

THE SHOW CAN'T GO ON (BUT IT MUST!)

By Michael Druce

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THE SHOW CAN'T GO ON (BUT IT MUST!)

A Full Length Comedic Farce

By Michael Druce

SYNOPSIS: Less than twenty-four hours before the opening of their dinner theater show, the cast of *Wine, Cheese, and Murder* learns their director has been arrested for plagiarism. Left without a script, the cast decides there is only thing to do. Quit! But contracts have been signed, tickets sold, food purchased, and important guests invited. The show's producer, an amateur playwright with more ego than talent, decides this will be her moment of glory. The show will go on! And everything that can go wrong will go wrong. Every actor who has feared being in a show that has disaster written all over it, *The Show Can't Go On (But it Must!)* is that nightmare come true.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(6 females, 5 males)

- RONNIE MEADE (m)..... Production technician also playing the role of Dr. Peter Pine. He is in his twenties and in a relationship with Hailey. He takes his responsibilities seriously. *(37 lines)*
- HAILEY BALES (f)..... Hailey is an aspiring young actress in her twenties, playing the role of Paige Turner. She is high strung and image conscious. *(50 lines)*
- RICK STYLES (m)..... Rick plays the role of Captain Anthony (Tony) Strong. He is in thirties and socially awkward. *(52 lines)*

- HUGH MOORE (m)..... Hugh is a respected actor who often plays roles of authority. Here he begins with the role of Inspector Sherring. A man in his forties, Hugh is experienced and reliable. *(91 lines)*
- SABRINA WAYFAIRE (f)..... Sabrina is in her fifties. No longer the ingénue, Sabrina is resigned to playing matronly roles. She has been chosen to play the role of Sunny Brooke. *(87 lines)*
- MITCH CAMERON (m)..... Mitch is the dashing leading man for whom age is never an issue. At fifty, he is levelheaded and down to earth. He plays the role of the wealthy Simon Cabot. *(135 lines)*
- LARKIN PEEKS (f)..... In her thirties, Larkin is a capable actress who plays plenty of lead roles. She plays the role of the female lead, Alice Strap. *(120 lines)*
- VANCE PROFIT (m)..... Vance, a reliable actor in his late forties, generally plays supporting roles. He is an accomplished and classically trained actor who cannot keep his feelings to himself. He plays Jacobs, the surly butler. *(120 lines)*
- RENATA ZENDAYA (f)..... Renata is an acid tongued actress whose opinions are not always appreciated. In her forties, she plays Loveless, the maid. *(153 lines)*

ERLENE BEAUMONT (f)..... Erlene is a well-meaning woman in her fifties, whose duties as theater manager and production director prove overwhelming. She is the type who wants to do everything asked of her but collapses under pressure. (68 lines)

OLIVIA DAVIS BASCOMBE (f)..... Olivia is a wealthy socialite who fancies herself a theatre entrepreneur and playwright. She has more ego than talent. In her late forties or early fifties, she is outrageously affected and theatrical. She wears her pretense as a designer dress, and shows no awareness whatsoever of how utterly preposterous she is. (134 lines)

DURATION: 90 minutes.

TIME: Present day.

SETTING: Dinner theater rehearsal/production.

SET

The set may be as simple or elaborate as desired. Minimally a couch is needed, chairs, and a credenza. To the back or side of the stage will be an elevated sound cubicle. Erlene needs to be visible at all times. The audience needs to see her reactions to the stress of getting all of her sound cues wrong.

COSTUMES

ACT ONE – Cast is dressed in age appropriate every day clothing.

ACT TWO – All but Erlene are dressed in elegant eveningwear. Erlene will dress up for her evening as sound technician.

PROPS

ACT ONE

- *Tablet for sound cues.
- *Phonograph
- *Radio (wireless)
- *Telephone
- *A decorative pistol on a stand.
- Basket of artificial fruit
- Decorative letters
- Sample scripts

*These props will be removed during the break between acts.

ACT TWO

- Decorative letters
- Martini glasses (optional)
- Banana peel
- Wheelchair
- Sound effects CDs
- CD player
- Easel with shroud
- 7 deadly sins poster
- Magnetic board

SPECIAL EFFECTS

Sound is really the only technical requirement in this show. In Act One, when Ronnie is running sound, the cues are on time and correct. In Act Two, when Erlene is running sound, every cue is wrong until the end of the show. Numerous sound apps for tablets and laptops are available via the internet, as well as sound effects. The sound effects are indicated in the script. A variety of effects may be substituted; however, the clang of the skiff bell and the ocean liner blast really ought to be used.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Everything That Can Go Wrong Will Go Wrong. Every actor who has feared being in a show that has disaster written all over it, *The Show Can't Go On (But it Must!)* is that nightmare come true. A capable group of actors are forced to do a show they know is a turkey. The acting challenge here is that the actors get to play two roles: actors and the roles they are playing. It should be apparent to the audience during the 'performance' of the play within the play, the actors are very much aware of how bad the play is. Sound cues are blown, props are missing, one actor is in a wheelchair, but the show must go on. While the play allows for what appears to be lots of mistakes, the play must be well rehearsed.

The Show Can't Go On (But It Must!) presents many opportunities for improvisation. However, improvisation should not be a substitute for rehearsal. The paradox of rehearsal is to practice a show so well that it appears spontaneous. When rehearsal is lacking, what should look spontaneous often appears awkward and draws attention to itself. In Act Two the actors will occasionally go out of character and away from Olivia's script. Don't overdo this. Despite the humiliation of a horrible script, these actors are professionals and would like to survive with some sense of dignity.

The role of Erlene becomes all pantomime in Act Two. Given the burden of running sound, she collapses under the pressure. If your production allows for drinking, then she may be tipsy. Otherwise she is just a nervous wreck. Inexplicably she will act out the seven deadly sins, and then throughout the second act she will play the wrong sound cues and react in ways large and small to her mistakes.

Dinner Theater Format: If coffee and dessert are to be served, the break between acts works well.

The Wheelchair: Hugh may use a wheelchair, crutches (with line changes) or a walker. It shouldn't be lost on anyone that sneaking around killing off people using any of these devices is absurd.

