

EXCUSES, EXCUSES

By Alan Haehnel

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CHARACTERS

Norma: The director
Simon: Teller of bad jokes
Marlene: Inept script writer
Marla: Same as Marlene
Butch: Very sarcastic “master carpenter”
Nick: Butch’s wannabe sidekick
Sasha: Cosmic actress
LeAnne: Somewhat vacuous actress
Mickey: Peace-maker
Jenna: Arrogant choreographer
Susan: Set designer, girlfriend to Tom
Tom: Costume designer, boyfriend to Susan
Jamie: Very shy narrator
Lucy: Hypochondriac

PROP LIST

One hand wipe

DIRECTOR’S NOTE

The challenge of “Excuses, Excuses” is to make something out of nothing. No costumes, no set, no spectacle other than this rag-tag bunch of players. In order for the play to work, each character’s objective must be clearly defined and consistently pursued. Butch’s final monologue may be of help in giving an overview of the character types who should be presented. My hope is that “Excuses, Excuses” will be pure fun. To paraphrase Mark Twain, any hints of deep significance are purely accidental. Enjoy!

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(Lights come up on an empty stage. We hear the sound of people marching in tight unison. Fourteen people enter from either side of the stage in two straight lines. The lines meet upstage center, turn sharply, and begin to march side by side downstage. When they get almost to the front of the stage, they turn sharply again and separate. They then begin to weave in and out in a complicated pattern, changing the cadence of their marching occasionally. At the end of this sequence, everyone freezes, bent over to the right at a sharp angle. They stay that way for a long time. NORMA steps forward finally, marching to the front of the stage, where SHE pauses. SHE looks a bit nervous—her eyes shift from side to side. Finally, SHE breaks her rigid pose.)

NORMA: Okay. Well, that was impressive, wasn't it? How about a big round of applause for these guys, huh? *(SHE begins to clap her hands; the audience joins in. The cast remains in the same bent over position.)* Yes. Well. That, um, that went well. We... *(SHE turns to the rest of the cast.)* I'm sorry, everyone, but I don't know what else to do here. I'm just going to tell them. I'm sorry. *(turning back to the audience)* We ran out of time. Or, my name is Norma, maybe I should say that first. I'm Norma, and this is my cast. I say "my" because I am the director, the leader of this group. It's a good group, too. Very good. I want you to know that. Uh...

SIMON: Norma, I'm getting a cramp.

NORMA: Oh. Uh, okay, Simon. Just a second. Stay where you are. Something might happen still. You never know.

SIMON: Ow.

NORMA: Okay. I know. *(to the audience)* You see, what we just did, that marching thing and the coming in and the weaving around, all that...that took us a lot of time to put together. A lot. And I feel very good about it. It went well, as I said. I mean, of course, I was a part of it, but I could still tell that it was pretty good. Excellent, in fact. And the thing is, we did this together. I mean, we had this group input into what you ended up seeing here. This wasn't a one person type of planned-out thing, not like a...dictatorship or anything. This was more like...communism! I mean, in a good way. That is, we all...you know, as Karl Marx wanted communism to work. The dictatorship of... *(MARLENE faints.)* Oh, dear. Oh, she uh, she...Marlene? Marlene?

MARIA: Norma, we can't do this anymore!

NORMA: Oh, okay. Everybody, quit that! **(They all stand up, getting out of the leaning pose. They groan at their stiff muscles. NORMA is hovering over MARLENE.)** Uh, she, uh, is she okay?

NICK: She fainted.

NORMA: Is she breathing? Aren't you supposed to, like, put her knees between her head?

BUTCH: How would you put her knees between her head, Norma? That is anatomically impossible.

NORMA: It is not!

BUTCH: Show me.

NORMA: What?

BUTCH: I would very much like to see you put your knees between your head.

NORMA: Did I say that? That's not what I meant. **(SHE laughs awkwardly.)** I meant knees between your head. I mean, there I did it again—I guess I did say that, didn't I? I meant, of course, head between your knees. "Knees between your..." That would be painful. **(MARLENE groans, stirs a bit.)** Oh, good. She's all right. Hello, Marlene. Hello. You fainted, Honey. How do you feel?

