

Don't Even Joke

A comedy about death for three actresses and an old dog

By Tim Luscombe

Draft One

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Script excerpt.

The entire script is 66 pages.

Scene Two.

A large, expensively decorated house in a swanky part of a northern European capital city.

Dominating things is a large 80s-style oil painting of a rock'n'roll drummer hard at work.

Connie (who played Pippa in Scene One) enters with a tray of lemonade and glasses.

The doorbell rings. Connie exits.

Connie: *(Off)* So sweet of you to come over, Hazel.

Hazel: *(Off)* I tried pretending I was the cleaning lady and bustling past, but they saw straight through it.

Connie: *(Off)* Come on in.

Connie and Hazel enter together. Hazel played Hannah in Scene One.

Hazel: What on earth to say to the buggers? I mean, that's not trite and completely bloody obvious. 'National treasure – had lost none of her powers – family distraught – friends inconsolable'. More than that I was incapable of. Oh, by the way, darling, is that a grand piano they're delivering next door?

Connie: Yes.

Hazel: They're making a shocking job of it. You should phone your neighbours and alert them. An entire buddleia bed has been trampled to death and three hanging baskets murdered.

Connie: I'm sure the prince's people will be onto it.

Hazel: Prince? You live next to a prince? Of what?

Connie: Some emirate or other. He's everso nice and very jolly, as princes go.

Hazel: I have no frame of reference when it comes to the jolliness of princes.

Connie: He's just built an island – to live on, I mean – in the gulf of something. Can you imagine? Building an island from scratch?

Hazel: But he didn't build it himself, did he? It'll be Indian slaves – won't it? – Pakistanis and Philipinos lugging sand around in 45 degrees, and he'll pay them nothing and care even less. I'm overjoyed they've buggered up his buddleias.

Connie: Have some lemonade?

Hazel: Lovely. I don't know whether I'm Arthur or Martha. Doing little things seems so pointless, doesn't it, but you can't do big things either. And all the time you just keep trying to get your head round it, just to take it in. (*Re lemonade*) It's absolutely delicious.

Connie: I just thought it might be best if we... I just thought I'd have us all round to –

Hazel: Sweet of you.

Connie: I didn't know what else to do. It seemed – I don't know – I thought we ought to be together.

Hazel: Jax not here yet?

Connie: Running late. Jimmy's not feeling great –

Hazel: Darling, this place is amazing.

Connie: (*Pleased*) I wasn't sure you'd ever been.

Hazel: Well, you invited Dave and me to a New Years Eve party a few years ago, but, you know, we always used to do our own, so...

Connie: (*Standing*) Would you like a tour?

Hazel: A tour? How grand. Maybe later.

Connie sits.

I'm completely numb. Like I've been switched off at the mains.

Connie: Of course she was old, but she was so...vital, wasn't she?

Hazel: Evidently not.

Connie: Oh God, Hazel, don't be brutal. You weren't the one who found her – in her dressing room, looking so...

Hazel: Dead. Has anyone heard from Duncan?

Connie: Not a word, as far as I know. If I was Duncan, I'd be on the phone this morning to every namey actress over the age of 60, wouldn't you?

Hazel: You think he'll replace her?

Connie: Well, we can't just carry on with the understudy, can we? I mean, for a few days perhaps, till whoever-the-replacement-is gets the part under her belt. But she won't do long term.

The doorbell rings.

Hazel: God, no. She's ghastly.

Connie: She's not *ghastly*. (*Rises*).

Hazel: She's hideous.

Connie: She *is* a pale shadow of Meredith. What worries me is, if he can't find a replacement, I wouldn't put it past him to pull the whole thing. (*Exits*).

Hazel: But pulling a money-making hit would be completely against Duncan's religion, wouldn't it?

Jax is heard offstage. Jax played Cat, the oldest woman, in Scene One.

Jax: (*Off*) You don't mind, do you, darling? Only, the poor little thing is everso poorly-worly and I just didn't have the heart to leave him at homeybies. (*Enters with Jimmy Jones her very old dog, and followed by Connie*) Hello, my darling.

Hazel: Hello, my darling.

Connie: Lemonade?

Jax: Why not? (*Half to the dog and half to the others*) I think he's developed a kind of sympathy thing, because he's generally a perfectly happy, healthy little doggiewoggie, and he's mummy's little sunshine, isn't he? Isn't he?

Connie: He's not going to be sick or anything – is he, Jax? – because that rug cost ten grand.

