

HOW TO MESS UP PRETTY MUCH ANYTHING

By Bradley Walton

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CHARACTERS

(6-31 roles: 1 male, 5-30 either)

ALEX	BEN	JEFF
ANNE	CHARLIE	JANET
ANDREW	CLARISSA	SCOTT
ALEXIS	CARL	SAMANTHA
ABIGAIL	CAMILLA	SETH
ARTHUR	CARTER	SUSAN
BOB	CASSIE	STEVE
BETH	JOHN	STEPHANIE
BRAD	JULIE	MIKEY
BRITTANY	JORDAN	
BETSY	JENNY	

All of the characters are teenagers. Characters whose names begin with the same letter maybe be combined. The genders of all characters except for MIKEY may be switched and their names changed accordingly. The director is welcome to use the real names of the actors in the production.

STAGING

Staging is completely flexible. The stage may be bare or set however the director sees fit.

PROPERTIES

PROPERTIES – ONSTAGE

Wig
Covered Pot
Skirt
Lipstick
Bucket

PROPERTIES – PERSONAL

Cell Phone – ALEX

COSTUMES

Costuming is completely flexible. The cast may be dressed in street clothes, matching outfits, or however the director sees fit.

AUTHOR NOTES

This play was my third attempt at writing a super-flexible ensemble script. My first attempt resulted in play that was very good, but was nothing like what I was really aiming for. My second attempt also yielded a very good play, albeit one that completely missed the mark I was trying to hit. The third time, though, I got exactly what I was after. Persistence is a good thing.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

How to Mess Up Pretty Much Anything was first performed by Madison Academy in Huntsville, Alabama on May 4, 2010. It was directed by Max Dashner with assistant director Cameron Ball, and featured the following cast:

Cameron Ball
Jeremy Clark
Anna Mathis
Rachel Green
Collin Williams
Savannah Gibbs
Taylor Amerson

Natalie Smith
Lindsey Scates
Tyler Miller
Zefen Riggins
Amber Lyons
Samantha Tomlinson
Christian Nichols

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AT RISE: The stage may be bare or set however the director sees fit. The FULL CAST is onstage addressing the audience. THEY are all teenagers. THEY may be dressed in street clothes, matching outfits, or however the director sees fit.

ALEX: Good evening (*or morning or afternoon*), everyone!

BETH: Welcome to (*name of school or performing group*)'s production of How to Mess Up Pretty Much Anything.

JULIE: It's a fact—plays aimed at school-age audiences are expected to teach some sort of lesson.

CHARLIE: In the interest of efficiency and clarity, we've gutted our play of any messy plot or storytelling that might get in the way of conveying our lesson.

SCOTT: And we've cut right to the chase and put our lesson right in the title of the play.

EVERYONE: How to Mess Up Pretty Much Anything!

BETH: Um...I said the title, already.

ANNE: Oh...sorry.

BOB: Oops.

CLARISSA: Got carried away.

JOHN: We messed up.

ALEXIS: Great!

SAMANTHA: Huh?

BRAD: That's totally in keeping with the theme of the play!

CAMILLA: So it's good that we messed up!

SUSAN: It's like an all beef onion ring.

ANDREW: A what?

JORDAN: Onion rings don't have beef in them.

BRITTANY: And they definitely can't be all beef.

SUSAN: They can if you mess them up badly enough.

CARL: That's very profound.

JENNY: (*to SUSAN*) You don't have a lot of life experiences, do you?

SUSAN: Not really, no.

CASSIE: We could make that a cheer!

ARTHUR: A cheer?

CASSIE: Yeah! (*Chants.*) We're-like-an-all-beef-onion-ring! We-can-mess-up-any-thing!

BEN: I can honestly say that I've never thought about comparing myself to an all beef onion ring before.

JEFF: Um, we're clear here that just because we CAN mess up anything, we don't ALWAYS mess up everything, right?

CARTER: Oh, of course.

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JANET: School plays never damage the self-esteem of the student actors.

