

Amateur Rites

A new play by Tim Luscombe

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Representation:

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Characters, in order of appearance:

Kate
Liz
Flicka
Virginia
Bernie
Rob
Suzette
Dawn
Alastair
Holly

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The excerpts from *Northanger Abbey* are taken from the author's own stage adaptation of Jane Austen's novel, © Nick Hern Books 2005, all right reserved

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This means a character is interrupted –
This means a character peters out ...
When dialogue is single-spaced, overlap the speeches

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The play takes place in the Community Centre of a small south-eastern English town, over the autumn and early winter of this year.

The stage comprises a large-ish and averagely hideous council-run room. It's a sort of hall or waiting room. So there are lots of entrances: 1. Double doors to the outside world. 2. A door or two to the loos. 3. A door to the "Rehearsal Room". 4. A door to what the characters call "The Hall".

Spread round the room is an un-designed accumulation of benches, tables and chairs. There's a decrepid heater. On the walls are rows of coat pegs, and children's Sunday School art, as well as community group messages, including timetables for Judo, Pilates, Cubs and Brownies etc.

The room's large enough, or at least the action's staged in such a way, that someone on one side of the stage is effectively unable to hear a private conversation between people on the other.

# Act One

## Scene One

*(A Tuesday evening in October)*

*(The lights are off. Kate enters. She heads straight for the light switches, switching on the overhead fluorescents)*

*(Kate's in her 80s; her body unreliable, her brain sharp. She has a curiosity about life and people that belies her age. She's wise, kind and warm, despite the fact that her world has recently been turned upside down)*

*(Kate heads for an upholstered bench and pulls a table up to it. She gets out her laptop, plugs it in and turns it on)*

*(Liz enters briskly, with a Boots plastic bag and a smart handbag. She's 40 years old, spruce, sleek and angry. She is disappointed with life and with herself)*

**Liz** *(Business like, striding across the room)* Evening, Kate.

**Kate** Good evening, Liz. All well?

**Liz** No one else here?

**Kate** No, not yet.

**Liz** There's a surprise.

*(Liz goes straight off, to the rehearsal room, with her bags. Kate starts to work at her laptop, and will continue to do so when she's not called on to do anything else)*

*(Liz returns with a stick of celery and a tape recorder. She plugs in the tape recorder and eats the celery. From the tape recorder we hear music: a contemporary reworking of JS Bach's 'Air on a G String', with lush strings and a heavy beat. Liz rehearses a dance to it as she eats. The dance is a kind of eighteenth century cotillion. It's rather restrained compared to the music. She takes one part at a time. She's choreographed it at home and is marking it through now. She forgets or is unhappy with a move, resets the music and starts again)*

*(Flicka enters. She's 28, rather beautiful in a very quirky way, and carries herself as if she's less than physically able-bodied. She hobbles around often with her knees together, and/or her wrists flexed etc. She dresses like a combination of a pixie and a babushka, has an amazingly quiet, baby voice, and is intimidated by most people. She laughs as a sort of self-protection, constantly and unconsciously. Her voice becomes more confident when she intones, which she does when there's strife)*

**Flicka** Hello, Liz. Sorry I'm late.

**Liz** (*Dancing*) Wait.

**Flicka** Oh, sorry, sorry.

**Kate** (*To Flicka*) Hello, dear.

**Flicka** (*Pleased to see Kate*) Hello, Kate. How's it going? Any progress with the tree?

**Kate** Rob managed to get a piece about it in his newspaper. Did you see?

**Flicka** No. What did it say?

**Kate** About the Council people and Smedley. Look. Here.

*(Kate hands a cut-out newspaper article to Flicka)*

**Flicka** (*Reading*) Ooh, a picture of you! Lovely.

**Kate** Think I look a bit furtive, but never mind.

**Flicka** No, it's lovely. Oh, yes, that's lovely. Helps to have friends in high places.

**Liz** (*Still dancing*) Flicka, will you start ringing round?

**Flicka** Of course, Liz, sorry, yes. Just get my coat off.

*(Flicka takes off her coat and enormous horse-feeder type bag. She takes out her phone)*

**Liz** Did you make the cushions?

**Flicka** Oh, yes, here they are.

*(Flicka produces from her bag two very pretty, colourful, tiny cushions)*

**Liz** They're not cushions, they're earrings. Think big. Big. Beanbags, not nipple shells. Ok?

**Flicka** Ok, sorry, Liz. I'll buy some more material and start again.

*(Virginia enters. She's a beautiful woman in her 60s. She feels herself to be in charge of the group, by length of membership, and perhaps by right of birth. Waspish and controlling)*

**Flicka** Oh, hello Virginia.

**Virginia** Hello everyone. It's not like autumn at all, is it? Absolutely glorious. *(Handing her coat to Flicka as she passes)* Put that somewhere would you, my darling? I was out, deadheading, till four. Simply amazing. *(To Liz)* Dear heart, I wanted to tell you how thrilled Bernard is with his role. He was born to play Henry Tilney. And you were sweet to give into my little request.

**Liz** *(Sarcastic)* Request?

**Virginia** Did I impose? Well, you had everything else your own way. I know you'd rather have had Alastair, but he simply doesn't have the wit for it. Bernard does. Bernard has class. Here he is, the little treasure. Look at him sweating.

