uses the hand dryer. And my boss never runs water and never uses the hand dryer. And I've never seen him use hand sanitizer. The other day, he came out of the restroom and reached right into the candy jar on my desk. He dug his hands way down into the M&Ms. His unwashed, undried, UNCLEAN hands and he looked at me and said, "Mmmmm." And it wasn't the first time he's done it. He's violated my candy jar too many times to count. And, every time, I throw away the candy. I'm not going to have unclean candy sitting on my desk. That's how it happened, you know. (*Explaining.*) The pregnancy. (*Clarifying.*) Not from the unclean candy. No. It was an immaculate conception. He didn't touch me. But he had unclean thoughts about me and I became pregnant. Eleven months ago. That's when it happened. I've been carrying the baby eleven months. It's due any day, now. Eleven months is a long time to be pregnant. Babies are supposed to come out after ten months, you know. Some people will tell you that it's nine months but they lie. They lie about washing their hands and they lie about liking your dress and they lie about how long you're supposed to be pregnant before the baby comes out. It's coming any day, now. (*Pause.*) I hope it's a baby that comes out and not a giant M&M.

**GEOFFREY:** Am I the only person who's disturbed by Ballpark Franks? I don't like the idea of hot dogs that plump when I cook 'em. I don't want any food that plumps. What's to keep it from continuing to plump after you eat it? If they put a chemical inside the plumping food to make it plump, does it get deactivated by saliva? Or stomach acid? When does it deflate? There has to be something that makes it un-plump, or else everyone who'd ever eaten a Ballpark Frank would be walking around like a balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. And, eventually, our skin would snap and all the stuffing would fly out all over the place, like when you pop a zit and it spatters on the mirror. Stuffing is interesting. It's fascinating. Stuffed chicken breasts... pasta shells stuffed with cheese... flounder stuffed with crab meat... stuffed mushrooms... stuffed animals. I had a stuffed animal that I used to sleep with. (*Quick pause.*) When I was really little. Not recently. Not in years. (*Correction.*) Maybe just one time since I was little, but it's because I'd had a very bad day and I needed some snuggle-love. (*Quick pause.*) Yes, that's a word. Snuggle-love is a word. (*Getting back on track.*) My sister has a bunch of stuffed teddy bears. I think all teddy bears are stuffed. I don't think there are actual bears in the wilderness called teddy bears. I think what makes a teddy bear a teddy bear is that it's a stuffed animal bear. The stuffing was red, so it looked like blood. I thought that was very appropriate. (*Quick pause.*) Wait a minute. I'm getting ahead of myself. See, I always wanted to be a surgeon. I used to do operations on my sister's teddy bears. It was the first one that I cut into, that had the red stuffing. Most of the other ones were brown or light blue. Frankly, all the other colors were a let down – a disappointment – after the red stuffing.



**LAURIE:** We were driving along and everything was fine. I was driving. Carolyn and Marcy – they’re my friends – were with me. Carolyn was in the front seat and Marcy was in the back seat behind me. Marcy’s friend, Michelle was sitting behind Carolyn. We were driving along and talking. We weren’t doing anything crazy. I wasn’t driving recklessly. It was raining, so I was being extra safe. I’m a good driver. I’m a very good driver. So, we were driving along and Carolyn was putting on some lip gloss and Michelle started screaming. “I’m allergic to strawberries!” And Carolyn was like, “It’s lip gloss. It’s strawberry lip gloss. It’s not like I’m smearing strawberries all over my face.” But Michelle kept screaming, “I’m allergic to strawberries. I am ALLERGIC to STRAWBERRIES!” The windshield wipers were going back and forth and Michelle was screaming and Carolyn was trying to calm her down and Marcy was growling. (*Quick pause.*) Growling like a dog. And I was like, “Shut up.” It started raining harder. Michelle was hyperventilating in the back seat. I looked in my rearview mirror to make sure she wasn’t passing out or anything. And we started sliding off the road. (*Explaining.*) The car hydroplaned... Hydro. Plane. It sounds like it oughta be a plane that lands on water. The ones that have pontoons. Pon – toons. Like pons set to music. Pon-TOONS. What was I saying? Pontoons... (*Tracing her through-line backwards.*) Hydroplanes... The car hydroplaned. We hit a telephone pole and spun around. That’s what they said. (*Clarifying.*) The people in the car behind us. I don’t remember what happened. I blacked out. When I woke up, I was laying in a puddle. I was all wet. I don’t like being in wet clothes. They didn’t wake up. Carolyn, Marcy and Michelle. They didn’t wake up. We were all wearing our seat belts, but mine popped open and I flew out of the car. I was ejected. Ejected. I was ejected but they weren’t. They got crushed. Plus, Carolyn got kind of impaled by a mile marker.