MIKEY: Unless, say...one of the boys in the play has to dress up like a girl!
Especially a Japanese schoolgirl. Who's carrying a pot roast. Which he spills on his dress. Because he trips over somebody's untied shoelace and everybody laughs!

SETH: We would never do anything like that here.

MIKEY: You've gotta admit...it sounds like a really good way to mess up somebody's self-esteem.

ANNE: Mikey, you sound like you think we should try it.

MIKEY: Yeah, totally!

JULIE: It would be mean.

MIKEY: It would be educational.

ABIGAIL: (*picking up a covered pot and a lipstick from behind a set piece or from offstage*) Funny thing...I've got a lipstick and a pot roast right here.

BETH: (*picking up a wig and a skirt from behind a set piece or from offstage*) And I've got a wig and a skirt.

MIKEY: All right, who's the lucky guy?

ANNE: You!

MIKEY: But...I didn't mean...aw, c'mon...it was my idea...

(Lipstick is applied to MIKEY. The skirt is put on over his pants, the wig is put on his head and the pot is thrust into his arms.)

MIKEY: Wow. I am very deeply traumatized.

CHARLIE: You need to trip and spill the pot roast.

MIKEY: Nobody's shoelaces are untied.

JOHN: He's right.

MIKEY: Well, you messed that up.

STEVE: We can still laugh at you. That's the important part.

MIKEY: True.

(EVERYONE points at MIKEY and laughs.)

Okay. Yup. I'm pretty much psychologically messed up for life now.
(There is a round of cheers and high-fives.)

JANET: You know, this seems awfully mean-spirited for a socially edifying play.

STEPHANIE: Are we messing up the social edification?

ALEX: That would go with the lesson.

JANET: Guys, seriously, what kind of a lesson is "How To Mess Up Pretty Much Anything?"

ANNE: You think maybe it's not a good lesson?

JANET: I'm thinking it's pretty questionable.

ALEXIS: Would you rather demonstrate good manners?

BETH: That sounds boring.

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ALEXIS: Proper hand washing skills?

BOB: Oh, please.

ALEXIS: The proper technique for tying a pink ribbon around a boa constrictor?

BRITTANY: I hate snakes.

ALEXIS: How to survive jumping out of a runaway shopping cart at a high elevation while being manicured by a Viking sumo wrestler?

JORDAN: We don't have a shopping cart.

ALEXIS: Cell phone etiquette?

BRAD: Now you're just being stupid.

ALEXIS: Then "How To Mess Up Pretty Much Anything" is a great lesson.

(ALEX's cell phone rings.)

JOHN: Is that your cell phone?

BOB: You're onstage and you forgot turn it off?

JENNY: What's the matter with you?

ALEX: Sorry! I messed up!

SETH: Oh, well, that's okay then.

ALEX: *(speaking into phone)* Hello? Um, listen, I'm sorry but this really isn't a good time right now. Could you—oh. Oh. Sorry. Right. We will. Bye. *(Puts phone away.)*

SCOTT: Who was that?

ALEX: The principal. *(If the principal is present in the audience, substitute "the superintendent" or "the school board chairman," "the mayor," etc.)*
He says it's not a good lesson.

SAMANTHA: Is he here?

ALEX: No.

SETH: Then how does he know what we're talking about?

ALEX: He's the principal. It's his job to know.

(EVERYONE quietly looks upwards and around in awed silence.)

ALEX: He says the play needs to teach us and the audience how to be better people.

STEVE: It does teach us how to be better people!

JENNY: How?

STEVE: It's so obvious I can't explain it! It just does!

JENNY: I think you're going to have to do better than that.

STEPHANIE: It teaches us the shortcomings of our humanity!

ALEX: I don't think that's what he had in mind.

BEN: It teaches us how to lower people's expectations of us so we don't have to work as hard.

JEFF: There's no way he's going to go for that.

MIKEY: It teaches us the most effective ways to humiliate our friends.

