

BROOM VERSUS PEN: A FIGHT TO THE LIFE

By Alan Haehnel

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SYNOPSIS: We see the on-going battle between two extremes in Monica's mind: Prag (*for Pragmatic*) and Creta (*for Creative*). Every time Monica has a writing idea, Creta screams encouragement while Prag demands that Monica get back to work. After all, she's a single mother with three children and little income—should she be taking time away from her duties to pursue writing, an activity that will almost certainly not bring her financial gain? When Monica's turmoil turns to despair, a Sheriff arrives with an ultimatum: Prag and Creta have ten minutes to decide which one of them will leave... or he will come back and make the decision for them. Ultimately, neither leaves, for the only true solution is balance.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 Male, 8 Females, 11 Either. Gender flexible, doubling possible)

MONICA SELLERS (f).....The woman whose mind we inhabit.
(9 lines)

PRAG (m/f).....The practical side of Monica. *(93 lines)*

CRETA (m/f)The creative side of Monica. *(78 lines)*

MINDY (f).....A comic monologist. *(1 line)*

JOE (m).....On a date with Tina. *(17 lines)*

TINA (f).....On a date with Joe. *(16 lines)*

SHERIFF (m/f).....Trying to keep order in Monica's mind.
(11 lines)

UNIFORM 1 (m/f).....Deputy of the Sheriff. *(9 lines)*

UNIFORM 2 (m/f).....Deputy of the Sheriff. *(6 lines)*

- POET 1 (m/f)The purest expressions of Monica's creative side. (12 lines)
- POET 2 (m/f)The purest expressions of Monica's creative side. (12 lines)
- POET 3 (m/f)The purest expressions of Monica's creative side. (13 lines)
- POET 4 (m/f)The purest expressions of Monica's creative side. (12 lines)
- POET 5 (m/f)The purest expressions of Monica's creative side. (12 lines)
- POET 6 (m/f)The purest expressions of Monica's creative side. (15 lines)
- BELLA BORGENSTEIN (f)A CPA analyzing Monica's practical situation. (15 lines)
- DARLA (f).....Monica's nine-year-old daughter. (10 lines)
- WOMAN 1 (f)Angelic figure representing balance. (3 lines)
- WOMAN 2 (f)Angelic figure representing balance. (3 lines)
- WOMAN 3 (f)Angelic figure representing balance. (3 lines)

PRODUCTION NOTES

SET: An upper level, sparsely furnished as Monica's apartment. A lower level with a neat side for Prag, a chaotic side for Creta, and a large, central pool-like structure with a covering that undulates—characters emerge from this part of the set.

AUTHOR NOTES

Though "*Broom Versus Pen...*" may seem like a complicated play to stage, the fact that it occurs almost entirely in Monica's mind can simplify the project considerably. Because you are not obligated to mirror any particular reality but rather create a dreamscape, you have full latitude. Crag is spastic; Prag is streamlined; the two are in conflict. As long as that basic story is visually represented, the play can work.

PROPERTIES

- A self-defense book
- A copy of *The Wall Street Journal*
- Three fanciful guns
- Two ticker-tape type machines
- A broom
- Pencil
- Writing pad
- A large stick with padding on the end

AT RISE: *Curtain opens to a dual set. Upstage on an elevated platform is the small kitchen of MONICA SELLERS' apartment—sink with dishes, refrigerator, stove, small table with three chairs, high chair. The lower set is the internal landscape of MONICA's mind. The stage left portion is very ordered and precise. PRAG, dressed in a severe business suit, sits there reading The Wall Street Journal. The stage right portion is a mess of shapes and colors. CRETA lounges there. Her costume is extremely wild and eclectic. Downstage center, a piece of gray cloth covers a large pool-like structure. In a moment, we see slight movement beneath the cloth. CRETA notices suddenly, her movements are spastic. SHE walks around the pool, examining it carefully. The surface jerks again; CRETA jumps and runs to grab a communication tube that hangs down on her side of the set. SHE speaks into the tube furtively, anxiously, all the while eying the cloth for more movement. This tube is the link from MONICA's inner mind to her conscious mind.*