THE MAGNETIC BOARD

- The name tiles on the magnetic board will be arranged in the following way.
- The tiles in parentheses will be added during Simon's speech.
- The F and the S of Fred Sherring should be detachable so Larkin can quickly reveal the actual identity of the Inspector.

- FRED SHERRING – pre-set
- (HERR DINGER)
- F/RED S/HERRING
- KEITH MILLER – pre-set
- (I'M THE KILLER)
- SIMON CABOT – pre-set
- (MOIST BACON)
- ALICE STRAP – pre-set
- (LACIE PARTS)
- (LICE TRAP)
- PAIGE TURNER – pre-set
- (EAGER TURNIP)

Making the magnetic tiles: Cut a strip of project board to the desired length. Write the name on one side. Fasten a strip of adhesive backed magnet on the back. Make sure the tiles are large enough to be seen from the audience. Magnetic tape is available at hardware stores.

ACT ONE, SCENE 1

AT RISE: *Thursday afternoon. A rehearsal of the final scene of Wine, Cheese, and Murder is about to conclude. HUGH, MITCH, RENATA, VANCE, RICK, HAILEY and SABRINA are on stage. The other cast members are watching.*

HUGH: I have worked on plenty of tough cases in my time, but none as tough as this. Who killed Shepherd Hope? Clues point to everyone, but hard evidence, that's another story. And so we must look at motive. Is it Alpha Tolman, whose hatred of Shepherd Hope was legendary? Were those your leggings wrapped around the doctor's neck?

RENATA: Every woman on this cruise has a pair of those things. Good luck proving they are mine.

HUGH: Or is it Barden Blue who never forgave Shepherd Hope for stealing every girlfriend he ever had?

RICK: That's not true. He only stole the rich and beautiful ones.

HUGH: Could it be Red Alder, former high school hunk and football star, whose good looks and victory over the Piedmont Pirates have long since faded, and whose only chance to succeed was to blackmail his former friend and teammate?

MITCH: If you could prove your accusations, Detective Danby, you would have arrested me already.

HUGH: Or perhaps is it Heidi Gruyere his long suffering mistress who waited years for Dr. Hope and his wife to divorce, only to discover she would always be the other woman.

HAILEY: I have never been the other woman. I am *the* woman!

HUGH: Is it Vanity Hope who stands to inherit millions as a result of the death of her fifth and very wealthy husband?

HAILEY: No, it's not me. I loved Shepherd—most of the time.

HUGH: And finally we come to Hannah Reserve, whose life would have had meaning had Shepherd Hope only looked twice at her. But instead, he never looked once, did he Miss Reserve?

SABRINA: Not once, not even a look of contempt, so yes, yes I killed him! I wanted to kill them all. I hated their cliques, their money, and their clothes. They thought they were so superior to the rest of us. Shepherd Hope wouldn't give me the time of day. To him I was nothing. One day I dropped my books in front him. He smiled and I thought he would show me some kindness. Instead he called me klutz and stepped on my notebook. I have spent a lifetime sitting at the other lunch table. We'll not anymore. If I can't sit with the popular kids, neither can he.

HUGH: One last thing, Miss Reserve! Was sitting at the popular table really such a big deal?

SABRINA: We know where you sat, don't we, Detective?

HUGH: Take her away, Sergeant.

VANCE leads SABRINA off.

MITCH: Relieved, darling?

HAILEY: Oh yes! What a horrible demented woman. I should never have gotten through this without you, Red.

MITCH: You can put it all behind you. It's all over. You can look forward now. We'll both look forward—together.

RONNIE, who is temporarily filling in for the absent director, leaves his position at the sound desk.

RONNIE: Cue music, lights down. Good job guys.

The others applaud.

RONNIE: I think we've got this. *Wine, Cheese, and Murder* opens tomorrow night and I think we're going to knock them dead.

HAILEY: (*Putting her arms around RONNIE.*) And tonight, mister, I am going to knock you dead.

SABRINA: Oh, to be young and in love again.

RICK: I'm young. Sort of.

ALL stare at RICK and then carry on as if he hadn't said anything.

HAILEY: Sabrina, you wouldn't be just a wee bit jealous, would you?

SABRINA: Jealous? I'm not jealous.

HAILEY: Then why the need to say anything?

SABRINA: You two can't keep your hands off each other. Do you know how disgusting it is watching you two engage in excessive displays of public affection?

HAILEY: Excessive?

SABRINA: Yes!

HAILEY: Then you shouldn't watch if it bothers you so much.

LARKIN: Ladies, if you're finished, I'd like to thank Ronnie for stepping in for Walt.

ALL applaud.

RONNIE: No problem. Glad to help out.

HAILEY: I absolutely love this play.

SABRINA: That's because you're playing the lead role. You're playing the ingénue and as usual I'm playing *The Antiques Roadshow*.

RENATA: You should be thankful you have a role.

SABRINA: Thank you, Renata. Apparently I didn't get the memo that it's 'Pick on Sabrina Day.'

LARKIN: Hailey is right. This is a really good play.

SABRINA: I didn't say the play isn't good. I'm just not crazy about playing a spinster again.

LARKIN: This is some of Walt's best writing. No, let me amend that. This is Walt's best writing.

VANCE: It's more focused and tighter than anything else he's ever written. If I hadn't seen his name on the script, I would have sworn it was written by someone else.

RICK: Too bad he's not here to hear the praise. I'm getting worried. We haven't heard from him all day.

RENATA: I've never known Walt to go missing in action.

HAILEY: I just had a thought. Wouldn't it be weird if Walt were murdered? *Headline: murder mystery director murdered!*

RENATA: Yes, hilarious. Thanks for that upbeat thought.

HUGH: Walt is such a stickler about being on time. This is not like him. He never misses a rehearsal.

RENATA: Tell me about it. I missed a rehearsal once and he threatened to kick me out of the show.

VANCE: Did he kick you out?

RENATA: No.

VANCE: Why not?

RENATA: We had a—thing--for each other.

MITCH: Renata, is there anyone you haven't had a—thing--with?