JEFF: Again, not what I think he's got in mind.

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CLARISSA: Oh—I know! We'd actually be teaching people how to be successful. Because if you expect to mess up and you always do, then you've actually got a 100% success rate.

JULIE: Except that then you've messed up at messing up. That would mess up your success rate.

CAMILLA: Huh?

JOHN: Don't think about it too hard. It's like time travel in science fiction movies. After a while it completely stops making sense.

ANDREW: We've got a problem here, don't we?

CHARLIE: Looks that way.

SCOTT: Then what do we do?

CARTER: What can we do?

BETSY: I have no idea.

JOHN: What are our options?

ARTHUR: Does anybody have any ideas?

SAMANTHA: Nope.

BOB: None.

CASSIE: Nada.

ALEX: Then I think the only thing we can do is press on with the original plan.

JORDAN: But the principal doesn't like it.

ALEX: If we stick with it, we're bound to come up with some kind of excuse to justify the lesson.

SUSAN: What if we don't? What if we mess that up?

ABIGAIL: Then at least it'll be consistent with the lesson of the play.

BRAD: And we'll know we made a valiant effort.

CHARLIE: And that knowledge will strengthen and sustain us.

SETH: As we spend the rest of our school years chained up in the janitor's closet.

JENNY: We could just drop the play.

ANNE: What, you mean walk off the stage and be done with it?

JEFF: Why not?

ANDREW: We'd be humiliated.

MIKEY: That would stink.

BEN: Mikey's right. He looks stupid, but he's right. We'll come up with something. In the meantime, let's just get on with the show.

ARTHUR: Okay. What's another way to mess something up?

CLARISSA: Be irresponsible!

BRITTANY: Don't bathe for a month!

JANET: Don't pay attention!

STEVE: Pretend you're a horse!

ALEX: I think we're on to something here. Irresponsibility, not bathing, and not paying attention are all great suggestions, but they're also common sense. Not pretending you're a horse though, you don't get that kind of advice every day.

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STEVE: The thing about the shopping cart and the Viking sumo wrestler kind of inspired me.

ALEX: Great! That's really thinking outside the box—innovative problem-solving that's not bound by so-called conventional wisdom. I think stuff like this is what we need to explore.

JULIE: Do you really think someone would mess something up by pretending they're a horse?

(BRAD and CAMILLA immediately begin play-acting.)

BRAD: So, what makes you think you're qualified to be the new manager of Big Burger?

CAMILLA: Neigh!

BRAD: I'm sorry?

CAMILLA: Neigh.

BRAD: I could have sworn I just heard you neigh.

CAMILLA: Neigh!

BRAD: You did neigh. I see.

CAMILLA: Neigh!

BRAD: Can you not neigh?

CAMILLA: Neigh!

ALEX: What do you think is going to happen here?

JULIE: The person doing the interview is going to assume that the person applying is a nut or a jerk and not hire her.

BRAD: I don't need anyone right now who can neigh. What I could really use is somebody who can quack like a duck. Do you speak quack?

CAMILLA: Neigh!

BRAD: I'm sorry, but I don't think we'll be able to hire you.

ALEX: Very creative, and a lot truth there. Definitely a lesson to be learned.

JULIE: That wasn't exactly what I meant. I mean, sure you could mess up pretty much anything by acting like a horse, but would someone actually do that, do you think?

ABIGAIL: How many people are there in the world?

JULIE: Billions.

ABIGAIL: Right. Billions. Now think of just the ones you know.

JULIE: None of them act like horses.

ABIGAIL: Maybe not, but try to count up all the other dumb things that they do.

JULIE: That could take a while.

ABIGAIL: Right. Now tell me that somewhere on this planet, there isn't someone who isn't going to mess something up by acting like a horse.

JULIE: Point taken.

CARL: Oh! I got one!

ALEX: Okay, what?

CARL: Stick your head in a paint bucket!

SUSAN: That's definitely a thought from outside the box.