Do Not Copy

CRETA: *(Blows quickly into the tube as if testing a microphone, then speaks.)* Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes! Ooooo, bubbles bursting, bam! An idea. Write it, write it, aphrodite it! It's good, the best, the break-heart, bang-bang, boom-the-boom best. Do it. *(MONICA pauses in her sweeping for a moment, as if hearing CRETA's urging, and looks out front, seeing an idea forming in her mind. CRETA giggles loudly, somewhat maniacally. PRAG rustles her paper slightly.)* Oh, sh. Sh. Wake not the dragon. Onion-breathed, furnace-faced, drat-darted dragon! Sh! Shake it out. Smoooooth it out. Write it. Oh, do. O'Doul's. No alcohol. Get drunk on the idea. Wake up fresh. Sh. Write. Drop the broom. Broop the droom. Go now. No gow. Sing sow. Pig, piggy, pig. *(MONICA puts the broom down, goes to a drawer to get a piece of paper and a pencil.)* Yes! Yes, yes, yes! Pencil scratch the only sound. Softly now. Soft lead, number two. Sh, sh. Do it. Write, my lively writher, my synthesizer, write! *(During this sequence, the pool landscape becomes more animated—rolling, bubbling, undulating, with an occasional low musical noise or a clinking of bells coming from beneath the surface. Now, a single bump starts to rise higher and higher; clearly, some live being strives to break free from the ground.)* Oh, a bump, a hump, a lump, a growth. Be it cancerous, ulcerous, wondrous, lecherous, let it fly! Write it!

But CRETA has been too enthusiastic. PRAG puts down the paper, quickly ascertains the situation, crosses to her comtube, and barks out a command.

PRAG: Hey! Get back to work!

Immediately, the bump in the landscape shrinks to nothing; the surface quiets, though ending in a different shape than the way it began at the play's opening. MONICA puts her pencil down, begins sweeping again.

CRETA: *(To PRAG.)* Ooo! Fardle-bearing farklesnap! Killjoy! Rotten chortleclapper! *(PRAG yawns in the face of these insults.)* Naysaying Nettler. Nettling knuckle- dragger. Dragging meddler. Morbid moribund jackal-footed geriatric gum coddling carrion!

PRAG: *(Resigned.)* Babbling idiot.

CRETA: She might have had something, you sour-faced whiffle bat.

PRAG: Go back to sleep. *(PRAG crosses back to where SHE was reading, picks up the paper. CRETA returns to her spot also, mumbling as SHE goes.)*

CRETA: Borple-snotted mumblypeg. Paper wart. Snibbling ribbler. Pick-cherried influenza bugger.

PRAG: Quiet, please.

CRETA: Infectious mortuary!

PRAG: Thank-you.

The TWO settle back down, the scene now similar to the play's opening. MONICA bends to sweep the pile of dirt from the floor into a dustpan. SHE looks up, suddenly struck by an idea. Lights dance beneath the landscape. A bump thrusts quickly up. CRETA jumps.

CRETA: Serendipity! Pyramid perfect, oh, rising Phoenix, come to papa!

MONICA crosses quickly to the table, picks up her pencil, and begins to write. The gray fabric seems stretched to the ripping point.

PRAG: *(Crossing crossly to the comtube.)* It's going to be one of those nights.

CRETA: *(Admiring the rising idea.)* Impending birth! Boil the water, woi! the bater, what the boiler, it's a' coming, I can feel it in my bones, in my blood, in my artful arteries, the caps of my capillaries, let copulation thrive!

PRAG: *(Into the comtube.)* Now hear this, Monica Sellers. You have work to do, more work than you have hours to finish it.

MONICA lifts her pencil from the paper. The lump under the gray cloth stops rising. CRETA, panicked, runs to her comtube.

CRETA: *(To PRAG.)* Aaah, baboon-bursting meal-mouth! *(Into her comtube, overlapping with PRAG's next speech.)* Monica, Monica, sword-more-mighty pencil-wielding warrior woman, write!

PRAG: You have three children, Monica, and one soon-to-be ex-husband who has no interest in paying child support. Why are you wasting time?

CRETA: Wasting time? Wasting? Time-tickling, freezing time--that's what you're doing. The children of your flesh lie a-bed, fair mother; now write, write, write, and bring forth a million children, mind minions, daring slumberless darlings.., give them breath, let them walk!

PRAG: Oh, certainly, Monica, you have all the time in the world for your writing. Just because the dishes need washing, the clothes need laundering, the bills need paying, the gerbils need feeding, the toilet needs cleaning...

CRETA: Mud-miring mundanities! Write, Monica! Let the dead bury the dead, the dishes do the dishes, the toilet...

PRAG: So write, Monica, go ahead. I mean, what's the use of money? Why clean? Why prepare? You're only an adult, after all. You only have children. Ignore all that—go ahead.