**DINAH:** I said, “No.” No, I didn’t want him to take me home. I was tired and I had a headache. That’s all. I wasn’t dizzy or anything. Just a headache. It wasn’t even a migraine. It was just a headache. But he insisted. He was insistent. He wouldn’t take no for an answer. Jason was like that. He always got his way with Melanie. She’s my best friend and Jason’s her boyfriend. It’s usually the girl who can get her way with a guy, but Jason always got his way. He was insistent. He wouldn’t take no for an answer. So, finally, I said, “OK, you can take me home.” He’d been to my apartment a hundred times with Melanie, so he knew the way. But instead of going the way I would have, he went a roundabout kind of way that made no sense. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to get into an argument about who knew the best way to get to my apartment. I had a headache. Nobody wants to get into an argument when they have a headache. And, besides, it’s not a good idea to get into an argument with your best friend’s boyfriend. So, I didn’t say anything. When he pulled into the parking lot at my apartment complex, he said, “I’ll walk you up to your apartment.” I told him he didn’t have to. He said he wanted to be a gentleman. I said, “No... No, thank you. Really. You don’t have to. I don’t need an escort to my apartment. I’m a big girl.” But he insisted. He was insistent. He wouldn’t take no for an answer. So, he opened the car door for me and helped me out of the car like we were on some kind of date and he took my arm and walked me to my apartment. I got my keys out of my purse and he took them out of my hand and started to unlock the door for me. “NO!” I said. “I can do it. I can unlock the door. I don’t need your help.” Before I was finished telling him I could do it myself, he’d unlocked the door and we were inside. (*She begins to cry.*) And he was insistent. He wouldn’t take no for an answer.

**TRACY:** My fans love me. They send me flowers and presents and pictures of themselves and their pets. On my last tour, we sold out stadiums – giant, outdoor stadiums – in ten different cities in less than four hours. It was some kind of Ticketmaster record. And everywhere I go people are always calling my name and photographers are stalking me. I love my fans but I hate the paparazzi. They invade my personal space. A photograph of me in torn sweatpants and a tank top with a mustard stain got sold to one of the tabloids for two million dollars. Think how much good that money could have done for the world. Starving people could have been fed. Sick people could have gotten medication. Children with crooked teeth could have gotten braces. One smile at a time. That's how to change the world. Hundreds of my fans have named their children after me and not just girls. There are dozens of little boys named Tracy running around out there in the world. Another hundred or so have named their pets after me. My fans send me pictures of their pets and on the back they write, "This is my cat Tracy, and she loves you. Tracy loves Tracy." Sometimes they're dogs, not cats. There have even been some birds, hamsters, ferrets, turtles and snakes named Tracy. All those Tracys love Tracy, too. My fans love me. They love me. My fan club has an official website for me and my music and it gets thousands of hits every day. People from all over the world visit my website. I'm not just a star in the United States. I'm an international star. I have fans all over the world. I'm an international star with fans all over the world. And they love me. My fans all over the world love me. They send me flowers and presents and pictures of themselves and their pets. On my last tour, we sold out stadiums – giant, outdoor stadiums – in ten different cities in less than four hours. And everywhere I go, people are always calling my name.

*As AUGUST, KEVIN, JANINE, GEOFFREY, LAURIE, DINAH and TRACY finish speaking simultaneously, the focus shifts to TIM.*

**TIM:** *(Wipes tears away; begins to speak; simply, trying to be clear.)*

I've got to get back... back home... I've got to get back home *(Quick pause.)* If I can just get back home, then, I'll be fine... Everything will be fine... if I can get back home... If I can just get back home... *(His tears resume. Hopeful, through tears.)* Do you know where my house is? *(Quick pause.)* If I tell you my address, can you tell me where my house is? It's green. My house. It's a pink shade of green. And there's a tree in front of it. It's a big tree with blue branches and purple flowers that are kind of orange-colored. I've got to get back... I've got to get back home. *(He is sobbing.)* I have to get back home. Can you help me find my house? Can you please help me find my house? I've got to get back home.

