

# SHOUTING FIRE IN A CROWDED THEATER

By Jerry Rabushka

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**SHOUTING FIRE IN A CROWDED THEATER***A Ten Minute Comedy Monologue***By Jerry Rabushka**

**SYNOPSIS:** You're not supposed to shout "fire!" in a crowded theater, but what if that's your part in the play? Melinda gets cast in the role of the woman who discovers the great Chicago fire, and to get into character she practices her lines wherever she can. It works great, as she sows panic throughout the neighborhood, school, and even a grocery store. After a significant amount of disciplinary action, it's time to perform, and the strangest thing happens...

**CAST OF CHARACTERS***(1 female)*

Melinda Wyden (f)..... A student at Xyborg High.

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**MELINDA WYDEN:** Melinda Wyden here, and today I wanted to talk to you about doing theater. Learning your lines and all that. Learning how to integrate your role from a play into society at large. (*Foreshadowing.*) And the consequences for doing so.

Xyborg High Drama Club was doing a play called *Mrs. O'Leary*, about the great Chicago fire and Mrs. O'Leary's cow that started it by kicking over a lantern. Now I know that history has examined the evidence and has since exonerated the cow from the kick, but this was an old play. We did old plays because the director had yet to discover the Brooklyn Publishers catalog, which is chock full of appropriate material for teens and much more importantly, their easily offended teachers and parents.

Our director, Mrs. Schubert, wanted us to be very familiar with our lines in order to get past the *Our Town* debacle of last semester. Who knew that play was four hours long? It is when nobody even remembers which town is "ours." Finally the girl who played the lead five years ago got up and finished it because her younger sister didn't remember her part. (*Admits her own fault, with a weak smile.*) Oh, thanks, Sis!

(*More upbeat.*) This time, things were different Mrs. Schubert was not about to leave this play unfinished...

(*As Mrs. Schubert, comically "inspirational".*) As you move about your daily life, I want you to incorporate lines from the play and see how your inflection and demeanor affects your audience.

So, we did.

(*As a Clerk.*) Thank you for choosing Xyborg Valley Coffee, how may we help you?

(*As an Actor, over the top.*) The entire city is going up in flames!

Or (*As a Second Clerk.*) Welcome to Macy's [or current department store], is there anything I can show you?

(As *Second Actor*.) I've lost everything, absolutely everything.

(As a *Second Clerk*.) Then perhaps we should start in the underwear department.

At school it was the same, and we quoted the play in every class.

(As a *Teacher*.) Mark, what was the cause of the Boston Tea Party?

(As *Mark*.) The cow did it! The cow kicked over the lantern and set the city on fire! We never knew if the British were coming or not because the cow kicked over the lantern! "One if by land and one of by sea" doesn't help!

My role, after blowing the lead in *Our Town* the year before, was relatively simple. Mrs. Schubert was giving me a chance to redeem myself. "Melinda, I want to trust you with a smaller role and see how you handle the responsibility." I was cast as Mrs. O'Leary's cow's neighbor, and I was the one who discovered the fire before it swept through the city and turned Chicago into the nightmare from which it took the Cubs 107 years to recover – and the White Sox 88.

My most important part was to announce the impending doom: (Shouts.) "Fire! Fire!" I took Mrs. Schubert's advice and practiced my lines where they would have maximum impact, to see how to best play them in front of our audience.

First, I tried it on the bus to school. (Shouts.) "Fire! Fire!" That was effective. Nobody on the bus made it to school. I did, but I missed play practice due to detention.

Next I tried it at the grocery store. "Cleanup in aisle three" was never quite so impressive.

(As a *Young Child*.) Mom, I want noodles.

(As a *Mom*.) Honey we've got to go before the place burns down.

*(As a Young Child.)* Mommy why is that weird lady screaming?

*(As a Mom.)* Get out! Fire!

Finally, I tried it at our family's house of worship during a meditative prayer. I waited until they were deep in thought, and then... *(Shouts.)* "fire!" I definitely had the touch! I knew that when I walked onto that stage, Chicago would know that it was, in fact, on... *(Notices people are coming for her.)*

*(As a Policewoman in authority, interrupting.)* "Melinda Wyden, may we have a word with you?" said a policewoman.

*(As a School Principal.)* "Several of us would like to have a word with you," the principal added.

Well, a word was what I was about. *(Shouting.)* "Fire!"

"That's exactly the word we'd like to have with you," they said.

As you can well imagine, I was soon invoking my rights granted in the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. And then the fifth. According to our constitution, not only could I say what I wanted per the first, but I didn't have to answer for it per the fifth. Unfortunately, the right to bear arms, per the second, was becoming very popular with my detractors.

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