MARLENE: Like crap.

NORMA: Oh, well, why don't you just stay sort of...stay down there until you feel less...like that. And there's an audience out here so let's not use words like c-r-a-p, okay? **(MARLENE groans and lies back down.)** So, where were we? It seems to me that you would probably appreciate a full explanation of what is going on, or, rather, what is supposed to be going on, or, that is, perhaps a measure of both; that is, both what is and what is supposed to be going on, since what is going on is really quite closely linked to what is supposed to be, if that makes sense. Does that make sense? I'm sure, if I were you—and really, that is the job of the director, to put herself in the position of the audience—I'm certain that I would be craving, so to speak, an explanation.

NICK: So explain already!

NORMA: Well, I am.

BUTCH: No, you're not. You're explaining why you should give an explanation.

NORMA: Well, introductions are sometimes necessary.

SASHA: Why don't you explain why you're explaining why you might want to explain why we're all here?

NORMA: I'm...I'm a bit confused by that.

BUTCH: Listen, you want me to do this? **(not waiting for an answer)** Fine. Look, here's the story, folks...

NORMA: I feel as if you're usurping my duties.

BUTCH: I'm slurping what?

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NORMA: Surping, not slurping. To usurp, to take away, to assume a position that is not rightfully one's own.

BUTCH: Sure. **(to audience)** So, the deal is...

NORMA: You're taking my job. I'm the director. I should be telling them "what the deal is," as you put it.

BUTCH: Then tell them!

NICK: Yeah!

BUTCH: Don't tell them about telling them about telling them! Tell them!

LEANNE: My head hurts. You shouldn't repeat things so much. I get dizzy. Telling them about telling them. How do you tell someone about telling something? Too many layers. I get dizzy.

NORMA: Fine. Fine. I will tell them. LeAnne, I'm sorry about your head.

LEANNE: **(staring significantly at BUTCH)** It's not just your fault.

BUTCH: If you're waiting for an apology from me, you're going to wait for a long time, Sister.

NICK: Yeah, so get over it.

MICKEY: Please, please, we don't need to do this. The audience doesn't need to listen to us doing this. Norma?

NORMA: Thank-you, Mickey. **(to audience)** Well, where to begin? Beginnings are difficult, especially when, as in this case, there are, in my opinion, multiple beginnings...

BUTCH: You're doing it again!

NORMA: What?

BUTCH: You're beating around the bush, stalling, introducing, wasting your breath...doing everything but telling them.

NORMA: I'm getting there.

BUTCH: Oh, sure, just like you were getting to putting this show together by tonight. Guess what? It never happened.

NORMA: Surely you're not saying that was my fault? Are you? Do you blame me for that?

MICKEY: Norma, no one is blaming you.

NORMA: **(indicating BUTCH)** He is!

MICKEY: Butch, you weren't actually blaming Norma, I don't think, were you?

BUTCH: If the shoe fits...

NICK: Or the sock.

BUTCH: **(to NICK)** What was that supposed to mean?

NICK: You usually wear socks with your shoes. I was backing you up.

BUTCH: Do me a favor.

NICK: Sure, Butch. What?

BUTCH: Don't.

NORMA: You see? You see?

MICKEY: All right, so that's Butch's problem. But we don't all feel that way.

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NORMA: You don't?

MICKEY: Of course not.

NORMA: Marlene? I'm sorry you fainted. You don't think it was my fault, do you?

MARLENE: I don't care.

NORMA: Jenna? Jenna? Jenna, would you please answer me?

JENNA: There are certain discussions of which I do not wish to be a part. This is one.

NORMA: Mickey, I'm not getting any enormous sense of confidence right now.

MICKEY: No one is blaming you.

BUTCH: Hey, what am I? Chopped liver?

NICK: And what am I? Coleslaw?

BUTCH: **(to NICK)** Would you stop it!

MICKEY: They don't count.

NORMA: But Mickey, no one's *not* blaming me, either. You're the only one who's supporting me and, frankly, that's just what you do all the time. You're a good friend, but how can I believe you? I'm going to ask one more person, and if I don't get a clear sense of support....I'm just going to leave.