*(Bernie totters in under the weight of an amazing amount of heavy picnic hampers and plastic bags. Bernie's Virginia's age but looks older and smaller. He's recently recovered from a major illness. Like Flicka, he's a laugher. Almost constantly chuckles under his breath. It's a nervous twitch. But whereas Flicka does it to protect herself, Bernie does it to protect other people, mostly his wife, for whose protection he lives. He's friendly but ineffectual. Flicka rushes towards him and relieves him of what she can)*

**Flicka** Ooh, let me give you a hand.

**Bernie** No, it's alright.

**Flicka** *(Mock cross)* Now, Bernie, you shouldn't be doing all that lifting and carrying at this stage, should you?

**Bernie** I'm fine, Flicka, honestly!

**Flicka** Well, you won't be if you go on like that.

**Virginia** *(To Kate)* Did you get out today?

**Kate** *(Meaningfully)* No, I was writing letters to your husband's department at the council all day.

**Virginia** Oh, what a shame. My chrysanthus are sublime.

**Bernie** Where do you want all these?

*(Flicka and Bernie are laden with bags, waiting for instructions)*

**Virginia** Over there. No there. No, wait a moment...put them there. Erect that little trellis table.

*(Flicka and Bernie, serially wrong-footed, oblige. Bernie will spend the next section going out and coming in with more things. Once he's brought everything in, he'll arrange it all on the table: tea, coffee, cakes etc. Virginia does no manual activity)*

**Virginia** (*To Kate*) It's no good blaming Bernard. You must understand he's a very little cog.

**Kate** If you say so.

**Virginia** Sometimes one just has to bow one's head to the inevitable. Smedley always gets what he wants.

**Kate** With the council's help.

**Bernie** (*Putting a load down*) Phew. Evening, Kate!

**Kate** Bernie.

(*Bernie exits*)

**Flicka** (*Into the phone*) Yes, I know you've got your sister coming tomorrow, but are you – oh, really? I'll pass it on. Ok, bye. (*Hangs up*) Rob says pork loin's on special offer in Tesco's. He'll be here in five minutes.

**Liz** What's he doing in Tesco's? We were meant to have a design meeting quarter of an hour ago. God Streuth. You people.

**Flicka** Sorry, Liz. So sorry. He'll be here, I promise. (*Makes another phone call*)

**Virginia** (*To Liz*) And it's good for him.

**Liz** What?

**Virginia** Take his mind off... Well, you know.

**Liz** What are you talking about?

**Virginia** Bernard playing Henry Tilney. The truth is, it might be his last chance to play the leading man.

**Liz** He's in complete remission you said.

**Virginia** The fact that he's playing anything at all is a miracle. Now, Liz, you mustn't worry about *me*. I am delighted to be able to contribute in anyway I can. Live to serve, that's my motto. And Henry's father, the General Tilney, will be a fascinating challenge.

**Liz** Right. Great.

**Flicka** Oh dear.

**Liz** What?

**Flicka** Holly was on her way to Intermediate Spanish. Got her Tuesdays and her Thursdays mixed up.

**Liz** Christ.

**Flicka** It's alright. She's going to hop on the 93.

*(Bernie re-enters)*

**Virginia** Bernard, did you pack the paper plates?

**Bernie** Paper plates, paper plates. *(Beginning to panic)* Oh God, I think... No, I did! Green bag!

**Virginia** *(To Kate and Liz)* I was going to make the quiches but Tesco's are so good. Mind you, they want nine days notice to make the big ones they do for parties. I said to them, 'Surely it doesn't take nine days to make a couple of quiches'. She said, 'You've obviously not seen our staff'. Now, who wants a nice cup of tea?

**Kate** No, thanks.

**Liz** No, thanks.

**Flicka** Ooh, tea, lovely.

**Virginia** There's the things. Help yourself.

*(A mobile phone goes off in somebody's bag. It plays the 'Mission Impossible' theme)*

**Kate** Sorry everyone. *(Into phone, walking outside with it)* Hello? Oh, hello, Mr Smedley. Thanks for phoning me back. I live at number 18 Whitford Lane, and your construction people, who are working at the back of my place...

*(Bernie exits. Virginia opens a bottle of sherry and helps herself to some)*

**Virginia** She's fighting a losing battle, you know.

**Flicka** Oh dear, do you think so? Can Bernie not do anything?

**Virginia** What is this constant barrage? Bernard is not responsible!

*(Rob enters. He's hauling in a large stage flying piece. He is about 30 years old, well built, with soft facial features. Can be camp or butch depending on the effect he wants to create. Pretty much always chipper and expansive. He'd be amazed if you suggested that a vast sea of rage was bubbling away under this good-humoured surface)*

**Rob** Evening, all.

**Flicka** Hi, Rob.

**Virginia** Oh, hello.

**Liz** At last! Where the hell have you been?

**Rob** Don't get your knickers in a twist, Lizzie-kins.

**Liz** It's not good enough. There's only nine weeks till we open. You've got to start being on time.

**Rob** Someone give me a hand with this.

**Flicka** I will! I will!

*(Flicka and Rob carry the stage flat into the middle of the stage. Liz turns off the music and unplugs her cassette player)*

**Rob** What do you think? *(To Flicka)* Careful, careful. Down your end. *(Standing it up)* There she goes.

**Flicka** Ooh, that's marvellous.

**Rob** It's recycled from the third act of Charley's Aunt we did in '99.

**Liz** Not sure of the colouring. Need it broken down.

**Rob** Broken down. Fair-enough-ski. Hey, I've got some costume drawings to show you.

**Liz** Excellent.

**Rob** Ok holding it? Flicka?

**Flicka** *(In another world)* Um? Oh. Yes. *(Laughs)*

*(Rob goes off and immediately brings back on a portfolio)*

**Virginia** Ooh lovely. Drawings. I love this bit.

**Liz** Actually Virginia, this is just a preliminary meeting. I'm not ready to show them yet.

**Virginia** Oh I see.

*(But Virginia lingers near Liz and Rob. Kate returns)*

**Kate** Oh, that's fantastic, Rob.

**Rob** Ta v much. You see the article about your tree? Front page!

**Kate** It's amazing. How did you manage it?

**Rob** I only had to sleep with the editor.

**Flicka** Ooh!

**Kate** You're terrible!

**Rob** To be honest we're always so desperate for interesting stories –

**Liz** (*Bringing Rob back to the job in hand*) Rob?

**Rob** Sorry, yes. Right.

(*Rob addresses himself to the costume drawings, Flicka still valiantly holding the flat*)