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ANNE: With or without paint in it?

CARL: Either. Here, watch. Stephanie, pretend my whole head is covered with paint.

STEPHANIE: Um, okay.

CARL: Hey.

STEPHANIE: Hey.

CARL: How's it going?

STEPHANIE: Good. You?

CARL: Great.

STEPHANIE: You look different.

CARL: You think?

STEPHANIE: Yeah. But it's real subtle. I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

CARL: I stuck my head in a bucket of paint!

STEPHANIE: Really?

CARL: Yeah!

STEPHANIE: I've never tried that before.

CARL: What do you think?

STEPHANIE: It's very...um, what color is it?

CARL: It's triple cobalt blueberry midnight serene.

STEPHANIE: That's a shade of blue, right?

CARL: It's a very special shade of blue.

STEPHANIE: Really? Why is it special?

CARL: Because it said so on the back of the color sample at the hardware store.

STEPHANIE: What else did the color sample say?

CARL: That this is the color of royalty.

STEPHANIE: I thought purple was the color of royalty.

CARL: On Earth, sure. This is the color of royalty on the planet Zuramath.

STEPHANIE: Oh, right. My uncle Marv's from there.

CARL: Liar!

STEPHANIE: What?

CARL: I've met your Uncle Marv and he was clearly born on Pluto.

STEPHANIE: Have you even been to Pluto?

CARL: No.

STEPHANIE: Then how can you say that?

CARL: Because it's cold on Pluto and that's the only way to explain your uncle Marv's huge, bushy mustache.

STEPHANIE: That's not a mustache, that's his nose hair!

CARL: I didn't say it wasn't his nose hair. I said it was a mustache. Pay attention.

STEPHANIE: There's a difference between nose hair and a mustache.

CARL: Depends on the nose hair. Your uncle Marv clearly has Plutonian nose hair.

STEPHANIE: You take that back! He has Zuramathian nose hair!

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CARL: You wouldn't know Zuramathian nose hair if you found it in your ears.

STEPHANIE: Then it wouldn't be nose hair!

CARL: See? You'd make that assumption just because of where you found it!

STEPHANIE: Nose hair grows in your nose. Ear hair grows in your ears.

CARL: Unless someone transplanted your nose hair into your ears while you were asleep. Did you ever think about that, huh?

STEPHANIE: People don't do cross-body-part hair transplants!

CARL: Oh, come on, don't tell me you've never been bored.

STEPHANIE: But that would require like, special equipment and a medical degree or something.

CARL: Of course it wouldn't. All you'd need would be a home body hair transplant kit. They sell them at the florist.

STEPHANIE: Florists don't sell home body hair transplant kits.

CARL: They do if they want to expand their product base to compete with the internet and big chain stores.

STEPHANIE: Who'd want to buy a home body hair transplant kit?

CARL: You've seriously never been bored?

STEPHANIE: Is that why you stuck your head in a bucket of paint? Because you were bored?

CARL: No, I did it because I wanted to look special.

STEPHANIE: Oh, you look special, all right.

CARL: What's that supposed to mean?

STEPHANIE: You figure it out.

CARL: Are you insulting me?

STEPHANIE: Of course not.

CARL: You're being sarcastic, aren't you?

STEPHANIE: No, I think it's awesome. I want to go stick my head in a bucket of paint, too.

CARL: Really?

STEPHANIE: Yeah. I want my head to be the same color as yours.

CARL: Oh. Well, um...this was the last of the triple cobalt blueberry midnight serene that they had in stock.

STEPHANIE: Uh-uh.

CARL: Uh-huh.

STEPHANIE: You're lying.

CARL: I'm being totally honest.

STEPHANIE: You just don't want me to look like you.

CARL: Go to the store and ask.

STEPHANIE: You intentionally picked a color that was almost out of stock, didn't you?

CARL: Well...

STEPHANIE: You're a greedy, selfish pig!

CARL: I guess.