MICKEY: Norma...

NORMA: Sasha, do you think this is all my fault?

SASHA: **(cosmic)** They say that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can begin a chain reaction that causes a hurricane three thousand miles away. A man can pause to look at a shooting star—a rushing piece of burning rock—and when he pauses, he steps on a caterpillar, and that caterpillar might have become that butterfly that was flapping its wings in Brazil, if only the man hadn't stopped. But can we blame the asteroid that shed the piece of rock that became the meteorite that the man stopped to watch? I wonder.

NORMA: I'm not getting a clear sense of support from that.

SASHA: Let me put it another way.

NORMA: Never mind. I'm leaving. **(SHE exits.)**

MICKEY: **(following her)** Norma! Norma, wait!

(There is a pause for a moment, then BUTCH comes forward.)

BUTCH: Okay, look. Norma, there, did the right thing. She left. I think we should all follow suit, if you know what I mean. If you paid money to get in here, demand to get it back. Just not from me. All right?

SIMON: Wait! Wait! Before everybody goes, just give me a second.

BUTCH: No jokes.

SIMON: Why not?

BUTCH: Because I like this shirt.

SIMON: What does that have to do with it?

NICK: I like your shirt, too, Butch.

BUTCH: **(to NICK)** Stop it. **(to SIMON)** When you tell jokes, people throw things, things that splatter. I don't want anything splattered on my shirt.

SIMON: I won't tell any jokes.

BUTCH: Good.

SIMON: Okay. A toothless termite walks into a drinking establishment...

BUTCH: Hey!

SIMON: This isn't a joke! It's a true story.

BUTCH: Right.

SIMON: So, this toothless termite walks into this pub, and he sits down, and he asks the guy serving drinks—you ready?—he asks the guy serving drinks, "Where's the bar tender?" Get it? It's a toothless termite. He wants to know where's the bar tender.

LEANNE: That's a true story?

SIMON: No, not really. Termites don't talk.

SASHA: We don't know that. We, as humans, sometimes assume that the boundaries of our communications extend to all living things. But perhaps the termite language is actually very complex and we simply haven't fathomed it yet. Perhaps every termite is the equivalent of an insectoid Shakespeare.

SIMON: He's toothless, get it?

LEANNE: But why is he asking where the bartender is if he's standing right there?

SIMON: He's not asking where's the bartender. He's asking where is the bar tender.

LEANNE: Yuh.

SIMON: Tender. Tender!

(SUSAN, who has been cuddling in a corner with TOM ever since the break from the opening pose, begins to sing.)

SUSAN: Tender—ooh, ooh! Tender—ooh, ooh! Tender is the night... ***(breaks off singing)*** That's our song, Tom. Remember?

TOM: How could I forget, Sweet Tomatoes? ***(TOM and SUSAN begin to sing together.)*** Tender—ooh, ooh! Tender...

BUTCH: Now we need to stop this right here. Right here and now. Here's the agenda from here on out—no interruptions, no jokes, no singing, no explanations of the universe. Item One: I explain, very briefly, why we're here in the first place. Item Two: I leave along with everybody else in this joint.

NICK: And I leave with him.

BUTCH: **(to NICK)** Zip it. **(to all)** Item Three: No more items. Now, about a month ago, some rocket scientist of a teacher here came up with a brilliant idea.

NICK: Mrs. Whately.

BUTCH: **(to NICK)** Sh. This is not a team effort. I work solo. **(Back to audience)** She said, “Let’s get a bunch of students together and assign them various roles in the creative process. Let’s set a date for a show, and let’s have them work together to come up with a theatrical production.” So that’s the scenario. We’re the bunch of students, many of us here against our wills. For me, it was either this or three months of community service at the landfill. Let me tell you something: playing in broken glass would’ve been a better choice. So we’re the students, and this is the date. But guess what?

NICK: We ain’t ready!

BUTCH: **(to NICK)** What did I say! Solo, remember? That means one! Not two—one! **(to audience)** Yeah, so like Nick the Stick there said, we just never got it together. That little dance thing took us about...three and half weeks to come up with.