RICK: Me. She hasn't had a—thing--with me.

RENATA: Rick, there's a difference between having a thing and being 'The Thing.'

RICK: Renata, that's really harsh.

RENATA: I know, Honey. But its better you know the truth now. Don't wait for me.

HUGH: Are we sure Walt isn't locked his room? He could be unconscious.

RONNIE: I've knocked, I've called, I could kick in the door.

HUGH: Before we smash up the place, someone needs to get a key from housekeeping.

MITCH: That should be Renata.

RENATA: Why me?

MITCH: You're the one who had a thing Walt.

RENATA: Not anymore.

SABRINA: What about the manager of the playhouse?

LARKIN: You think Erlene and Walt have a—thing—going on?

SABRINA: Oh, that takes my breath away.

HAILEY: Why? As a mature woman, I would think you'd have quite a different opinion.

SABRINA: Only when it comes to myself.

RONNIE: For the record, Walt isn't the only guy Erlene is hitting on.

LARKIN: You? Oh, come on, Ronnie. You? She's old enough to be your mother.

RONNIE: I'm young, intelligent, good looking. To a woman like her, I'm an Adonis.

VANCE: Ronnie is right.

LARKIN: You think Ronnie is an Adonis?

VANCE: No. I'm talking about Erlene. She's been giving me the eye as well.

RICK: Why hasn't she been giving me the eye?

SABRINA: You're kidding, right? She'd turn into a pillar of salt.

RICK: Does everyone feel that way?

Long silence.

HAILEY: This is getting creepy. Is someone going up to make sure or not?

ERLENE enters in a hurry.

ERLENE: I am so sorry I am late. It's just awful, absolutely awful. It's the most awful thing you can imagine.

LARKIN: We were just talking about something awful, and it was impossible to imagine.

ERLENE: I've been at the police station all morning. Walt Goldman has been arrested.

SABRINA: The director of our play has been arrested?

ERLENE: Early this morning he was hauled away in handcuffs.

LARKIN: Police handcuffs?

ERLENE: Well, yes. What other kinds are there?

RENATA: Well—never mind.

MITCH: Why was he arrested?

ERLENE: Well--

LARKIN: What happened?

ERLENE: You see, I, uh—

RENATA: When is he getting out?

ERLENE: That is, I mean—

MITCH: Say something!

ERLENE: I am trying. He isn't getting out. He can't post bond.

RONNIE: What did he do?

ERLENE: It's positively indecent.

RENATA: This sounds interesting.

LARKIN: He hasn't run off with the housekeeper, has he?

SABRINA: She's young enough to be his granddaughter!

ERLENE: No, he hasn't run off with the housekeeper!

VANCE: Who has he run off with?

ERLENE: No one. He hasn't run off with anyone. He's been charged with plagiarism!

ALL: Plagiarism!

HUGH: Is that still a thing?

SABRINA: Of course it's a thing!

HUGH: What with the Internet and all, I thought everything was fair game.

SABRINA: Sorry, Hugh, but cutting and pasting someone else's writing is a crime.

HUGH: Wow! I better share that with my kids.

MITCH: Never mind that. What did he plagiarize?

ERLENE: This show. The play we're working on.

RICK: He stole *Wine, Cheese, and Murder*?

ERLENE: Yes. He stole it from his ex-business partner.

HUGH: What does that mean?

ERLENE: His partner left the script on his desk and Walt took it.

HUGH: We know what that means. What does it mean for the production?

MITCH: The show goes up tomorrow night.

RENATA: Mitch, it's not as if we need Walt. We know the lines and the blocking. We can do the show without Walt.

ERLENE: No we can't. We can't use the script.

ALL: What?

HAILEY: We've memorized the whole show.

ERLENE: I know and that's why I'm about to have a nervous breakdown.

LARKIN: Have you called the ex-partner?

ERLENE: The man is being a complete jerk. He won't let us use the script.

RICK: That's crazy. Why is he punishing us? It's Walt's fault. He shouldn't be mad at us.

ERLENE: He won't listen to reason. He sounded very mean and very angry on the phone.

LARKIN: Well, that's it then. We're done.

ERLENE: No! We can't just abandon the show. A lot of money has been spent on this production. We have bills to pay. Tickets have been sold. Food has been ordered. We can't just forget about it. The playhouse is barely in the black.

SABRINA: That's your problem. Not ours.

ERLENE: You're under contract.

RENATA: I signed on to do a show with Walt Goldman. No Walt--no show--no me.

ERLENE: Renata, your contract is with the playhouse, not with Walt Goldman.

LARKIN: Erlene, we're reasonable people—some of us. But the show is tomorrow night and we have no script. It would take a miracle.

ERLENE: I believe in miracles. I think we can do this.

VANCE: This is not one of those 1940s Hollywood musicals where everyone suddenly comes together and pulls off the impossible. Get a grip! This is real life. Are you nuts?

ERLENE: I have an idea!

MITCH: I have a better idea. Set fire to the playhouse and collect the insurance money.

ERLENE: What if I take over as director?

MITCH: Really, you should think about setting fire to this place.

RENATA: Before we burn the place down, have you ever directed anything?

ERLENE: No, but I've been assistant director on lots of shows.

RICK: That's like saying I roller-skate, therefore I know how to fly a plane.

Pause. ALL look at RICK and then carry on.

RENATA: Erlene, even if you had the talent to direct a show, there's still one small problem. No script!

ERLENE: I've thought about that. Olivia is on her way.

HUGH: Who is Olivia?

ERLENE: She is the chief benefactor of the Eleanor VanHeusen Arts Center, Olivia Davis Bascombe. She's just returned from Europe.

LARKIN: That's great, but who is she?

ERLENE: She took over after Eleanor VanHeusen face planted into a bowl of spaghetti.

MITCH: Two things. First, none of us has ever heard of this woman, but that doesn't really make a lot of difference, because—and this is the second and most important point—we open tomorrow night!

ERLENE: I think you have the wrong attitude about this. When life hands you lemons what do we do?

MITCH: Add vodka to the lemon juice, make a martini, get a can of gas, and start a fire.

ERLENE: No, we are going to make lemonade!