**Rob** This is Catherine Morland's ball gown for when they arrive in Bath for the first time.

**Liz** Too bright.

**Rob** Right.

(*Bernie re-enters, with another load*)

**Liz** Deconstruct it.

**Rob** Decon... What does that mean?

**Liz** Show me what's underneath. I know this is Jane Austen but I want Auschwitz, Belsen, Late 80s Jean Paul Gautier.

**Virginia** (*Muscling in*) What's that?

**Rob** The costume for Mrs Allen's solo dance.

**Virginia** What?

**Kate** Mrs Allen? That's my character. Solo dance?

**Liz** I found a piece of Michael Nyman film music that's absolutely perfect.

**Kate** I don't think that's in my script.

**Rob** I thought pale tangerine organza here, with hand-printed blue silk for the main body of it. I know a woman who can get me good quality stuff fairly cheap.

**Liz** It needs distressing.

**Rob** What?

**Liz** Tear it, singe it, put mud on it.

**Rob** I don't think our audience would understand that.

**Liz** Trust me. If you're doing something as clichéd as a Jane Austen you need to cut against it with a radical design. This is Mrs Allen's solo dance of death. It's about longing, yearning, despair.

**Virginia** Oh, it's such a shame. It's a beautiful design.

**Liz** (*Trying to block out Virginia*) Excuse us, Virginia.

**Virginia** This is your 'concept' is it? Why can't it just be pretty and normal? I mean what's the point of doing a Jane Austen if you're going to make it all dreary?

**Liz** We've got to make it relevant to today.

**Virginia** Why?

**Liz** Look –

**Virginia** Sorry. Your show. I'll just...do the tea.

**Liz** (*Turning back to Rob*) Ok, thanks, Rob. Show me the changes next week. That should give you enough time, right?

**Rob** (*Ever cheerful*) Have to be, won't it? Come on, Flicka.

*(Rob and Flicka take the flat off)*

**Liz** You asked me to come in and direct this show. I told you I would on one condition.

**Virginia** Absolutely, quite right. It's just that we're an amateur company –

**Liz** But you want professional standards. Presumably that's why you got me in, right?

**Virginia** Yes, well... At the time, I thought I'd be unavailable. Who knew Bernard would make such a speedy recovery...

**Liz** Nevertheless. (*Picking up the tape recorder*) Flicka, come with me. I need you to take down some choreography.

**Flicka** (*Returning*) Choreography. Do I need a pen?

**Liz** Of course you need a pen. (*Turning to Kate and Virginia*) Tell me as soon as Dawn gets here. There's nothing much I can do till she arrives. Meanwhile

run lines. We don't have a second to waste. Bernie, come and dance with me. I've got Henry Tilney's cotillion sorted.

**Bernie** Shall I just finish these things for Virginia?

**Liz** (*Commandingly*) With me, Bernie.

*(Liz exits to the rehearsal room, followed by Flicka who runs after her, scrabbling around in the bottom of her bag for something to write with. Bernie follows them off)*

**Bernie** Ooh, Liz, actually, can I just have a quick word in your shell-like about one of Henry Tilney's lines? I'm finding it such a bugger to learn and – (*Exits*)

**Virginia** (*Reaching for the sherry*) She's intolerable.

**Kate** It's exciting to have a professional eye for once.

**Virginia** I say if she's working with an amateur group, she's an amateur.

**Kate** Still, I appreciate the rigour.

**Virginia** Being highhanded isn't the same as being rigorous, you know.

**Kate** I'm just saying I think she knows her onions.

**Virginia** (*Defensively*) And I don't know my onions? I've directed and starred in the last 27 shows that Pogchurch Valley Amateur Dramatic Society has presented, and if I don't know my onions by now I don't know who does know their onions.

**Kate** Yes, alright, Vi. Don't get upset. Do you want to run lines?

**Virginia** Don't be ridiculous. (*Uncorks the sherry*) What induced me to think she'd be a good idea is beyond me. And fancy her choosing a play that doesn't have enough parts for middle-aged women. I mean, this is amateur dramatics, for God's sake. There's always *tons* of middle-aged women! She'd got the whole thing planned, you know. Think about it. She knew I'd veto that ridiculous University-style notion of the all-female 'Anthony and Cleopatra'. And who on earth would want to do 'Hard Times'? I know its Dickens and he's absolutely marvellous but it's so unremittingly grim. And what was her other idea? Scum? Trash?

**Kate** 'Waste'.

**Virginia** 'Waste'.

**Kate** Harley Granville Barker.

**Virginia** It might as well be Freeman Hardy and Willis - you wouldn't sell a ticket to a play called 'Waste'. Not round here, you wouldn't. 'Northanger Abbey' was the only viable option. She didn't want me in it, so she forced a play on us with no part for me.

**Kate** You're in it.

**Virginia** General Tilney?! Have you read the play? He's a cough and a spit.

**Kate** Why wouldn't she want you in it?

**Virginia** Because she wants to control everything. It's an illness with her. I'm the only decent actress in the society and I'm asked to play a man. Oh, why couldn't we do a nice Noel Coward like usual?

*(Bernie re-enters from the rehearsal room, dancing the cotillion steps. Suzette enters. She's in her early 20s. A furrow-browed, earnest, well-meaning, intense evangelical. She's also very pretty, with the clear skin and bright eyes of the newly converted zealot)*

**Suzette** Hi, everyone. I know I'm late. I'm incredibly sorry.

**Kate** Hello, Suzette.

**Suzette** Wow, Bernie, I'm impressed!

**Bernie** Pretty good, huh?

**Suzette** *(Joining in with his dance)* Very cool!

**Virginia** Bernard... The quiches are still in the car.

**Bernie** Yes, dear. *(Exits)*

**Suzette** Look at all this food.

**Virginia** Anyone for a sherry? Oh, no - sorry, Suzette; didn't mean to be insensitive.

**Suzette** *(Flustered)* That's ok. No worries. I'll have a coffee.

**Virginia** *(Wafting her hand at the coffee things)* It's all there. *(Pouring herself a sherry, to Kate)* And asking Holly to play Eleanor. I mean, Eleanor is beautiful, Eleanor is elegant. Holly is simply overweight and unattractive. It's screamingly obvious what to do with her. You've got to give her a part with no lines, dress her in dark colours and make sure she gets nowhere near the light.