JENNA: Correction, please: It took me approximately two and a half minutes to “come up with,” as our esteemed Butch put it, and it took all of them the remainder of the time to learn.

BUTCH: Thank you for the clarification, Jenna. So that’s the story. Sorry about that. I hope you didn’t leave something more enjoyable—like, say, scrubbing your toilet bowl—to come see us, but this just ain’t happening. Item One: Over. Item Two: We leave.

(All begin to exit when NORMA comes back on, looking renewed and energetic. MICKEY is behind her.)

NORMA: No! No, we shall not leave. We shall not be leaving the stage for quite some time, ladies and gentlemen.

BUTCH: Oh, for crying out loud.

NICK: For crying out really loud.

NORMA: Butch, Nick, everyone, we’ve been scheduled on this stage for approximately forty-five minutes. That was the term of our contract with Mrs. Whately; more importantly, that was the commitment we made to each other at the outset of this project. And we’re going to honor that commitment.

SIMON: I’ve got another joke.

NORMA: No, no you don’t. Not right now, Simon, because I want to tell you and everyone else about something important that just happened to me. Please sit down. Butch, I have been informed that the entire three months of community service still awaits you if you do not satisfactorily finish this project.

BUTCH: Blackmail. It's the American way.

NORMA: **(tearfully)** Ladies and Gentlemen, as you are aware, I quit a moment ago. I am ashamed of that action. I felt depressed and unsupported, despite the best efforts of my dear friend Mickey. I was ready to walk out the door and leave this group; leave you, the audience; leave this project behind. But on the way out the door, my dear friend Mickey grabbed my hand and swung me around—and I will be forever grateful to her for doing that—and when she did, I hit my head, very hard, against the door jamb, and I fell to the floor. I believe I blacked out for a second, but when I came to, I looked in the direction of this stage, I saw all of my fellow project participants, and I suddenly saw them as angels. Angels of unrealized talent. They seemed bathed in holy light, awash with tremendous potential. I knew then that I couldn't leave them. I vowed at that moment to return and to share with you, good audience, the amazing things that these people have to share! **(SHE spreads her arms expansively, presenting the group to the audience. The group stares, dumbfounded.)** I believe in you, my cast. I know that I seemed to be chosen arbitrarily by Mrs. Whately to be your director. But this moment doesn't feel arbitrary at all. This moment feels destined. So we will begin, and I know—I know!—that something will develop.

(MICKEY claps enthusiastically, rises and hugs NORMA. Several others join in the clapping, but quickly stop. After NORMA and MICKEY stop hugging and exchanging brief words of thanks and encouragement, there is an uncomfortable pause.)

NORMA: **(to the audience)** So, first, I want to introduce to all of you the various members of our group and their responsibilities. **(to the cast)** And listen, everyone, if, as I'm doing this, you feel like some impulse just hits you for how we should proceed, take it as inspiration and go with it. All right? All right? **(scattered half-hearted assent)** Well, I think it would be appropriate for us to start with the woman responsible for that first very impressive part of our show—our choreographer, Jenna. Jenna, would you like to talk to the audience about your creative impulses regarding our project?

JENNA: My name is Jennavieve Courtney Haversham III. I am appalled to be here. I am not certain what precise lapse in my perception allowed me to make the heinous mistake of thinking that this endeavor might be a worthwhile way for me to earn an art credit. However, you can certainly be assured that I will locate that lapse and eradicate it completely so that no such error will ever occur again in my life nor in the lives of any members of the extended Haversham empire.

NORMA: Well. Thank you ever so much, Jenna. Might you be willing to shed some light on your creative process, how you came up with that wonderful opening sequence for us?

JENNA: Having studied dance extensively, both classical and modern, I quickly ascertained that none of my education would have any application for this group. So I chose very simple movements such as marching, used very simple lines and shapes—triangles, squares—and gave very simple directions—you go here, you go there. The overall effect was impressive for the untrained viewer, but totally lacking artistry and I do not wish to have my name associated with the final product. What we performed is not what I would call dance; more accurately, I would call it sludge. Would you like to know any more about my creative process?