RENATA: Call a cab. I'm leaving.

ALL: (*Ad lib.*) Me too. I'm out. It's over. We're done.

ERLENE: Then we have no choice but to sue for breach of contract and file a complaint with the actor's guild.

VANCE: Are you threatening us?

ERLENE: What choice do we have? The show is a sellout. Olivia will be here any moment. Just listen to her. Give her a chance or risk being sued.

HAILEY: I can't afford to be sued. It would be all over social media in no time.

RENATA: You know what they say, 'Live by the tweet, die by the tweet.'

SABRINA: I can't afford to look like an idiot.

RENATA: You've overcome that before; you can do it again.

OLIVIA enters.

OLIVIA: Hello, hello, hello!

OLIVIA and ERLENE make a big show of kissing.

ERLENE: Everyone, this is my friend and arts patron, Olivia Davis Bascombe.

OLIVIA: What a pleasure to meet all of you at last. I do hope you have enjoyed your time here at the Eleanor VanHeusen Arts Center, or as we like to call it for short, EVAC.

MITCH: I'm about to evac right now.

OLIVIA: My heart goes out to all of you. When Erlene called, I was just devastated, positively devastated. I cancelled everything and came as soon as possible. This situation with Walt Goldman is so unsettling.

HAILEY: Unsettling? I'm about to wet my pants.

VANCE: That's it. We can't pull this off.

HAILEY: I said I'm about to, I didn't say I have. *(Beat.)* Oh, that's not what you meant.

VANCE: We open tomorrow night.

OLIVIA: To paraphrase Golda Meir, we must govern the clock, not be governed by it. I am nothing, if not an optimist. I look upon this as an opportunity.

RENATA: We look upon it as a disaster. Got to go.

ERLENE: Give her a chance. Olivia is a talent ready to burst forth.

OLIVIA: Erlene you little minx, you embarrass me.

HUGH: False humility aside, what do you bring to the table?

OLIVIA: Naturally I did some creative writing in high school.

RENATA: Naturally.

OLIVIA: I belong to the local writers group. The president of our group says my writing has an indefinable quality about it, something that mere words cannot express.

MITCH: Before you get a cramp from patting yourself on the back, have you ever published a play?

OLIVIA: Not yet, but I have written lots of plays: murder mysteries, romantic comedies. They swirl around in my head.

SABRINA: Is there anything in that head of yours that is short and easy to stage?

OLIVIA: I have just the thing. I am working on something I call *The Eighth Deadly Sin*.

LARKIN: There are only seven deadly sins.

OLIVIA: The eighth deadly sin is murder. Seven people are invited to a remote island for a weekend and—

MITCH: One by one they are all murdered because each of them has committed one of the seven deadly sins, except for the murderer who's committing the eighth deadly sin.

OLIVIA: Well, yes. How could you possibly know?

MITCH: That idea has been done to death.

OLIVIA: My play will be an exception. There are seven guests, the butler, and his wife.

RONNIE: That's a cast of nine. We have only eight actors.

OLIVIA: Who here doesn't have a role?

ERLENE: Ronnie. He's the soundman.

OLIVIA: Ronnie, you've just been promoted. You're playing a role

RONNIE: No, that won't work. I can't do sound, and props, and lights, and play a role.

OLIVIA: Ronnie, one man in his time plays many parts.

RONNIE tries to protest.

OLIVIA: No, no, no! I won't hear of it. Understandably you have doubts. But never fear, Olivia is here. Take a lunch break, relax. I'll hammer out that script in no time.

RENATA: The script isn't finished?

OLIVIA: It's a work in progress.

MITCH: You can't write a script in one afternoon. There's only one person I know who can do that—[insert name.]

OLIVIA: In times such as these I take solace in the words of William Shakespeare: Our doubts are traitors. We lose the good when we fear to attempt. Come, Erlene.

OLIVIA and ERLENE exit.

MITCH: Shakespeare also said, 'Nothing will come of nothing.' We are standing on the deck of The Titanic.

The cast and crew freeze. SFX: A HARP trill to suggest the passage of time.

ACT ONE, SCENE 2

AT START: *Later that evening. ALL unfreeze; snap back to life. They are deep into the first read through*

HAILEY: Is it me? Or did time fly?

RENATA: Are you kidding? I'm exhausted.

HAILEY: Are you saying that in character or as yourself?

RENATA: Both. Put us both out of our misery.

ERLENE enters with a handful of scripts. She passes a script to each cast member.

ERLENE: Ready for the next scene, hot off the press, as they say. By the way, Ronnie nice job on those sound cues.

RONNIE: I am flying by the seat of my pants. None of these cues are programmed into my tablet. I am making it up as I go.

ERLENE: Keep up the good work. You're the best, Ronnie.

HAILEY: Don't I know it?

SABRINA: Good grief! You two are so gross.

ERLENE: Enter Jacobs, who falls onto the couch. A moment later Loveless enters.

VANCE enters as if he is about to drop dead. He falls onto the couch. RENATA, who has been standing off turning pages, enters.

RENATA: Holy moly, how long is this play? It's like *The Odyssey*.

VANCE: Slight difference, *The Odyssey* makes sense. This is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying stupidity.

RENATA: I'll re-enter.

RENATA steps back and enters the scene. She also looks as if she is about to drop dead. As she is about to fall onto the couch, she sees VANCE and stops herself in time. She gives a brief, but unconvincing scream.

VANCE: Good Scott, Loveless! Why are you so anxious?

RENATA: You startled me. I'm absolutely on edge. It's that detective.

VANCE: You mean Inspector Sherring, Inspector Fred Sherring?

RENATA: Yes, there's something not right about him. He's been giving me the eye.

VANCE: You are an eyeful. (*Groans at how cheesy the line is.*) Ignore him. He's not here on official business. He is just one of the guests.

RENATA: Why are you just lying here? We have work to do.

VANCE: I am having a little rest.

RENATA: Rest? I'm the one who needs a rest. I'm exhausted. Can't you see that? Do I look exhausted?

VANCE: Worse!

OLIVIA enters.

OLIVIA: (*Whispering quietly to ERLENE.*) How's it going?