Jax: No, no, he'll be fine. He'll tell me if he wants to be sick.

Connie: How clever of him.

Jax: Oh, he's the cleverest little doggieyoggie. Everso clever, everso clever. No, he's just a little bit doopydrawers this morning, a little bit saddykins.

Hazel: Did he tell you that too?

Jax: Mummy knows when jimmywimmy's miserable. Mummy knows. Doesn't she? Yes, she does. Now you be a good little Jimmy Jones and you stay there, you hear? Yes, that's it, you stay there. Good boy.

Jimmy Jones is very well behaved and stays put throughout. Jax gets out various dog things over the next section – all very ragged – including a water bowl and water bottle.

Connie: Well... (*Toasting with lemonade*) Here's to Meredith.

Hazel: To Meredith.

Jax: Meredith.

They drink.

Hazel: Honestly, Jax, how fabulous was she as Evelyn in this? God, she was good, wasn't she?

Jax: She was sublime.

Hazel: And all so apparently effortless – as ever.

Jax: Not that it didn't cost her, going through that every night.

Hazel: Of course it cost her.

Jax: Dearly. Deeply.

Connie: The most impressive thing for me was that she held down such a huge part half blind and almost completely deaf.

Hazel: Yes. Miraculous is what it was.

Jax: She honestly lost none of her timing.

Hazel: As long as she could read your lips.

Connie: Yes, as long as you stayed close to her and faced her. Once she'd got used to that little earpiece...

Jax: God, how brave she was with that.

Hazel: Yes. Not like some I could mention.

Jax: Oh you mean...?

Hazel: Oh yes.

Connie: Who?

Hazel: You didn't hear about Sooz in *The Hypochondriac*?

Connie: Oh, yes...

Hazel: Just like Meredith, but nasty with it.

Jax: Mad as well, of course.

Hazel: Sooz? God, yes. Mad as a box of frogs.

Jax: Couldn't remember her lines towards the end.

Hazel: But wouldn't take a prompt.

Jax: Couldn't *hear* the prompt.

Hazel: Vicious, evil witch. No exaggeration.

Jax: But Meredith...

Hazel: Yes, Meredith...

Jax: Saintly.

Pause.

Oh, Christ, what the hell is going to happen to us?

Hazel: Connie thinks Duncan's going to pull it.

Jax: Hells bells.

Connie: I didn't say that. Just that he might. I mean it *is* Meredith's show.

Hazel: Well, now. That's not quite right. It's an ensemble piece, isn't it?

Connie: Let's be frank. They don't come to see *us*, do they?

Jax: They don't come to see *me*. I haven't sold a ticket since the mid 1980s.

Connie: Nobody's saying we're not good – all three of us are doing a wonderful job in this – but name-wise we're not in the same league as Meredith.

Jax: She's right.

Connie: Not to mention that the take's hardly wonderful at the moment.

Hazel: Well, it's unfair to judge the take in the middle of a heat wave.

Connie: Oh, there's always a reason. It's the summer. It's February. It's raining. It's not raining.

Hazel: It's not a touristy show.

Connie: You see?

Jax: I don't even want to think about it.

Connie: The point is, the advance isn't building – not healthily.

Hazel: What I heard was that nothing's doing well.

Connie: Some things are doing well. And now Meredith's gone, God bless her –

Hazel: God rest her –

Jax: Bless her little cotton socks –

Connie: It's going to be even worse.

Jax: I can't believe it. I just can't believe it.

Connie: On the other hand, it's a popular play, the translator's all the rage, and if Duncan can get a namey replacement, he'll probably see if he can crawl through the summer with it. So what I thought we could do –

Jax: (*To Connie*) You know, my darling, it's not only Meredith. It really isn't. Your performance in this is revelation to me.

Connie: No, Jax. You think so?

Hazel: Absolutely.

Jax: That bit in the third act where you start to accept that we're trapped in the catacombs forever...I can feel my molecules rearranging themselves every time we get to it. It shifts things around inside me on a visceral level, on a tectonic level. I honestly thought all those years in telly would have done terrible things to you, but not so. Not at all. It's a ravishing performance. Quite the best I've ever seen you give.

Connie: Crikey. Thank you, Jax. I'm overcome.

Jax: I mean every word.

Connie: Right. So. Well... I thought what we could do is come up with some names to help Duncan move the take-over process on.

Jax: Move the take-over process...? My God, the poor woman only died fifteen hours ago, Connie.