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STEPHANIE: You know what? I'm not putting up with this kind of abuse anymore. This friendship is over.

CARL: And that's what happens when you stick your head in a bucket of paint. You mess up a friendship.

ANNE: Wow.

BRITTANY: Who'd have thought?

JOHN: That was kind of a weird, random, stream of consciousness dialogue the two of you had going.

JEFF: Like, not just outside the box, but a couple miles down the road from it.

CARL: We need to explore all the possibilities we can if we're going to make this lesson work.

SCOTT: There are great truths to be found in fantasy, allegory, and the outer fringes of the human mind.

JORDAN: Do you actually believe that?

SCOTT: Believe it? I don't even know what it means. It was something my English teacher said.

ALEXIS: So what happens if the paint bucket is empty?

BEN: Oh! Lemme do that one!

SAMANTHA: And me!

ALEXIS: Okay.

CHARLIE: (*gets a paint bucket either from offstage or from behind a set piece*) Here.

BEN: You have a bucket.

CHARLIE: I have a bucket.

BEN: I'm not going to ask how it is that you just happen to have a bucket.

CHARLIE: You probably shouldn't.

BEN: Right.

CHARLIE: Thanks.

(*BEN puts the bucket on his head.*)

SAMANTHA: Hey, Ben.

BEN: Hi, Samantha.

SAMANTHA: How's to going?

BEN: Good.

SAMANTHA: You want to go get something to eat?

BEN: Oh, man, I'd love to, but I can't get any food into my mouth.

SAMANTHA: That stinks. How come?

BEN: I've got a bucket on my head.

SAMANTHA: No way.

BEN: Yeah.

SAMANTHA: How'd that happen?

BEN: I put my head in the bucket.

SAMANTHA: How come?

BEN: It was there.

SAMANTHA: I hate it when stuff is there.

BEN: Me, too.

SAMANTHA: It's like you're walking down the street minding your own business and there's this potted plant...some stupid geranium or something, and you try to ignore it, but you can't, so you dump all the dirt into your shoes and your socks get dirty. It's a real bummer.

BEN: Totally.

SAMANTHA: Did the bucket get stuck on your head?

BEN: No, why?

SAMANTHA: You said you can't eat.

BEN: Right. Because there's a bucket blocking my mouth.

SAMANTHA: Can't you take the bucket off?

BEN: Sure.

SAMANTHA: So why don't you?

BEN: For one thing, the sun's awfully bright today and this helps block out the light.

SAMANTHA: You could put on sunglasses.

BEN: I don't have any sunglasses. Just a bucket. Also, I won't hurt my head if I wreck my bike.

SAMANTHA: Right. The bucket protects your head.

BEN: Yeah, I guess it would. Mostly it's because I can't see to ride a bicycle.

SAMANTHA: Huh.

BEN: Yeah.

SAMANTHA: So why don't you take the bucket off so you can eat?

BEN: Because it's protecting my eyes against bright light and it's keeping me from getting hurt in a bike wreck. What's the matter with you?

SAMANTHA: Sorry.

BEN: Plus, it's there, you know.

SAMANTHA: You can't argue with logic like that.

BEN: I'm really hungry, though.

SAMANTHA: I'm not sure how to help you with that.

BEN: Could you get a blowtorch and cut a mouth hole in the bucket?

SAMANTHA: I lost my blowtorch at the mall last Friday.

BEN: Aw, man. If I don't figure out something soon, I'm going to starve to death.

SAMANTHA: There's also a chance you could walk into the street and get hit by a car.

BEN: I hadn't thought of that.

SAMANTHA: Okay, well, I'm going to go get a burger. I'll see you later, if you're not dead and stuff.

BEN: Okay, sure. Later. Maybe.

SAMANTHA: And that's how you mess up your chance at quality time with friends by having an empty bucket on your head.

ANDREW: Harrowing.

CASSIE: Disturbing.

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JENNY: Truly.

(BEN removes the bucket from his head. ALEX's phone rings.)