ERLENE gives her the okay sign. SFX: The CLANG of a BELL. A small skiff is approaching.

VANCE: That will be the skiff from the mainland with Dr. Pine

RENATA: According to the guest list, our last guest.

VANCE: Yes.

RENATA drops onto the couch.

VANCE: What are you doing?

RENATA: I told you I'm exhausted.

VANCE: Dr. Pine will be here any moment.

RENATA: We have plenty of time. It takes forever to climb those steps. I am so jealous of all these people here for a weekend of rest and relaxation.

VANCE: Jealous? Why?

RENATA: What with all their money and nice clothes and fancy things, when do we get to live the good life?

VANCE: We don't, that's why we live downstairs instead of upstairs.

RENATA: I am just sick of it, sick of it, sick of it, sick of it! (*Out of character.*) Stop! Wait! Cut. (*To OLIVIA.*) Repetitions usually occur in threes. Did you intend for *sick of it* to be repeated four times?

OLIVIA: Yes.

RENATA: Oh. (*To VANCE.*) It's your line.

VANCE: I know. Wealth and fame are not all they are cracked up to be.

RENATA: You really are an idiot. My mother said that.

VANCE: Loveless, you do go on.

RENATA: Yes, I know, but – (*Out of character.*) Time! Stop! I hate the name Loveless. Loveless makes her sound pathetic.

OLIVIA: She is pathetic. Hers is a name like Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman*.

RENATA: *Death of a Salesman*! Really! This isn't Broadway. This is a theater on a street named Broadway.

OLIVIA: Her name is a metaphor. Low-man. Love-less. There is no love in what she is doing.

RENATA: So it's not a metaphor for her love life?

OLIVIA: No. It's a metaphor for how she feels about her job. She's eaten up with envy for the people she works for. Carry on.

ERLENE: Let's take it from *you do go on*.

VANCE: You do go on.

RENATA: I am tired of living downstairs. I hate my job.

VANCE: I take no pleasure in being a butler, no matter how cool they make it look on *Downton Abbey*. (*Pause.*) Wait a minute! Doesn't this play take place in the 1940s?

OLIVIA: Yes.

VANCE: *Downton Abbey* is an anachronism.

OLIVIA: I will make a note. Thank you.

VANCE: Accuracy is important. Those are the kinds of mistakes that bother audiences. As a writer—

OLIVIA: How many plays have you written, Mr. Profit? (*Before VANCE can answer.*) That's what I thought!

SABRINA: Can we please get on with it?

ERLENE: Yes, yes, let's carry on.

SABRINA: Thank you. Otherwise I won't have enough age defying make up to get me through the weekend.

RENATA: I was sure you had already run out.

SABRINA: Renata, must you always be so abrasive?

RENATA: Always.

ERLENE: The line is *I feel as if we're living a bleak, meaningless existence*.

MITCH: Truer words were never spoken

RENATA: I feel as if we're living a bleak, meaningless existence, as if I'm character in a Franz Kafka novel. (*Aside.*) As if anyone in the audience will understand that allusion.

VANCE: Soon we will be taking that passage to India and there will be no more wishing our lives away. We'll be able to do nothing for the rest of our lives.

RENATA: If only that were true.

OLIVIA: Let me just break in here. Vance, punch up these lines. They are important. They provide essential background information into the lives of Jacobs and Loveless. Carry on, I'll be back in a moment. I need a drink. *(Exits.)*

VANCE: *(With exaggerated emphasis.)* Soon we will be taking that passage to India and there will be no more wishing our lives away. We'll be able to do nothing for the rest of our lives.

RENATA: *(Off script.)* Why are they going to India?

SABRINA: Renata, it doesn't make any difference.

RENATA: Of course it does. They must be going to India for a reason. Why? What does it mean?

SABRINA: There is no larger meaning. There is nothing to think about. This is not the Actors Studio. They are just random words on a page. Say the line and move on.

ERLENE: It's *something about this doesn't feel right*.

VANCE: You're telling me.

RENATA: There is something about this that doesn't feel right. It smells fishy.

VANCE: We're on an island. There are fish carcasses, and cliché's, and bad puns, everywhere.

ERLENE: Vance, the line is *your imagination is running wild*.

VANCE: Your imagination is running wild.

RENATA: None of this feels right. We haven't even met the man who hired us, this Mr. Keith Miller. Who invites nine strangers to a remote island for a party?

VANCE: Mr. Miller. Mr. Keith Miller, that's who.

RENATA: Make a call to the boat service and let's get out of here. This whole thing feels—ominous.

VANCE: The phone doesn't work. *(Aside.)* No surprise there.

RENATA picks up the phone, listens, and then hangs up.

RENATA: I think we'll regret ever doing this play—I mean I think we'll regret ever coming here.

VANCE: I do.

SFX: A DOORBELL.

VANCE: But enough talk of misery, I'll see to Dr. Pine. You see to the hors de oeuvres.

RENATA exits. RONNIE leaves his spot at the sound desk.

RONNIE: (To *ERLENE*.) You'll have to take over while I do this bit. (Handing *ERLENE* his tablet.) Tap on this icon when we need the music.

ERLENE: That seems easy enough. Vance, you exit.

VANCE exits. He returns a moment later with RONNIE as Dr. Pine.

VANCE: Dr. Pine, a pleasure to meet. I am Jacobs.

RONNIE: Thank you, Jacobs. Has Lady Paige arrived?

VANCE: Yes, she arrived this afternoon.

RONNIE: What about Fred Sherring?

VANCE: The inspector? Yes, he's here. I believe he is in the library.

HAILEY enters and throws herself into RONNIE'S arms.

HAILEY: Peter!

RONNIE: Paige!

HAILEY and RONNIE embrace excessively.

SABRINA: What is it with you two?

HAILEY: It's acting, Sabrina, acting. The script calls for a tender embrace.

SABRINA: That's about as tender as a tiger on a raw steak.

VANCE: Are you two finished yelling at each other?

SABRINA: Yes!

VANCE: Well then, I'll leave you to it. We shall meet here at seven.

VANCE exits.