*(Dawn and Alastair enter. Dawn's on the phone, finishing off a conversation. She's a 40-year-old, down-to-earth, hard working, mean-spirited woman, currently overstretched and very tense. Alastair is her happy-go-lucky*

*husband; a hedonist and a leech; a slave to his urges. He's sexy in a hairy-round-the-edges kind of way)*

**Alastair** Hiya Suzette. Hiya Virginia. Hiya everyone.

**Kate** Hello there!

**Suzette** Hiya.

**Virginia** Good evening, Alastair.

*(Dawn wiggles her fingers at everyone and talks into her phone)*

**Suzette** Have you seen all this food?

**Alastair** Got any sausage rolls, Virginia?

**Virginia** No. Vol-au-vents?

**Alastair** What the hell are they?

**Virginia** These things.

**Alastair** Oh, alright.

**Suzette** Kate, do you want anything?

**Kate** No, I'm fine.

**Alastair** Very nice. Cheesy.

*(Bernie enters with the quiches)*

**Bernie** Look out, quiches coming through.

**Suzette** You've done us proud, Virginia.

**Virginia** *(Modestly)* Just my little way of contributing.

**Alastair** Hey, Bernie, I see you've finally given the go ahead to the strip club up Mearston Road.

**Bernie** I certainly did not. Anyway, it's not a strip club.

**Alastair** It bloody well is.

**Virginia** You don't mean you've been there.

**Bernie** I did everything I could to get in the way. There must have been hush-hush deals.

**Alastair** Don't talk crap –

**Bernie** The entire thing's very regrettable –

**Alastair** It's the best thing that's happened to this place since Suzette started coming here on Tuesday evenings.

**Suzette** Oh, be quiet.

**Virginia** I thought we'd hit an all time low when that wretched Indian restaurant opened on the corner of Langley Gardens, but 'Esquire' takes the biscuit.

**Alastair** What's the bloody hell's wrong with the Indian? Doesn't suit Upper Pogchurch, is that right? Well, we love The Mogul, don't we Dawn?

**Dawn** (*Having finished her phone call*) Don't talk to me ever again.

**Alastair** You're not still pissed off.

**Dawn** Every single time. Every single time we get to the junction at Booker Corner he tells me to get a move on. Every single time –

**Alastair** Well you dawdle, woman! (*Wandering off with a handful of vol-au-vents*) Looking good tonight, Suzette.

**Suzette** (*Wearily*) Oh, Alastair.

(*Suzette heads towards Kate, and safety. Alastair follows her*)

**Dawn** (*To Virginia*) He's pathetic.

**Bernie** How's it going?

**Dawn** We're doing the bloody stock take at the warehouse this week. I was up there till midnight last night, and back again at six this morning. Course, *he* finds a reason not to be there.

**Alastair** Not my fault they called a regional. I didn't want to go all the way to bloody London, did I? Missed my dinner.

**Dawn** Oh, Virginia, I've been dying to tell you. You'll never guess what I heard about Debbie Cosgrave.

**Virginia** No! What?

**Bernie** No, actually, Dawn, I meant how's it going with your part.

**Dawn** Catherine? Oh, Christ, it's enormous. I think my brain's going to explode. Can I go through some of it with you, Bernie. Those endless speeches about marriage in the Ball scene. I'll get myself sorted out first –

**Virginia** I was just saying what a nightmare the stand-in director is.

**Dawn** She's good, I reckon.

**Virginia** You would. She's given you the lead part.

**Dawn** Don't take it personally, Vi. Nice to have a change.

**Virginia** (*Witheringly*) Good. I'm so glad.

**Dawn** Nothing against you... What are you doing?

(*Virginia is tapping on the sherry bottle with a knife*)

**Dawn** Virginia...

**Alastair** What? Speech?!

**Kate** What's going on?

**Bernie** Shhh.

**Virginia** (*Getting attention*) Thank you. Thank you. I just wanted to say 'thank you' to you all. Thank you for supporting me.

**Alastair** How do you mean?

**Virginia** You all have parts you're happy with, I think. I, on the other hand, am playing a military geriatric with very few lines. So, thank you. That's all I wanted to say. For your support. (*Getting teary*) For standing up for me, the longest serving member of this Amateur Dramatic Society. Thank you.

**Bernie** Look, dear, I'm sure that –

**Virginia** (*Snapping*) What? What are you sure about?

**Alastair** It's the way the cookie crumbles, Virginia. Isn't it? I'm not thrilled with my part, actually. It's not much bigger than yours.

**Dawn** Aaww, he's unhappy with the size of his tiny part.

**Virginia** (*Holding back tears, to Alastair*) At least you've got a sword fight to do.

**Dawn** Ready, Bernie?

**Bernie** I've just got to get a few last bits from the car.

**Dawn** Let Virginia do it.

**Bernie** (*Exiting*) We can do the lines at the same time.

**Dawn** (*Following him, giving in*) Alright! Let's just do it.

**Virginia** (*Small*) Bernard?

*(But Bernie's gone)*

**Alastair** (*Approaching Virginia*) Come on, Vi. Cheer up. I've always seen you as a bit of a dominatrix. Make sure you ask Rob for a whip and some very high boots.