NORMA: No, no. That was quite informative. Perhaps you would be willing to demonstrate some of your favorite dance moves for us? That would be entertaining.

BUTCH: Yeah, Jenna, how about the dance of the seven veils?

NICK: Or the eight veils.

BUTCH: Clap it shut, Rick.

JENNA: I believe I have sufficiently fulfilled my obligations regarding this group and its project; more so, in fact, than anyone else. Therefore, I wish to be left alone. As to the idea of demonstrating my dance talents in this particular venue, I believe I would rather have my hair set on fire.

BUTCH: That would be entertaining, too!

JENNA: You are a cretin in the first degree.

NICK: Better than being stuck up in the eighth degree.

BUTCH: Not bad, Nicky, not bad.

(JENNA gives the two of them a withering look and returns to her place.)

MICKEY: You know, you guys, your put-downs haven't been very helpful in this whole process.

BUTCH: Put-downs? You call that a put-down? I haven't used any put-downs. Here's a put-down: You're so low, you have to go up to be down. But I haven't said anything like that, have I? No, I haven't. But Jenna, there, she was putting us down. "I limited their movements to simple shapes—squares and triangles." What's that saying, huh? Is that not saying we're too dumb to learn anything?

LEANNE: You have to go up to be down? What? How does that work?

BUTCH: You're going to sprain a brain cell, LeAnne; just relax.

MICKEY: There you go again.

BUTCH: Where I go again?

NICK: Yeah—where does he go again?

BUTCH: **(to NICK)** I do not need you taking my side, either.

NICK: What? I'm just...

NORMA: Angels. Angels, every one. I saw that. The stars cleared after I had hit my head, and then you were all wearing haloes. You just don't know yet. But I do. **(to audience)** And I want to tell you, one of the brightest angels on this castle of clouds we have here has no idea what she's made of. We pulled our assignments out of a hat, and when this girl got this particular assignment, she was mortified. I have an idea, though, that she's going to come out of her shell, her cocoon, any minute, and become an angelic butterfly. I'd like to introduce our narrator, Jamie. Jamie?

(JAMIE, at the mention of her name, hides behind several other people.)

SIMON: I think your butterfly just flew the coop.

JENNA: Butterflies do not live in coops. Pigeons live in coops. I can't stand mixed metaphors.

SIMON: Well, soorry!

(NORMA has retrieved JAMIE, has brought her to the front. JAMIE is clearly very shy.)

NORMA: This is our narrator, Jamie. Jamie, what would you like to tell the audience? ***(JAMIE can't even make eye contact with the audience, never mind say anything.)*** It's all right. I know you have much to share. I can feel it. Jamie? ***(JAMIE hands NORMA a note.)*** Oh, of course, Jamie's note. I want to share this with all of you—she's handed this to me several times during the rehearsal process, and it really is delightful. ***(reading)*** "Leave me alone. Leave me alone. Leave me alone. I can't talk when I get nervous. You're making me very nervous, so I can't talk. If I could talk, I would tell you to leave me alone." Signed, Jamie. Isn't that something? A narrator who won't talk. You see what I mean? ***(As NORMA goes on, JAMIE grabs the note back and goes to her former spot.)*** The wonderful tapestry of our existence! The magnificence of the variety! Theater is a celebration of that diversity! And we're going to do that! I know it! We're here to celebrate! Where are my script writers? Where are those little angels? Marlene, Maria? Come forward and share yourselves.

SIMON: Or come over here and share yourselves.

MARLENE: Shut up, Simon.

NORMA: Let me introduce you to our fine script writers, Maria and Marlene.

MARIA: Hi.

MARLENE: Hey.

NORMA: So, I know the two of you have been hard at work on some dialogue for us. Could we, perhaps, get a sampling?

MARIA: Marlene has it.

MARLENE: I don't have it.

MARIA: You're supposed to have it.

MARLENE: What are you talking about?

MARIA: The stuff we wrote the other day. Remember?

MARLENE: Oh, yeah. I got that. It's over here.

(SHE comes back with a notebook.)

NORMA: Wonderful! Words, words, words. I am very excited.

MARIA: Yuh. Don't start drooling just yet; we didn't get very far.