CRETA: *(To PRAG.)* Issue-clouding clod! Shush your crap-trap! *(Back to the comtube.)* Monica, listen. Ear me your lends. Lore me your leans. Leak your me lakes. *(MONICA puts down the pencil and returns to her former business of sweeping up the pile of dirt. The bump recedes. The imagination quiets. Desperately, CRETA gets the line out.)* Lend me your ears!

PRAG: Too late, Creta. She already lent them to me.

CRETA: *(Crossing to PRAG.)* Oooh, you...

PRAG: I sense anger, Creta.

CRETA: You...

PRAG: Here's a challenge for you, Creta: can you say, "Prag, I am angry with you." Can you do that?

CRETA: Barf-bagged vomit-spewing spagnum moss!

PRAG: No, you cannot do that. Do you know why you can't say that simple phrase, Creta?

CRETA: Mossy-fingered water sprite!

PRAG: Because you have no control, Creta. No discipline. For some reason, Creta...

CRETA: Sprite-watered mossy mouth! Mouthy mink. Minked monster.

PRAG: That was an interruption, Creta. In the civilized world, we call that rude.

CRETA: Frosted bladder-splat!

PRAG: Ah, I see. You have no interest in my objective observations about the sickness called your life. Fine. Let me be direct: Go lie down. Go into a coma.

CRETA: Nose hair! Toilet product! Rock-minded mud-making mess! Highway hopping...

The imagination has begun to undulate again. PRAG notices, but CRETA is too busy hurling insults to pay attention.

PRAG: Damn. (*SHE grabs a long pole with a pillow attached to the end, jumps up and runs to a spot on the landscape where an idea is trying to break free. CRETA yells when PRAG first jumps up, afraid that PRAG is after her. When SHE sees PRAG begin to pound away on the rising idea with her weapon, SHE runs and jumps on PRAG's back to prevent the assault.*) Back! Get down!

CRETA: Noooo! Joked-up butterball!

PRAG: (*Struggling to get CRETA off her back.*) Get off of me, you lunatic! Get away!

CRETA: Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!

MONICA has left her dish-washing and is at the table, writing. Away from the bump that PRAG has been trying to quell, another bump rises quickly. PRAG frees herself to go after it, but CRETA trips her up.

PRAG: Another one! Get down, you... hey!

CRETA: Dream dropper! Write, Monica, write! Wriiite!

PRAG: You're wasting your ti...!

CRETA: (*Clapping a hand over PRAG's mouth.*) Sh! Bump birth! Boom!

From the fabric of MONICA's imagination springs a woman sitting on a chair talking on the telephone. This is MINDY.

MINDY: Hello, yes, my name is Mindy Feinberger. Feinberger, yes. I sent you a manuscript a couple of months ago. Yes, I know it's not your policy to discuss... but I wonder if you... I realize you're very busy, but if I could just have a moment of your time. Just a moment. Yes. Thank-you. Well, the piece was entitled "The." "T-H-E." Uh-huh. Do you remember it, by chance? Oh. Well, perhaps you haven't gotten to it yet. But I just wanted to explain. The work is 312 pages long, and it repeats the word "the" over and over in different typescripts and handwritings. No, that's all. Just the word "the." You see, it's a statement of individuality in a world obsessed with conformity. It's also a collaborative work. While 28,000 of the "the's" were hand written by me in different moods and at different times of the day, and another 5600 I typed using varying fonts from 57 different word-processing programs, the remaining 741, 929 "the's" were gathered from sources other than myself. Yes. Of course, I have written permission from every contributor on file. I understand that you're very busy. And so am I. A million projects compete for my time, of course, but I realized that I may not have explained myself well in my cover letter. You see, the emphasis of my work in writing and compiling "The" is not on the product, but on the process. Yes. I think it is the quintessential statement on our American desire to be recognized as individuals. Thus, "the" as opposed to "A," which is the title of the sequel. I just wanted to... I understand. Well, thank-you. Thank-you so much for your time. I look forward to hearing from you. Did you get the spelling of the work? That's correct. Oh, oh, one last question before you, before I hang up: Would now be a good time to talk about the film rights?

MINDY freezes with the phone at her ear. PRAG and CRETA regard MINDY for a moment from the floor, and then CRETA begins to laugh hysterically. SHE rolls off of PRAG, who rises, shaking her head. MONICA reads over what SHE has just written, occasionally stopping to fix a word or add a bit of punctuation.