**Virginia** (*About to cry*) Leave me alone, you tawdry little man.

*(Virginia avoids Alastair and runs off to the toilets. Rob re-enters and heads for Suzette)*

**Rob** Hi Alastair.

**Alastair** Hi Rob.

**Rob** Hey, Suze.

**Suzette** Oh, hiya.

**Rob** You finding your feet ok? Are we all weird?

**Suzette** Look, I'll tell you a secret, ok? (*Secretively, importantly*) I go to AA.

**Rob** Oh, yeah?

**Suzette** And I love it, I really do, don't get me wrong, but as far as weird goes, they've got you beat.

*(Bernie and Dawn re-enter, running lines. Bernie carries another box of things for Virginia's table. Dawn's not bad at her part, but without the spirit, youth or sharpness for it her lines sound boring and flat. She's not nearly as appalling as Bernie, though)*

**Dawn** '...People that dance only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour.'

**Bernie** (*Drying, and straining to remember*) To which I say something very witty and clever. (*Consulting his script*) Oh, yes. 'Have I then not reason to fear that if the gentleman who spoke to you just now were to return, there'd be nothing to 'something' you from 'something' with him as long as you chose?'

**Dawn** Conversing.

**Bernie** 'From conversing with him for as long as you –

**Dawn** Bollocks. It's pointless, Bernie.

**Bernie** It's terribly difficult stuff.

**Rob** Yeah, it's hard to get in, isn't it? My head feels like I'm trying to cram a large confused slippery sea lion into a mouse hole.

**Bernie** (*To Alastair*) Where's Virginia gone?

**Alastair** The loo.

**Bernie** Well, I'd better go and face the en... – make sure she's alright. (*Exits to loo*)

(*Dawn joins Suzette*)

**Dawn** Wanna do some lines?

**Suzette** You should keep your husband on a tighter leash.

**Dawn** He enjoys making a complete tit of himself in front of women your age.

**Suzette** Any age, I think.

**Dawn** I've gone through humiliation, and being embarrassed for him. Now I just pity him.

**Alastair** I heard that.

**Dawn** Good.

**Suzette** Had you thought about some sort of counselling?

**Dawn** I think probably the only thing that would have any effect would be to cut his dick off, to be honest. Can we do that bit where we first meet?

(*They are interrupted by Virginia, who has reappeared from the toilet, trailed by Bernie*)

**Virginia** (*The fragile martyr*) Could I have a word?

**Suzette** With me?

**Dawn** Actually we were just gonna run some lines.

**Virginia** Privately.

**Suzette** Oh. Ok.

(*Suzette leaves her group and follows Virginia. Virginia speaks conspiratorially*)

**Virginia** How dare you insert things into my handbag? (*Holds out two pamphlets*) What the hell do you mean by it?

**Suzette** Well –

**Virginia** This is Alcoholics Anonymous literature is it not?

**Suzette** Yes –

**Virginia** Alcoholics Anonymous! Smelly old men and Irish people!

**Suzette** You see, in AA we're asked to pass the message on to fellow sufferers, and I thought –

**Virginia** Fellow sufferers?! Just because you choose to go to those sordid little meetings, doesn't mean everyone else has to follow you into the gutter.

**Suzette** No, I just thought that *you* maybe –

**Virginia** What can it have to do with me? (*Thrusting the leaflets back at Suzette*) I would imagine I've *spilt* more alcohol than you could possibly have drunk in your entire short life.

**Suzette** Oh, you should've known me before.

**Virginia** Listen, I'm giving you a second chance, because you're new. But if you even *think* of implying such a libellous allegation again, you'll be out of this society before you can say...Alcoholics Anonymous.

*(Virginia sweeps away from Suzette. Liz emerges from the rehearsal room, followed by Flicka. All faces turn towards Liz, to see who she's going to need for rehearsals)*

**Liz** (*To Dawn*) You're here! (*To Virginia and Kate*) I told you to tell me when she got here.

**Kate** Oh, sorry, Liz.

*(Virginia shrugs)*

**Liz** Am I the only one taking this project seriously?

**Dawn** No.

**Kate** Not at all.

**Bernie** We're all behind you.

**Alastair** Every step of the way.

**Liz** You all seem to imagine the whole thing's an extended coffee break.

**Dawn** I've been running lines from the moment I arrived.

**Liz** I need Dawn and Holly. We'll do Act One Scene Two.

**Dawn** Holly's not here yet.

**Liz** What? (*At Flicka*) Where the hell is she?

**Flicka** Um...

**Liz** I thought you said she was on her way. Good God, it's not as if the dozy girl doesn't need rehearsing. Phone her!

*(Flicka crumples, then makes the call)*

**Liz** I want you *all* here *all* the time. And no excuse for lateness will be accepted from next week onwards. Is that clear?

**Alastair** If you like.

**Rob** Absolutely, Mein Fuehrer.

**Liz** Well, honestly...

**Rob** No, but it's meant to be fun, too, Liz. This isn't the RSC.

**Liz** We can have fun when we've done some work.

**Virginia** I could read in for Holly.

**Liz** Don't you start falling in love with the part though.

**Virginia** Oh, for goodness sake.

*(Virginia is dithering)*

**Liz** Are you coming, then?

**Virginia** Does anyone have a spare script?

**Liz** She doesn't even have a script!

**Virginia** I am offering you help.

**Bernie** (*Handing Virginia his script*) Here you are, dear.

**Virginia** Thank you.

*(Dawn and Virginia follow Liz into the rehearsal room)*

**Rob** God, she's fierce isn't she?

**Kate** 'This isn't the RSC'. Hehehe.

**Flicka** (*To the room in general*) I think maybe she's in that bit where you can't get reception, where it wiggles across that part of the common, before you get to the garage and that shop that sells fire places.