Connie: I know. I really don't want to sound hard-nosed about it, but we need someone, and we need her now. If the understudy has to do it for more than a few days, we'll be dead in the water.

Jax: Tell me, which one is her understudy?

Connie: Moira.

Jax: That means nothing to me.

Hazel: Short. Thin hair.

Jax: Not that tiny little squat one? Oh, she's really grim, that one – all flushed and angry. Mind you, they're all pretty frightening – professional understudies – aren't they? I've never understood why anyone would want to be one.

Hazel: Yes, dear. It's one of life's greatest mysteries.

Connie: My very first job was understudying you in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Jax. You remember that, don't you?

Jax: Ah. Well, you're the exception, my darling.

Connie: Best education I ever had honestly. Watching from the wings every night as you wormed your way into Maggie's mind. Really extraordinary. Never did a single crossword.

Jax: What a sweetheart you are. But generally it's a very strange job. Like assistant directors. I mean, what is the point of an assistant director?

Connie: Right. So, the list.

Jax: What list?

Hazel: Trouble is, Connie, the sort of people you and I will think of are going to be good actors, aren't they?

Connie: Of course –

Hazel: It's pointless, isn't it? Duncan'll want commercial names. Names on the level Meredith was on.

Connie: Well, what d'you think we should do?

Jax: We don't have to *do* anything, do we?

Hazel: I think we should close the show. *We* should.

Jax: I don't know about you, my darling, but I signed a contract.

Connie: Exactly. If Duncan wants it to play on, we play on.

Hazel: Look, we're not talking about any old actor here. This was Meredith Masters. We close the show – we'd be saying we can't do it without her. It would be a salute to her genius.

Jax: God love her.

Hazel: I think it's the only appropriate thing to do.

Connie: Well, I...I don't know, Hazel.

Hazel: The three of us stand up to Duncan... We can outface him if we stick together. I can have a word with the Union. They'd back us, you can be sure of that. And people would want it. They'd get it. It would look good. It's right. It's the right thing to do.

Jax: But, my darling, honestly, the last thing I want is to stop the show. It's the first time since drama school – and that was a few centuries ago – that I've done a play with a bunch of other women, all with decent parts, where we've all got on, where the director trusted us and kept nicely out of the way, and where we got paid proper commercial salaries. Connie can afford not to know what to do. (*To Connie*) I'm not saying anything, my darling, but we didn't all marry rock gods. (*Back to Hazel*) Personally, I don't even have a pension plan.

Connie: You don't...? Why ever not?

Jax: Well, people didn't in my day, dear.

Connie: Nonsense.

Jax: Freelance artists didn't. And, well, I suppose the truth is, I honestly never really planned to go on this long. I suppose I thought, if I ever did, something would just...happen. Perhaps I'd become famous, or marry someone famous. Well, turns out, no amount of wishful thinking...

Connie: I'd like to say in my own defence, the money's got nothing to do with anything. Jax, you know I'd give it all away just to have Rick back again. So please don't think it's anything other than a curse actually.

Jax: I knew you'd be offended. I shouldn't have said anything.

Connie: I just needed time to think, and now I've thought, and what I say is that I'm certain Meredith would have wanted us to go on with it. If for no other reason than she knew exactly how long each of us had been out of work before this came along.

Jax: Absolutely. I'm not exaggerating – this one saved my life.

Connie: It's really not up to us, Hazel – is it? – to decide what is or isn't an appropriate gesture to commemorate poor old Meredith.

Jax: She's right, dear. You go help organise her memorial if you like. But we're in a show, and we carry on, whether it be with that frightful orange dwarf of an understudy, or with whatever other namey-name Duncan can persuade to join us.

Hazel: Yes. I just... It's so overwhelming. I wanted to react in a way that... She's dead, God damn it. Meredith's dead, and I feel so bloody powerless.

Jax: You are, my darling one. All we can do is go on. Turn up to the stage door tomorrow, pick up your dressing-room key and put on the slap. Get out there and entertain the crowd.

Connie: Exactly.

Hazel: I'm sorry. You're right. We'll carry on – for Meredith.

Connie's phone rings.

Connie: *(Into phone)* Good morning, Duncan. Yes. No. Really? Because we thought... Oh, I see. *(Hand over phone)* He's putting the notice up.

Jax: He's not!

Hazel: Bollocking bollocking bollocks. Damn him. God damn that bastard.

Jax: Very well. In that case, I shall kill myself.

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