CRETA: *(Through laughter.)* Film rights! Film rights! “A piece entitled ‘The!’” “Did you get the spelling on that?” *(SHE continues laughing, clutching her sides and rolling around. PRAG walks over to her side of the set. SHE pulls a piece of paper that has just come through some sort of fax-type machine or ticker-tape, begins reading into her comtube. As soon as SHE begins to read, CRETA gets her laughter under control, crosses to her side of the set where SHE takes a piece of paper from her own machine.)*

PRAG: Monica, this just in—Boston Globe Theater Review: Monica Sellers' skewed view of the writing life provides us with a new definition for an old term: boredom. If you have anything else to do but listen to this latest work, do it. Clean the garbage disposal, lance a boil, scrub your car's undercarriage--anything would be more amusing than this.

CRETA: New York Times: Monica Sellers, that Quintessential Queen of Quips, scores yet another triumph with this whimsical, witty, wild and whirling little ditty of a piece. Mindy Feinberger, the principal character...

PRAG: ...clearly represents a thinly-veiled but unabashedly pitiful portrait of the writer herself. Perhaps Ms. Sellers should consider opening her home as a theater, allowing the audience in to watch the tedious proceedings of her daily life first hand. What a thrill that would be. Do miss this one. D-. People Magazine.

CRETA: We recognize in ourselves the striving, thriving, teeming search for meaning that defines our... Though brief, the piece...

PRAG: One suggestion to Ms. Sellers: When revising, cut this three-minute piece. By three and a half minutes. The Valley News. *(MONICA rips piece of paper off of the notepad, crumples it up, throws it in the wastebasket. PRAG turns to CRETA. MINDY is swallowed back into the landscape of the imagination.)* She takes criticism well, don't you think?

CRETA: Blasted lasagna! Meat-sauce maniac! Toothy manicotti! Blue-jean bumbling bricklayer! Sloppy sidewinder! Forever-meaning canker-breathed spaghetti squash!

PRAG: Your powers of lunacy astound me. (*MONICA has moved back to the table. The imagination again stirs. A bubble rises. PRAG picks up her weapon again, runs to quell the latest idea.*) Oh, no you don't. (*CRETA again trips PRAG up before SHE can get to the idea.*) Let go of me! Get off!

CRETA: Baby-killer! Craven couplet-binding muggle mind! Schlepper-pepper!

A MAN and a WOMAN come through the fabric, seated at a table at a restaurant. JOE and TINA. THEY are eating quietly, catching one another's eyes, obviously attracted.

JOE: What?

TINA: What what?

JOE: I asked first.

TINA: Well...

JOE: Go on.

TINA: Oh, boy.

JOE: What? Tell me. Maybe I feel the same way.

TINA: That would be scary.

JOE: Why scary? (*SHE tries to say something, can't, laughs.*) You have incredible eyes, you know that?

TINA: Do they bug out or something?

JOE: No. They... sparkle. Shine. Just kind of sit there and look beautiful.

TINA: Oh.

JOE: You don't like compliments, do you?

TINA: Occasionally.

JOE: Listen, can I be totally honest with you?

TINA: I don't know. Can you?

JOE: You don't make this easy.

TINA: Okay. I'll just sit here and sparkle at you.

JOE: Good. (*Deep breath.*) My heart is beating a thousand miles a minute. It's thrashing around inside my chest like a furious bird. Like some beautiful furious bird that wants to get out and fly. And my hands are sweaty. I'm tingling like lightning is about to hit. The excitement I feel when I look at you just makes me want to jump right out of my skin. I'm afraid to say the word that keeps popping up in my mind like some crazy jack-in-the-box because it just seems too soon. I mean, we've barely met. I can hardly endure being with you without touching you and yet the thought of not being with you makes me crazy. I can't think of anything I would rather be doing than sitting here, across from you, looking in your dazzling eyes, telling you honestly how I feel. Whew.

TINA: Whew.

JOE: And I'm thinking that you maybe feel the same. Or close, anyway. Well?

TINA: Yes. I do. I feel a lot like that.

JOE: I knew it. Let's not leave each other.

TINA: But.

JOE: But?

TINA: I see something else when I look in your eyes.

JOE: Tell me.

TINA: Are you sure?

JOE: Honesty is the best policy. I just made that up, incidentally.

TINA: I would laugh, but I don't feel like it.

JOE: Tell me what you see. I'm ready.