RONNIE: I've missed you so much. I didn't think I'd ever arrive. That boat trip took ages.

HAILEY: I know, darling. I've missed you too. I am absolutely delirious

RONNIE: I can't wait to get married and carry you across the threshold of Cabot Abbey. Look, there's a wireless. Shall we dance?

HAILEY: Yes. Sweep me into your arms and let's dance the night away.

HAILEY goes to the radio and turns it on. SFX: A big band tune plays. They dance for a moment. OLIVIA enters.

RONNIE: You have told Charles it's all over, haven't you?

HAILEY: What? Sorry, the music's a bit loud.

RONNIE: Charles. Charles, the man you are engaged to. You have told him, haven't you?

They stop dancing. HAILEY goes to the wireless and turns off the music.

HAILEY: Told him?

RONNIE: Yes. Have you told Charles that you're in love with another man? That you're in love with me?

HAILEY: No! Not exactly.

RONNIE: Why not? What have you been doing?

HAILEY: Well, I've been busy. I haven't found the time.

RONNIE: I'm getting impatient Paige. We should get married right away.

OLIVIA: Ronnie, the Charles line is very important. Make sure you don't slough it off. It speaks to motive. Be emphatic. Demand you and Paige get married right away.

RONNIE: Paige, we must be—will be—married right away!

OLIVIA: How about emphatic without being bombastic? Let's try it that way.

MITCH: You don't have to keep interrupting. As inept as this play is, we know what lines are important and how to deliver them.

OLIVIA: Inept? What are you saying?

MITCH: Yes, inept. This script is idiotic.

ERLENE: Mr. Cameron, do you know you're speaking to?

MITCH: Unfortunately, I do. *(To OLIVIA.)* It's as if you've never seen a play in your entire life.

OLIVIA: I'll have you know I have studied the dinner theater classics: *Killer Reviews, Murder Ahoy, Dinner at Eight, Dead by Nine.*

MITCH: Compared with you, the guy who wrote those plays is a genius. You learned nothing. This play reads like a movie script. So far there have been twenty-seven scenes that take place in twenty-one different locations. Scene thirty-eight takes place in a Casino on the French Riviera, and scene thirty-nine takes place on an airplane. Come to your senses woman! Look around you. We're in a dining room.

SABRINA: Mitch is right. We must address the elephant in the room.

OLIVIA: And what pray tell is the elephant in the room?

RENATA: You are!

OLIVIA: How dare you! I have never been called an elephant in my entire life.

HUGH: That's a surprise.

LARKIN: Can we just get on with the next scene?

HAILEY: Yes, yes. Let's move on. *(Turning pages.)* What page? I can't find the next scene.

VANCE: Or any additional scenes for that matter.

OLIVIA: They haven't been written yet. I'm working on them.

MITCH: Jolly good! We have a beginning, some of the end, and nothing in between. That should make for a fun show.

OLIVIA: My muse is taking a break.

RONNIE: My muse is saying leave town. I can't work this way. I can't do four jobs at once.

OLIVIA: Well, aren't you just a prima donna? You think you're the only one feeling pressure? Walk a mile in my heels mister. Erlene, help me out.

ERLENE: Honestly, Olivia? I think we should set fire to the playhouse.

MITCH: The first thing anyone has said that makes sense.

HAILEY: I'm about to freak out here. What happens in the scenes you haven't written yet? I need to be able to wrap my head around my character.

RENATA: Seriously? You've actually discovered some character in this script?

OLIVIA: At seven o'clock the guests will gather. They introduce themselves, have cocktails, make small talk, and then Jacobs will play a recording by our unseen host, accusing each of the guests of committing a deadly sin. They must all be punished. Ronnie, you will be responsible for recording the voice of Mr. Miller.

RONNIE: I have a notebook full of things to do. There are only so many hours in the day.

OLIVIA: I have every confidence in you.

RONNIE: Have you written the dialogue for that part yet?

OLIVIA: Soon.

HAILEY: What sin my character has committed? I can't work this way. How can I build a back-story if I don't have all the information?

RENATA: She's a method actress.

OLIVIA: Soon, very soon.

HAILEY: Soon? That won't do. I need to know now.

RENATA: As long as my sin is just I'll be happy.

HUGH: Olivia, just to help us find our way through this, who is Keith Miller?

OLIVIA: It doesn't matter.

HUGH: It matters to me.

OLIVIA: He's sort of an abstraction. Think of him as an avenging fury.

HUGH: Okay. But why?

OLIVIA: So many questions.

HUGH: Why does he care who these people are and what sins they have committed?

OLIVIA: Because he is crazy and that's what crazy people do! Are you clear now?

HUGH: Chrystal.

OLIVIA: We'll pick up a few scenes later. This is the big accusation scene after Dr. Pine has been murdered.

RONNIE: I'm dead? Best news I've heard all day.

Goes to the soundboard.

LARKIN: What happened to Dr. Pine?

OLIVIA: I'm working on that.

HAILEY: What was his sin?

OLIVIA gives HAILEY a hard look.

HAILEY: Never mind. You don't know.

RICK: What about my sin? What is Captain Strong accused of?

RENATA: Probably the sin of existence.

RICK: You're kidding, right? That really isn't one of the seven deadly sins.

RENATA: No, but it should be.

OLIVIA: Erlene, which scene? Where are we?

ERLENE: Scene twenty-eight. Sorry, scene thirty. We'll pick up with Inspector Sherring.

HUGH: We've searched the island and the house a dozen times. There's no place anyone can be hiding. We've got to face the cold, stark, steely, inescapable, inevitable truth—Really? Five adjectives modifying the word *truth*?

OLIVIA: You will deliver the line as written. One doesn't walk up to Da Vinci and say, 'You need to change that.'

HUGH: Da Vinci is dead and that wouldn't be a bad thing for you, either.

OLIVIA: You call yourselves professionals?

HUGH: Not anymore.

ERLENE: Continue, please!

HUGH: The truth is, I think we must consider that the killer is one of us. But before we do, we must consider motive. What possible motive would drive anyone of you to murder. Lady Paige?

HAILEY is rubbing her eye.

HUGH: Lady Paige!