**Bernie** Come on. Come and have a cuppa.

**Flicka** I'd better go and tell Liz.

**Bernie** Brave soldier.

**Flicka** It's probably my fault.

*(Flicka goes back into the rehearsal room)*

**Kate** Poor old thing

*(Flicka immediately reappears from the rehearsal room)*

**Flicka** Suzette... Um... Liz wants you.

**Suzette** Oh, ok.

**Alastair** (*Singing to Suzette, lustfully*) 'The way she wears her hat...'

**Suzette** Oh, give it a rest!

*(Suzette goes into the rehearsal room. Flicka makes another phone call)*

**Kate** (*About Suzette, to Rob*) You can't credit to look at her that she's ever had a problem, can you?

**Rob** She tell you about going to AA then?

**Kate** In the strictest confidence. But then I heard her tell you. You should hear some of her drinking stories. Gosh, they'd put hairs on your chest.

**Rob** If I were her, I wouldn't go around telling everyone. Anyway, it's meant to be anonymous. The clue's in the title, isn't it?

**Bernie** (*To Alastair, who's listening at the door of the rehearsal room*) What's happening in there?

**Alastair** She's working on Dawn. Got her breathing like a panther. Trying to find her passion, apparently. She'll be lucky. Hasn't been any passion in that woman since Kajagoogoo split up. (*Leaving the rehearsal room door*) Hey Kate, how's your battle going against that bloody bollocking bastard Smedley?

**Kate** Oh, I don't know Alastair. Some days I think I'm making a bit of headway, and then –

*(Bernie is sloping off)*

**Rob** Bernie, you're not getting out of it that easily!

**Bernie** What?

**Rob** We're talking about the houses they're building behind Kate.

**Bernie** Nothing to do with me, I'm afraid.

**Rob** Course it is Bern, me old mukker.

**Alastair** No, mate, he told me there's nothing he can do about it. Any of those cheesy things left?

**Rob** If you chose to get your finger out –

**Bernie** I really wish you wouldn't interfere in –

**Rob** Smedley can't start to build till you lot at the Council give him clearance.

**Bernie** Yes, but –

**Rob** You run the department.

**Bernie** It's not just *my* department involved.

**Rob** Don't give me that. I know how it works.

**Alastair** You write the sports page for the Pogchurch Advertiser!

**Rob** I've spent days in those bloody council offices –

**Kate** Bernie, if you could do something...

**Bernie** Haslam's dealing with it.

**Rob** Geoff Haslam? But you could override –

**Bernie** Smedley needs to create room between your building and the new houses to match the legal requirement for light and air space between –

**Kate** You needn't think by using technical jargon you're going to pacify me, Bernie. I know all about building specs and legal whatsits. These days I only talk to surveyors, council officers, engineers...

**Bernie** Well, that's the way it is. If you keep the trees, you've got to move the houses; and you can't move the houses because some of them are already sold.

**Kate** But they've not been built yet. There's still a chance we could negotiate, isn't there?

**Bernie** Sorry, Kate. It's done and dusted.

*(Little pause)*

**Kate** *(To Bernie)* You know Ken planted those trees?

**Bernie** No, I didn't.

**Kate** They used to go all the way down to the river.

**Rob** Did they?

**Kate** *(To Rob)* Before you were born. They knocked down ten of them when we lost that piece of land they built the garage on. But there's still six left.

**Rob** Yeah, they're gorgeous. Particularly this time of year.

**Kate** Bernie, you'll think me a mad old woman, but I feel Ken's in those trees. His spirit I mean. The one by me fills my bedroom window with the most incredible colours. And, in the wind, it knocks, like it's trying to get in. It's the last bit of him I have, Bernie. If you take that away...

*(She doesn't want to cry, so she stops talking)*

**Rob** *(To Bernie)* Come on, there must be something you can do.

**Bernie** It's out of my hands. And that's all there is to it.

**Kate** Knock down five of them! I don't care about five of them! Just let me keep my one.

**Bernie** *(Conciliatorily)* Kate...

**Kate** You'll give a license to that crummy strip joint, but you won't save my tree.

*(Kate gets a tissue out, and blows her nose)*

**Rob** *(To Bernie)* Mind you, if you behave at work like you do around your wife, I'm not surprised Geoff overrules you.

**Bernie** What do you mean by that?

**Rob** D'you let him boss you about like Virginia does?

**Bernie** I don't let *either* Geoff Haslam *or* Virginia boss me about.

*(Alastair stifles a laugh)*

**Bernie** It's not in the least true. How dare – What can you possibly know about my relationship with my...? You're just a...

**Rob** What? Go on, Bernie. Say it.

**Bernie** I won't stand for your cheek.

**Rob** Oh my God. Won't you? Now I'm crushed.

**Kate** It's alright. We shouldn't be arguing about it like this.

**Rob** *(Doing a limp fairy impression)* I'm just a little crushed thing now...

**Bernie** Don't be so pathetic, you... You...

**Rob** What? Me what? What do you want to say, Bernie?

**Bernie** *(Darkly)* You know what you are.

*(Bernie strops off)*

**Alastair** *(Not unamused)* Leave him alone, mate. He has a hard enough time with Virginia, without you –

**Rob** He could do something if he wanted, I'm sure of it. I'll investigate Haslam in the week, Kate.

**Kate** I've tried him already. He's clam-like.

**Rob** We'll see.

**Flicka** *(Doing her public intoning thing)* Oh, Earth Mother, Great Goddess of the Universe, let the Spirit of the Tree be strong. Give your daughter Kate the cosmic power to fight like a mighty celestial warrior against those who in this time dimension have base earthly desires, Smedley and Geoff Haslam at the council.

**Kate** Thank you, dear. That's very reassuring.

**Flicka** Oh Goddess Earth, let our warring spirits be united in peace and serenity –

*(Liz bursts out of the rehearsal room, blaring at Flicka)*

**Liz** What the hell are you doing, Flicka, you dozy woman! If you're not on the phone, you should be in here with me.

**Flicka** Oh, yes, sorry, Liz.

**Liz** Holly's not here yet?

**Flicka** No, sorry, no.

**Liz** Wretched girl. Well, we'll just have to start without her. (*Calling into the rehearsal room*) Come on everybody. Out here. (*To Flicka*) Have you been crying?