MARLENE: **(handing the notebook to MARIA)** Here.

MARIA: **(looking at the notebook)** Ugh, what is that?

MARLENE: Oh. Peanut butter.

MARIA: Peanut butter?

LUCY: Keep that away from me. I'm allergic.

MARLENE: I wiped it off; it's just the oil.

LUCY: **(deadpan)** I'll die. I'll get hives and I'll swell up like a blowfish and then I'll pass out and stop breathing.

MARLENE: It's a notebook. You don't have to eat it.

LUCY: I'm just telling you I'm allergic to peanuts. Peanuts will kill me, all right?

MICKEY: Lucy, we don't want you to die. We'll keep the peanut butter far from you.

LUCY: That's all I'm saying. Peanuts and I don't mix.

SIMON: If you did, you'd be like a can of mixed nuts. Get it? Like those party nuts?

LEANNE: I thought she was allergic to peanuts, not all nuts.

LUCY: I don't tend to experiment. I avoid nuts as a rule.

SIMON: Then what are you doing here? **(HE laughs uproariously at his own joke. Everyone looks at him until HE stops, finally winding down.)** Ooh, that was a good one...what are you doing here? Man, now and then I nail one. Ooh, oh, yeah.

NORMA: Okay. Now, back to the script.

MARIA: **(gingerly holding the notebook)** Gross. How did you get peanut butter on it, anyway?

MARLENE: It was on the counter when I was making a sandwich.

MARIA: Well, what do you spread with, a shovel?

BUTCH: Hey.

MARLENE: The knife slipped a little, okay?

BUTCH: Hey! (**They turn to him.**) Sometime today? Huh? Can we get past the peanut butter? Huh?

MARIA: Right. Okay. We'll read you what we have so far.

NORMA: Well, if you have multiple copies, we could assign parts and hold a reading, right here! A world premiere of your script! That would be wonderful, wouldn't it?

MARLENE: We only got the one copy.

NORMA: Oh. Well, how many parts? Perhaps we could pass it around to several people.

MARIA: (**leafing through the notebook, checking out the number of parts**) Uh...two.

NORMA: Pardon?

MARLENE: Two parts.

NICK: Two? There's fourteen of us!

MARIA: Well, maybe it's not done yet, Nick.

NORMA: A work in progress. That's fine. So, male or female?

MARLENE: What?

NORMA: The parts—for male or female?

MARLENE: Yeah.

MARIA: Either way.

NORMA: Oh. Well, that's good. That makes it very versatile. How about if we get two of our acting specialists to come up and read the parts; so you, as writers, can listen to the rhythm of their speech, see how it plays.

MARIA: Sure. If they can read my writing.

NORMA: LeAnne, Sasha—would you come forward for this premiere reading of our script? What's it called?

(MARLENE and MARIA look at each other for a moment, puzzled.)

MARIA: Uh...it's called...

MARLENE: (**looking at the script**) Uh...It's called, "Hey, Hey Yourself."

NORMA: Now, that is interesting. Sasha, are you ready? LeAnne?

LEANNE: Should I act it or just read it?

BUTCH: How about if you just act it but don't read it?

LEANNE: I don't know how to do that.

SASHA: What did you have in mind for characterization? I see acting as a sort of out-of-body experience, with the potential to transcend one reality and move completely into a new reality. The writer is a god, of sorts, shaping characters and situations from sheer nothingness into complete somethingness. What sort of auras were you trying to transmit with this play?

MARIA: Well...you're a girl. And so are you.

SASHA: Ah!

LEANNE: I can do that.

NORMA: Good! Let's begin.

SASHA: **(reading)** Hey.

LEANNE: **(reading)** Hey, yourself.

SASHA: **(reading)** How's it going?

LEANNE: **(reading)** How's it going with you?

SASHA: **(reading)** Pretty good.

LEANNE: **(reading)** Cool.

SASHA: **(reading)** Hey, you want to...*(turning the page, looking up from the script)* That's it.

LEANNE: Don't I get any more lines?

NORMA: Maria, Marlene...is that...?

MARIA: That's about all we got.

MARLENE: Yeah, that's pretty much it.

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