HAILEY: Yes? Sorry, my eye is twitching.

ERLENE: Hailey, that's not the line.

HAILEY: Erlene, I know *my eye is twitching* is not my line. My eye really is twitching.

ERLENE: Hugh?

HUGH: My eye is fine.

ERLENE: You have the next line. *Isn't it true—?*

HUGH: If you say so.

ERLENE: *Isn't it true* is your next line.

HUGH: Right. *Isn't it true—*there's nothing written here. All it says is Paige Turner and in parentheses it says *explanation to be added later*.

OLIVIA: Yes, I'm working on those motives as we speak. For the moment, just improvise.

HUGH: Paige Turner, you did it—because—because—I'm sorry, I've got nothing. I'm just going to read the names. Loveless and Jacobs, blah blah blah. Alice Strap, Tony Strong, Lord Cabot, so on and so forth.

LARKIN: Haven't you forgotten someone, Inspector?

HUGH: Have I?

LARKIN: You think being a policeman makes you immune to corruption, revenge, retribution, pay back, and getting even?

HUGH: Once again, the rule of three, not to mention the redundancy.

OLIVIA: Redundancy, something you'd know a lot about Mr. Moore.

HUGH: I'm just saying.

OLIVIA: Exactly. Carry on, Miss Peaks. The line again, please.

LARKIN: You think being a policeman makes you immune to corruption, revenge, retribution, pay back, and getting even?

HUGH: I don't think, Miss Strap, I know. (*Out of character.*) Is he saying he doesn't think? He doesn't know? Or he does know, but he doesn't think?

OLIVIA: He is sure of what he knows.

VANCE: I'm glad someone is.

SFX: The sound of a TELEPHONE.

RENATA: I thought the telephone was broken.

VANCE: It is.

RENATA: Apparently not, it just rang.

HAILEY: Shouldn't someone answer? *(Pause.)* Someone should answer. *(Pause.)* Someone answer the phone. It may be our only hope.

RENATA answers the phone. LARKIN leans in to listen as well.

RENATA: Hello, who is this? *(Pause.)* What? *(She hangs up. Fear is written all over her face.)*

SABRINA: Who was it? What did they say?

LARKIN: He said, "One down, eight to go."

RENATA: But the phone doesn't work.

VANCE: That can only mean one thing.

ALL: The call is coming from inside the house!

ERLENE: Everyone freeze. End of scene.

OLIVIA: Bravo, bravo! Despite a few hiccups, you folks are marvelous, just marvelous. In the face of adversity, you make my words sing. They come alive. I am positively blown away, blown away. Are you as blown away as I'm blown away?

RENATA: I'm blown away, but not as much as you're blown away, and not for the same reasons.

OLIVIA: I see! But you are blown away?

MITCH: Yes! We are all stunned! Happy?

OLIVIA: I'm ecstatic! Wait! I hear a knock. Who's that knocking at my door? I think it's my muse. She's back. Erlene will continue to rehearse with you for the remainder of the day. In the meantime I shall finish those remaining scenes and have them to you bright and early tomorrow morning.

OLIVIA exits.

MITCH: Erlene, I hope you'll take this in spirit it is intended. You seem like a sensible woman.

ERLENE: Why thank you, Mr. Cameron.

MITCH: I know Olivia is your friend, but—

ERLENE: Yes?

MITCH: She needs to be committed.

ERLENE: I know Olivia can seem a bit eccentric.

SABRINA: A bit?

MITCH: We're drowning here. We're not some local community theater group that comes together once a year to put on a half-baked comedy murder mystery. We don't sort of memorize our lines or have them fed to us from offstage. We're professionals. We have reputations. This is what we do and I am afraid what we're doing is not up to our usual standards.

LARKIN: I think what Mitch is saying--

ERLENE: I know what Mr. Cameron is saying. I'm seeing a bigger picture. We're actually making progress. I have an unshakeable faith in you. We're going to pull this off.

The cast shakes heads in disbelief.

ERLENE: Let's take a short break, re-focus our energy, and continue in five. Remember, hope is the thing with feathers. *(Exits.)*

MITCH: This bird has been plucked. Ain't no feathers on this turkey

ALL freeze. SFX: A HARP trill to suggest the passage of time.

ACT ONE, SCENE 3

AT START: *The following morning. ALL unfreeze, snap back to life.*

ERLENE: Rick, I believe it's your line.

RICK: If I had a line, I'd say it. All I've got is a blank page. We were told last night we'd have more pages this morning. That hasn't happened and I'm ready for lunch.

ERLENE: Fine, we'll jump to the next scene. Hugh, we'll begin with you. Ronnie, cue sound.

SFX: The sound of a BLOWGUN

HUGH: *(To RONNIE.)* Seriously?

RONNIE: Excuse me?

HUGH: A blowgun?

RONNIE: That's what written in the script, Hugh. I didn't write it. I'm just following directions.

HUGH: (To *ERLENE*.) Not a gun, but a blowgun! A poisoned dart. Why?

OLIVIA enters, looking haggard.

OLIVIA: A blowgun is unexpected.

HUGH: So is a piano dropping on her head or a herd of buffalo crashing through the dining room. What about a plague of locust or frogs dropping from the sky?

OLIVIA: A blowgun illustrates the evil machinations of the madman behind these murders.

MITCH: You were supposed to be here two hours ago with a completed script.

OLIVIA: I had a rough night.

MITCH: Apparently your muse had too many martinis.

HUGH: I need a break. On second thought, I need a drink.

RONNIE: I'll join you.

HAILEY: Ronnie, you don't drink.

RONNIE: I do now.

HUGH and RONNIE exit.

RENATA: Are we finished talking? If we are, we'd like to make our entrance.

ERLENE: Sound of blowgun. Whoosh. Paige screams. Ahhhhh. Loveless and Jacobs rush on.

SABRINA: Jacobs, Loveless, what's the matter?

RENATA: It's horrible. Paige Turner is dead.

SABRINA: Paige is dead?

RENATA: Didn't I just say that?

SABRINA: Yes. What? (*Out of character.*) I'm confused. I don't know if she is saying that in character or as herself.