**Flicka** No, I've been praying.

**Liz** Good God, woman, what's wrong with you? Right then, I want a quick 'zip zap boing'. Then we'll do notes from last week.

**Virginia** Oh no, not that stupid games again. Are you seriously telling me that professional actors actually do –

**Liz** Ok, ready everyone? Come on! Come on!

**Virginia** I just can't imagine Dame Judi Dench doing zip zap boing, can you?

*(They are forming a circle. Bernie re-emerges. Kate is last to make it. Flicka doesn't join in. Virginia stands disapprovingly slightly outside the circle. The group has done 'zip zap boing' before and it knows the drill)*

**Liz** Right. Rob leads. Begin.

*(Zip zap boing is a warm up game, with 'zip's and 'zap's being passed round and across the circle, respectively, and 'boing's reversing the direction. Particular physical movements accompany each exchange. This uncoordinated group is pretty rubbishy at it, except Rob who's good at everything! At best it's desultory. Often the flow is disrupted. Kate gets her zip mixed up with her zap. Bernie just stops every time it comes to him and says 'Sorry'. Suzette gets the giggles. Virginia is uncommitted, stiff and scornful)*

**Liz** Ok. Enough. That was pathetic. If you're going to carry off the part of Henry Tilney, Bernie, you're going to have to start connecting.

**Virginia** I really don't see the point of these superannuated party games.

**Liz** Zip zap boing's about staying present. It's about being emotionally available. It's about maintaining focus. Bernie, on all counts, fails.

**Virginia** Well if you're just going to use it as an opportunity to insult us...

**Liz** And it's about being part of the group, Virginia. On that count you fail.

**Virginia** Well, really. No one could accuse me of being uncommitted to this group.

**Liz** Not sure your sort of commitment is especially useful. Just feel free to join in like everyone else, and see if you like it any better.

*(As Liz and Virginia are about to continue the argument, Holly walks in. She's an awkward, overweight, depressed, catatonic, young woman who wishes to be other. She always carries with her an up-to-date copy of Heat magazine, and, when possible, eats. She's soaking wet)*

**Liz** At last!

**Holly** I'm ever so sorry, Liz.

**Rob** Hi, Hols.

**Suzette** How are you doing?

**Alastair** Hey Holly, what's going on?

**Kate** Oh, my dear, you're soaking wet!

**Flicka** Hiya!

**Liz** Where on earth have you been?

**Holly** I'm really sorry. I got everything all mixed up in my head, coz, you see... My cat's gone!

**Dawn** Not Brad!

**Suzette** Oh Christmas.

**Kate** Oh dear.

**Flicka** Oh no, not your cat.

**Alastair** That's bad luck.

**Bernie** What a shame. Poor girl.

**Dawn** Come and sit down.

**Liz** *(To herself)* Oh, for heavens sake.

*(They all, except for Liz and Virginia, gather round Holly, comforting her. Virginia stands slightly to one side, helping herself to a sherry)*

**Flicka** What happened to him?

**Holly** I don't know. Yesterday he didn't come for his food, and today he didn't, and I think he must have just gone away. Because no one's seen him or reported him run over or anything. And he's all I've got. So I was incredibly upset and I just wasn't thinking straight. But I put on my coat and I set off for Spanish, and then Flicka phoned and said it was Tuesday not Thursday, but by that time I was on the trunk road. And there wasn't a bus. But then there was. But it broke down. So I started to walk. But then it rained. And then I realised that if it was Thursday, it wouldn't be Spanish anyway. On Thursday it's Pilates at 6.30 and then it's Sing-Along-A-Salsa at 8.30. Spanish is on

Wednesday. And as I realised that, I started to feel very bad inside because, you know, the truth is that it doesn't really matter where I go. I do all these classes just so I don't have to be in my flat on my own in the evenings, because I get really, really depressed with being so alone, and also so I can meet a man. But none of it does me or anybody else any good at all, so I might as well have gone to Spanish, even though it wasn't on and nobody would have been there. And there aren't any men to meet at any of these places anyway. Not any who aren't gay or married or weird. So I'll never meet anyone. And even if I do, no one's going to want me. How can I have a boyfriend when I can't even keep a cat? And my yucca's died – it's gone all yellow and crispy because I forgot to feed it its special stuff. And I keep thinking: do you think *I'm* dying? Because I once saw a film where it said that cat's don't stay around dying people. They just leave. Like Brad has. But what could I be dying of? Can you die of being unattractive and lonely? Because if you can, then maybe I'm dying of that. Like my yucca. I'll go all yellow and crispy, and I'll die.

**Kate** Oh, no, dear.

**Dawn** No.

**Suzette** You're not dying, and you're not unattractive.

**Bernie** Now then, don't be silly.

**Virginia** Get her a cup of tea, Bernard. Don't just stand there.

**Dawn** Let's get her dry.

**Kate** Good idea. Come on Holly, let's get you dry.

*(Kate and Flicka take the shivering and weeping Holly off to the toilet. The others mill round the food table, discussing the crisis)*

*(Alastair sidles up to Liz with a cup of tea for her)*

**Alastair** Hello.

**Liz** Yes?

**Alastair** Enjoying yourself?

**Liz** It won't shock you to hear I've had better rehearsals.

**Alastair** So why on earth did you agree to do this then?

**Liz** I think it's important for a director to work with all kinds of companies, and to work within the community.

**Alastair** You were out of work, you mean.

**Liz** Not at all.

**Alastair** (*Sarcastic*) Right!

*(Her defences nearly fall, but she holds herself in check and drinks some tea)*

**Alastair** Pity you got landed with Bernie as Henry Tilney. He's never gonna make it.

**Liz** I'll tell you a trade secret. One of the skills a director must have is knowing when to lose battles. I let Virginia win that one because it meant everything to her. And I won all the others. Directing is a matter of balancing people against each other, you see. (*Eyeing Alastair*) And of making the best of what you've got. Winning the war is what I'm interested in. One battle at a time.