*During the next segment, there is the illusion of conversation and communication, but at no point should any of the characters actually speak to each other. Their thoughts have a connectedness, but the characters are not connecting with each other.*

**KEVIN:** I hate the nurse with the red hair -- the young one who works the day shift. I hate her. She slapped me, yesterday -- backhanded me right across the face. Across the face! All I said was, "I don't want to take the damn pill." That was all I said. Really. And she hit me. I almost bit her hand. If I'd have been quicker, I'd have gotten a couple of her fingers in my mouth when she slapped me. Next time, I'll be ready. I'll leave teeth marks on her hand.

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**JANINE:** And it wasn't the first time he's done it. He's violated my candy jar too many times to count. And, every time, I throw away the candy. I'm not going to have unclean candy sitting on my desk. That's how it happened, you know. (*Explaining.*) The pregnancy. (*Clarifying.*) Not from the unclean candy. No. It was an immaculate conception. He didn't touch me. But he had unclean thoughts about me and I became pregnant. Eleven months ago. That's when it happened.

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**KEVIN:** I've been practicing. It's kind of practicing and kind of an alternative form of revenge. (*He pulls out a red-haired Barbie doll.*) It's a voodoo doll. (*Shows it, then, pauses.*) She used her hand to hurt me, so I'll use the voodoo to hurt her. (*He bites the Barbie's hand.*)

**LAURIE:** The windshield wipers were going back and forth and Michelle was screaming and Carolyn was trying to calm her down and Marcy was growling. (*Quick pause.*) Growling like a dog. And I was like, "Shut up."

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**JANINE:** I've been carrying the baby eleven months. It's due any day, now. Eleven months is a long time to be pregnant. Babies are supposed to come out after ten months, you know. Some people will tell you that it's nine months but they lie. They lie about washing their hands and they lie about liking your dress and they lie about how long you're supposed to be pregnant before the baby comes out.

**LAURIE:** Hydro. Plane. It sounds like it oughta be a plane that lands on water. The ones that have pontoons. Pon – toons. Like pons set to music. Pon-TOONS... What was I saying? Pontoons... (*Tracing her through-line backwards.*) Hydroplanes... The car hydroplaned. We hit a telephone pole and spun around.

**JANINE:** It's coming any day, now. (*Pause.*) I hope it's a baby that comes out and not a giant M&M.

**LAURIE:** That's what they said. (*Clarifying.*) The people in the car behind us. I don't remember what happened. I blacked out. When I woke up, I was laying in a puddle. I was all wet. I don't like being in wet clothes.

**DINAH:** But he insisted. He was insistent. He wouldn't take no for an answer.

**LAURIE:** They didn't wake up. Carolyn, Marcy and Michelle. They didn't wake up. We were all wearing our seat belts but mine popped open and I flew out of the car. I was ejected. Ejected. I was ejected but they weren't. They got crushed. Plus Carolyn got kind of impaled by a mile marker.

**DINAH:** So, he opened the car door for me and helped me out of the car like we were on some kind of date and he took my arm and walked me to my apartment. I got my keys out of my purse and he took them out of my hand and started to unlock the door for me. "NO!" I said. "I can do it. I can unlock the door. I don't need your help." Before I was finished telling him I could do it myself, he'd unlocked the door and we were inside. (*She begins to cry.*) And he was insistent. He wouldn't take no for an answer.

**KEVIN:** DOOR. FLOOR. SCORE. WHORE. [*Optional: substitute “more” for “whore”.*]

**TRACY:** My fans love me. They love me. My fan club has an official website for me and my music and it gets thousands of hits every day. People from all over the world visit my website. I’m not just a star in the United States. I’m an international star. I have fans all over the world. I’m an international star with fans all over the world. And they love me. My fans all over the world love me. They send me flowers and presents and pictures of themselves and their pets. On my last tour, we sold out stadiums – giant, outdoor stadiums – in ten different cities in less than four hours. And everywhere I go, people are always calling my name.

**ALL:** (*Except TRACY; whispered in unison.*) Tracy. Tracy. Tracy. Tracy.

**TRACY:** My fans love me. They send me flowers and presents and pictures of themselves and their pets. On my last tour, we sold out stadiums – giant, outdoor stadiums – in ten different cities in less than four hours. It was some kind of Ticketmaster record.

**ALL:** (*Except TRACY; whispered in unison.*) Marsha. Marsha. Marsha.

**TRACY:** Do you hear that? (*Quick pause.*) My name isn’t Marsha.

**ALL:** (*Except TRACY; whispered in unison.*) Someone’s name is Marsha.

**TRACY:** (*Agitated.*) We sold out stadiums in ten different cities in less than four hours.

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