RENATA: Does it really make any difference? At this point are we even pretending we have roles worth thinking about?

SABRINA: I'll take that as a *no*.

RENATA: Yes.

LARKIN: Paige is dead? How? What happened?

VANCE: It was-- (*He can hardly bring himself to say it.*) --a blowgun.

SABRINA: You mean--?

VANCE: Yes, a blowgun, a freaking blowgun!

SABRINA: What? I mean is where?

RENATA: At the end of the hall!

SABRINA: Are you sure Paige is dead?

VANCE: How many times do I have to say it? Yes. There's a thing stuck in her neck.

SABRINA: Who could have done such a thing? We were all here.

VANCE: It was a booby trap. It was some sort of spring-loaded mechanism. When Paige grabbed the handrail to go downstairs that was it.

RENATA: Quick, call the doctor.

LARKIN: The doctor is dead.

RENATA: That's right, it slipped my mind.

VANCE: I don't have any more pages.

SABRINA: Is that the end of the scene?

LARKIN: That's all I've got.

OLIVIA: Erlene, make a note. I need to finish writing that scene.

MITCH: Erlene, make a note. We open in eight hours.

OLIVIA: It's all doom and gloom with you people. Have some faith. It will all work out.

HAILEY: Olivia, can I be honest?

OLIVIA: If you must.

HAILEY: Nobody has any idea what is going on. Pages are missing, scenes just end, and I've got the hives.

OLIVIA: Would you like an antihistamine?

HAILEY: I don't need medicine. I need sanity. I need a script. I can't take any more.

OLIVIA: There is no I in team.

HAILEY: Lady, you are one crazy—

SABRINA: Mitch! Say something!

MITCH: I think what Hailey is saying is we're about forty-five percent on the lines, what there is of them, and, all things considered, this show is a complete disaster and it can't go on.

OLIVIA: It must and it will. I have invited agents, the media, talent scouts. This is an event, a happening. This play may well launch my career.

SABRINA: While our careers go down the toilet. You should have told us this from the start. We have reputations as well.

OLIVIA: I see how it is. You think it's all about you, but it's not. It's all about me. If you think I won't make good on my threat, you're wrong. I've ruined the reputations and careers of better folks than you. Now, I've got a phone call to make. When I get back, I expect to see an attitude adjustment.

OLIVIA exits.

HAILEY: Seriously, I am about to have a nervous breakdown. My eye has been twitching all morning.

RICK: Oh, I thought you were winking at me.

HAILEY: Oh, shut up, Rick! Fever blisters are popping up. My hair is itching.

RICK: I don't mind.

LARKIN: Rick, she's not interested in you. No one is. Get a life!

MITCH: We have officially reached critical mass. Erlene, I don't think we have any choice. I think we have to kill the director.

ERLENE: We can't do that.

MITCH: We can, and we should. My conscience will be entirely clear.

RENATA: We are not going to kill Olivia. As much as I would like to, we are not going to do that. If we want her out of our hair, we should slip a mickey into her cocktail.

HAILEY: What's a mickey?

SABRINA: A sleeping pill. Drug her, knock her out, anything! Anything to save this show.

HAILEY: There's nothing to save.

MITCH: Erlene, is there anything in your notes about the end of play? Do you have anything that might give us a clue who Keith Miller is and where this play is going?

RENATA: The sewer.

ERLENE: *(Shuffling through her notes.)* Does this help?

MITCH: *(Quickly scanning the page.)* My goodness, the woman really is a moron.

RICK: Well?

MITCH: Three monkeys locked in a room with one arm tied behind their backs could come up with something better than this.

RICK: That's ridiculous! (*A beat.*) Where can we find a monkey?

ALL stare at RICK and then carry on.

MITCH: My instinct is to quit and just walk out. But I have to keep reminding myself we are professionals. We might be able to make this work, but we need everyone on board. We've all been in shows that didn't come together until opening night—(*To audience.*) --most of them right here on this stage.

VANCE: Those were shows with an intelligent script and a producer who wasn't nuts.

MITCH: I guess I've got just enough ego left to say let's give it a go. There'll be a lot of improvisation, but I'm willing to give it a try. Does everyone agree?

EVERYONE nods in agreement. OLIVIA enters.

OLIVIA: I trust cooler minds prevailed.

MITCH: Barring a complete disaster, we'll find a way to make this work.

OLIVIA: That's the spirit. As Shakespeare said, "Business that we love we rise betimes, and go to it with delight." Nothing is going to stop us now.

RONNIE rushes in.

RONNIE: Hugh has been in an accident.

THE CAST: What?

RONNIE: The railing on the balcony broke loose. He's broken both ankles. A doctor witnessed the whole thing.

RICK: Can he walk?

RONNIE: Of course the doctor can walk.

RICK: I'm talking about Hugh.

RONNIE: No. Both ankles are completely useless.

RICK: What about crutches, can he use crutches?

RONNIE: I don't think so. Doesn't one foot have to be on the ground?

RENATA: It's time to lower the lifeboats.

HAILEY: I quit. I can't do this. I will turn into one giant fever blister. I'm out. Sue me. Report me to the actor's guild. I don't care. Ronnie, let's go.

ERLENE: He's the soundman. He can't leave.

HAILEY: He's my boyfriend. Ronnie grab your props and whatever else is yours and let's get out of here.

RONNIE: But, what about--?

HAILEY: (*Hands on hips.*) Ronnie, unless you want to be--

RONNIE: Got to go!

RONNIE grabs his tablet and exits with HAILEY.

MITCH: All that stuff I said about being able to do this, I was lying. It's over. We're through. We're done.

OLIVIA: No we are not! We are going to do this show!

LARKIN: Are you insane? Two cast members just quit the show and a third one can't walk.

OLIVIA: Batten down the hatches! Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night but we're going to get through this. Erlene, you'll take over on sound.

ERLENE: I couldn't possibly. I'm all thumbs. Ronnie had all those cues on a tablet and he just left with it.

OLIVIA: There's a stack of sound effects CDs in storage. Grab those and make magic.

LARKIN: How are we going to work around three characters? We are out of actors.

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