*(Dawn observes Alastair and Liz suspiciously)*

**Alastair** Well, you're doing a great job.

**Liz** How can I be? I never have a full company.

**Alastair** I think you're amazing.

**Liz** What are you doing?

**Alastair** Telling you the truth.

**Liz** You wouldn't be flirting with me, would you?

**Alastair** No.

**Liz** Because I'm a married woman and you're a married man. And anyway I never fuck in the factory.

*(Alastair is shocked)*

**Liz** Unless someone's incredibly talented. I have a soft spot for talent.

**Alastair** I'm pretty talented.

**Liz** You're a perky little thing, aren't you? Want to prove your talent?

**Alastair** (*Slightly frightened*) What?

**Liz** There's a couple of hours on a Saturday at 4.30 when this room's free between W.I. and Jamaican Drumming. 4.30, Saturday. Start leaning the part of Henry Tilney.

*(She walks away, leaving him amazed. A smile starts to creep across his face)*

*(Lights out)*

## Scene Two

*(A month later. A Tuesday evening in November)*

*(It's raining outside. When characters enter they have to deal with umbrellas etc)*

*(Kate's already arrived for this evening's rehearsal; working at her laptop as usual)*

*(Liz enters. She carries two fencing foils along with her usual handbag and Boots plastic bag)*

**Liz** Evening Kate.

**Kate** Ooh, you're in a good mood.

**Liz** Been offered a job.

**Kate** Paid, you mean?

**Liz** Yep. Small-scale touring project out of Halifax.

**Kate** Congratulations.

**Liz** Might have a career after all! *(Stopping)* Halifax. Seven years ago the Daily Telegraph said I was the new Katie Mitchell. I took something to Edinburgh and I was an *enfant terrible*, according to the Glasgow Herald. What did I do wrong do you think? *(She breathes out)* Fuck it. *(Disappears into the rehearsal room)*

*(Flicka enters, jogging. She's obviously in some distress, and makes a beeline for the toilet)*

**Flicka** Ooh, Hiya, Kate. Horrid, out there, isn't it?

**Kate** Yes, I was nearly sw –

**Flicka** Sorry. Hang on; I've just got to –

*(Flicka disappears into the toilet. Liz returns, with one foil, eating grapes, her defences repaired. She lunges and parries with an imaginary partner. She's practising a fight she's already choreographed)*

**Liz** The pisser is I can't take it. It's a direct clash with our opening.

**Kate** Still...

**Liz** No. Far too late to back out of this. Four weeks to go. I won't let you guys down.

**Kate** But a proper job –

**Liz** A professional's never going to walk out in the middle of a project.

*(Flicka re-enters from the toilet)*

**Flicka** Hello Liz. False alarm. Just air.

**Liz** What? Oh. Did you have another stab at the cushions?

**Flicka** Oh, yes. Here they are.

*(From her horse bag, Flicka pulls out two average-sized homemade sofa cushions. They are larger than her last effort)*

**Liz** *(Through clenched teeth)* Let me explain once again. Because we have no budget, the detailed sophistication of the Regency interior of Catherine's room is to be created solely by two large cushions on which Catherine and Isabella will perch throughout their scenes. If they sat on those their arses would completely hide them, wouldn't they? Comprene?

**Flicka** Yes. Sorry.

**Kate** Can you think of something nice to say about them?

**Liz** They're the right colour. Now, come with me. I want you to take down this fight. It's fantastic. Sort of Jane Austen meets Kill Bill. And bring a pen.

*(Liz goes into the rehearsal room. Flicka starts to follow, then does an abrupt U-turn and runs in the opposite direction towards the loo)*

**Flicka** *(Clenching her bottom)* Ooooh. *(Exits to the toilet)*

*(Dawn and Alastair enter. They argue as they hang their coats up, oblivious of Kate's presence)*

**Alastair** All I'm saying is I don't know why you're so determined to get pregnant this minute.

**Dawn** Don't make me laugh. How long have we been trying?

**Alastair** But with the show now, and the amount you still have to learn –

**Dawn** I'm on top of it!

**Alastair** You're so tense you're about to explode. No wonder you can't get pregnant.

**Dawn** Well, we might stand a chance if you could keep an erection on the go for more than thirty seconds – Oh, hello, Kate, didn't see you there.

*(Liz comes out of the rehearsal room)*

**Liz** Where the hell did she go? Ah, good, you're here.

**Dawn** Hiya.

**Alastair** Hi, Liz.

**Liz** Give me a shout when we have a quorum.

**Kate** Oh, Liz, could we do Mrs Allen's dance today? I'm not hugely confident with the rap bit.

**Liz** If there's time.

*(Liz goes back into the rehearsal room. Rob enters)*

**Rob** Hi, guys.

**Kate** Evening, Rob.

**Alastair** Hi, mate.

**Dawn** Hello, Rob. How are you?

**Rob** Could someone give me a hand with this thing?

**Alastair** Sure.

*(Alastair goes off with Rob, crossing with Suzette who's coming in)*

**Suzette** Hi Rob

**Rob** Hi Suzette

**Alastair** Hi sexy.

**Suzette** Sodding awful weather. *(To Dawn and Kate)* Hiya.

**Dawn** Hiya.

**Kate** Hello, dear. What have they got out there?

*(Alastair and Rob bring in an enormous prop chandelier. Lack of a complete coat of paint reveals that it's made of cheap wood)*

**Dawn** Wow! Amazing!

**Kate** Ooh, a chandelier!

**Rob** Now, it's not finished.

**Suzette** That's so cool.

**Kate** I wouldn't have the first idea how to start making one of those.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO READ THE REST OF THIS PLAY PLEASE CONTACT  
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