ALEX: Hello? Oh, hello, sir. We're doing our best. We thought the non-conventional approach was worth exploring...creative problem-solving and whatnot. Yes, sir. No, sir. You're what, sir? Oh. I'll tell them, sir. Goodbye. *(Puts phone away.)*

SETH: Was that...?

ALEX: The principal *(or mayor, etc.)*. He just got out of a meeting downtown and he's on his way here to personally kick us off the stage.

BETSY: But we're not done, yet.

ALEX: He doesn't think we're going to pull off a socially edifying lesson and he doesn't want us to ruin the school's reputation any more than we already have.

JEFF: We need to stop now.

ALEX: No—we don't have any choice but to keep going and try to figure something out. It's our only hope.

JANET: There is no hope.

ARTHUR: There's always hope.

JULIE: A sure-fire way to mess something up is to think there's hope when there's really no hope.

ANNE: We have to believe.

JOHN: Likewise, another surefire way to mess something up is self-delusion.

STEVE: Like wearing the clothes aunt Gladys gave you for Halloween out to the mall and thinking it will be okay.

JORDAN: People don't generally give gifts for Halloween.

STEVE: Aunt Gladys does.

JENNY: When people do give gifts for Halloween, it's like small toys and stuff.

STEVE: Aunt Gladys gives clothes.

JEFF: Like vampire capes and disco jackets?

STEVE: Like quilted pants with dog drool on them.

BOB: Oh, wow.

CASSIE: What does she give at Christmas?

STEVE: Food.

JANET: What kind of food?

STEVE: Disgusting food.

ANDREW: Fruitcake?

STEVE: Sausage butter.

ARTHUR: Butter that goes on sausage?

STEVE: Butter made from sausage.

BETH: That's really gross.

SETH: Probably almost as gross as the chains in the custodial closet.

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ALEX: Listen, one really guaranteed way to mess up is to let other people make your decisions for you. We can't let the principal make the decision. Our fates are in our hands.

JULIE: Another guaranteed way to mess up is to assume you know everything.

ALEX: That only applies when you assume that everyone else knows nothing, especially adults, and extra-especially when you let the adults you assume know nothing make decisions for you even though you assume you know everything. I'm not assuming I know everything... just that it's possible for us to pull this off. Now who's with me?

(Silence.)

Pizza when it's over! My treat!

EVERYONE EXCEPT THE "J" NAMES: We're with you! Pizza! Defy authority!

CHARLIE: Short term goals rule!

ALEX: Now think, people! Stretch your minds! Give us some bold, new ideas!

BOB: Serve boiled Cheerios!

ALEX: That's the spirit!

MIKEY: Shave your head with an inner tube!

ALEX: Keep it coming!

SCOTT: Stop to smell the roses with an asparagus in your nose!

ALEX: The path to our affirmation lies ahead! I can feel it!

CARTER: Wash your hands with photocopy toner!

ALEX: Yes!!! Explore that one!

BETSY: My hands are kind of dirty.

CARTER: Here. I've got some toner from the photocopy machine you can wash your hands with. (*Mimes holding toner.*)

BETSY: But won't my hands get stained?

CARTER: Nah, that's just an urban legend.

BETSY: But copier toner is black.

CARTER: Yeah.

BETSY: And it stains stuff.

CARTER: Yeah.

BETSY: So it'll stain my hands black.

CARTER: Of course it won't.

BETSY: Are you sure?

CARTER: Positive.

BETSY: But I'm pretty sure—

CARTER: You're wrong.

BETSY: But—

CARTER: Nope.

BETSY: How can—

CARTER: It just does.

BETSY: Okay. I'll give it a try.

CARTER: Here.

BETSY: It's really black.

CARTER: Yup.

BETSY: It's not coming off.

CARTER: Careful, now. Don't touch me.

BETSY: How come?

CARTER: Because you've got toner all over your hands.

BETSY: You said—

CARTER: Just keep rubbing it in.

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