TINA: I see... (*Deep breath.*) ... I see us holding hands like this and talking like this for a long time. I see us at my door and I see me resisting and then finally giving in and letting you stay for the night, and then I see you at my door tomorrow afternoon and I see me wondering if I really want to let you in and then I see me letting you in not just tomorrow, but the day after and the day after and I see me feeling that what this is is probably love but I can't be sure and I see you on bended knee asking for my hand and I see myself saying yes even though I should probably be saying no and then I see us on a cruise to somewhere and I see your eyes which had once always and only been on me, already starting to stray to that blonde younger woman in the bikini as she rises out of the pool and smiles at you and I see myself thinking, "Well, he is a man, after all; what can I expect?" and I see the paint-chipped apartment we move into because we can't afford anything else and I see the pink slip that you bring home after you get fired from your job because you just can't control your temper and I see you answering the phone and walking out of the room and I see you yelling "Do you mind!" when I walk in on you talking on the phone and I see the stained mattress and I see beer in the refrigerator but no butter and I see my belly growing and your interest waning and I see the child I have named Kristen, a name you agreed to but never really gave me any input on, and I see myself getting up to nurse the baby and coming back to bed and I see the side of the bed where you aren't there anymore and I see the divorce papers that you file and, finally, in your eyes, way deep, I see you driving off in a silver convertible with a woman younger and more beautiful than me with all of your possessions and a few of mine piled in the back seat while Kristen, now just three years old, stands beside me on the sidewalk and pulls on my hand and I see her saying to me, "Momma, where's Daddy going with that lady?"

JOE: (*After a shocked pause.*) Check, please.

MONICA stops writing. SHE reads what SHE has just finished, mouthing the words as SHE does. CRETA gets up, dazed. PRAG rises also, walks back over to comtube.

CRETA: *(Each exhalation getting a different emotional coloring.) (Near tears.) Oh. (Enlightened.) Ah. (Puzzled.) Hm. (Humorous.) Hmph. (Near tears again.) Oooh! Monica! Pulverizing piece, wondrous work, terrifying tome—what to think? What to feel? Feel, think, fink, theel... all in one, one in all. Innards tickled, wrenched, blasted. Monica, mother milk mystifier, this is the beginning, the foundation of the skyscraping ever-escaping literary monolith which for your birthing was born! Great work!*

PRAG sits, takes out an airhorn and blows a tremendous blast into the comtube. CRETA screams, falls to the floor as if expecting a bomb to hit. MONICA winces subtly, pricked by the conscience PRAG represents.

PRAG: Monica. Do I have your attention? Monica. I don't have much to say. Just three quick statements I want you to consider. 1. The rent is due, and you don't have it. You need to be thinking about a better-paying job. 2. These creations of yours will never earn you a penny. 3. You are a single mother with three children. Oh, yes, one other thing: *(SHE blasts the horn again, briefly. CRETA falls to the floor again.)* You need to grow up. *(SHE puts down the airhorn again, picks up a book, looks at it, then begins practicing some karate-style moves while often referring to the book. MONICA rips the page out of her notebook, regards it with an air of disdain. The fabric of the imagination begins to move toward JOE and TINA, as if to swallow them back up.)*

CRETA: *(Into comtube.)* Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! Deflect rejection, negate the negative, let them live! Let them li...

MONICA throws out this piece of writing, too. CRETA crosses to watch TINA and JOE sink back into the landscape.

PRAG: Any preference?

CRETA: Mutating mustard. Flagrant falderall.

PRAG: *(Still gesticulating martial-arts style, demonstrating each move as SHE talks about it.)* If you come at me from behind, I could give you an elbow to the solar plexus, backhand to the nose. How about that?

CRETA: Biliou lily-slivered pronghom.

PRAG: Because I know Monica. She's not done yet. Pretty soon, another idea will sprout and you'll try to keep me from keeping it down. And that's when I will send the heel of my foot to your shin, the heel of my hand to your chin. (*Looking down at the book.*) Or was it the other way around? No, that's right. You like that idea?

CRETA: Deadwood. Wormwood. Flatulating spatula!

PRAG: Or there's the flip, landing you on your back, and then a knuckle sandwich to the jaw. Sound attractive?

CRETA: Virulent viscera.

MONICA has crossed back to the table and is about to write. The imagination begins to boil.

PRAG: Oh, boy—here we go.

CRETA: Foreshadowed shatter-smashed blanket rip! Here we gooo!

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