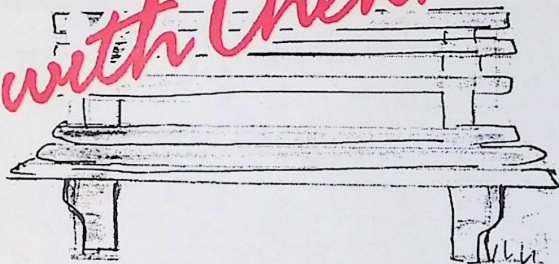


TALKING THINGS OVER

with Chekhov



by **JOHN FORD NOONAN**

JOHN FORD NOONAN is a 1989 inductee into the French Society of Composers and Authors. He first came to prominence in 1969 with the highly acclaimed Lincoln Center production of *The Year Boston Won the Pennant* starring Roy Scheider. At Joe Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival Noonan wrote *Older People* (a Drama Desk Award winner), *Rainbows for Sale* (an Obie Award winner), *Concerning the Effects of Trimethylchloride*, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, *All the Sad Protestants* and *Getting Through the Night*. In 1978 his play *The Club Champion's Widow*, with Maureen Stapleton, opened the premiere season of the Robert Lewis Acting Company. In the '80's he wrote *A Couple White Chicks Sitting Around Talking*,* which ran for more than 800 performances at the Astor Place Theatre, and *Some Men Need Help** (three months off Broadway). In 1987 Mr. Noonan's *Spanish Confusion*, *Mom Sells Twins for Two Beers*, *Green Mountain Fever* and *Recent Developments in Southern Connecticut* all ran simultaneously in Los Angeles (three of which won Drama-Logue Awards). The Asolo State Theatre presented Noonan's *Why Can't You Be Him?* during the '87-88 season. Noonan has twice been nominated for Emmys—in 1984 for an episode of "St. Elsewhere" called "The Women" (for which he won) and in 1985 for the television adaptation of *Some Men Need Help*. On screen he has acted in such movies as *Brown Wolf*; *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*; *Heaven Help Us*, and *Adventures in Babysitting*. Twice he has been acclaimed in Andrew Sarris' favorite film performances of the year. Mr. Noonan's proudest accomplishments to date are (1) his children: Jesse Sage Noonan, Chris Noonan Howell, Olivia Noonan Howell and Tracy Noonan Howell; and (2) his acclaim by *Rolling Stone* magazine as "the greatest white boogie dancer in the world."

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by John Ford Noonan



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45 WEST 25TH STREET NEW YORK 10010
7623 SUNSET BOULEVARD HOLLYWOOD 90046
LONDON TORONTO



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Talking Things Over With Chekhov was presented by Bill Repicci at the Actors' Playhouse under the direction of Marjorie Mahle, with set by Ron Kron, lighting by Tracy Dedrickson, costumes by Gene Lauze, stage management by Joe McGuire, and with the following cast (in order of their appearance):

JEREMY M. John Ford Noonan
MARLENE D. Diane Salinger

CHARACTERS

JEREMY M.
MARLENE D.

TIME

The present.

PLACE

Riverside Park in the West 80's.

ACT I

Scene 1

SCENE: The time is the present. Autumn, early October. Just after one in the afternoon. The place is a park bench in Riverside Park in the West 80's.

AT RISE: LIGHTS up. Brief seconds and enter JEREMY M. HE is slightly overweight, in very poor condition, and in his early forties. HE sits on park bench. Brief seconds, HE leaps up with renewed verve and looks in both directions. It's as if HE's expecting someone. Suddenly HE spots anticipated visitor, sits back down, and feigns sickness, face in hands, coughing and gagging.

Enter MARLENE D. Tall, beautiful, willowy, late 30's. SHE also wears jogger's suit, along with wool cap and oversized sunglasses. In great shape, SHE stops near bench and does series of advanced stretches. Pleased, SHE sits at opposite end of bench from Jeremy. SHE laughs. JEREMY coughs. Suddenly MARLENE recognizes Jeremy.

MARLENE. Is it you? (*Moves down bench toward Jeremy.*)

JEREMY. Yes?

MARLENE. Marlene?

(JEREMY doesn't recognize her. MARLENE removes a red wool cap from head and sunglasses. JEREMY recognizes her.)

JEREMY. You've ... you've ... you've ...

MARLENE. Made some changes.

JEREMY. Your hair is different.

MARLENE. It's called "The snug look."

JEREMY. You've lost weight.

MARLENE. Almost twenty pounds.

JEREMY. You look taller.

MARLENE. I've reportioned myself. I work out on a regular basis. Something called the Nautilus machines. I've gotten bigger where I wanted to get bigger. Smaller where I wanted to get small. I feel more held together. People's eyes look at me all different. My body has finally become my friend.

JEREMY. How many times a week?

MARLENE. Three. Plus the running. That I do every day. I start out on the East Side. Cross the Park—rest here for about five minutes. Then the same thing back home. All together it's six-point-two miles. I would die without my six-point-two miles every day.

JEREMY. I've been jogging myself.

MARLENE. It takes a while before the results show.

JEREMY. I just started.

MARLENE. Still got that gut? (*Pats Jeremy's stomach.*)

JEREMY. Please don't touch me like that.

(*SHE doesn't stop. She continues.*)

JEREMY. I hate when you touch me like that. I've always hated when you touch me like that.

(*Continues. HER touching grows to tickling. His laughing starts.*)

JEREMY. My stomach's my vulnerable spot. You always do it to get to me.

MARLENE. What's wrong with trying to get to you? (*Tickling increases, laughing grows uncontrollable.*) Am I getting to you?!

JEREMY. Get your fucking hands off my goddamn stomach! (*Suddenly pushes her hands away, leaps up from bench. Quickly HE sits back down, breathing deeply.*) Almost three years and it's like we never—

MARLENE. Two years, nine months, seventeen days.

JEREMY. You keep count?

MARLENE. It's the best way to remember how bad it was.

JEREMY. Marlene, don't start!

MARLENE. I get up in the morning. You're not next to me. I have a reason to live.

JEREMY. Marlene, I'm warning you!!

MARLENE. I look for you every day in the obituaries. I keep hoping you'll get hit by a car. I dream of your funeral. I see the worms getting through.

JEREMY. (*Leaping to feet.*) I don't need this.

MARLENE. No one asked you to sit down.

JEREMY. See you in another three years.

MARLENE. Two years, nine months, seventeen days.

JEREMY. (*Starts off, stops, sits back down on bench.*) So you live on the East Side?

MARLENE. Seventy-third between Park and Lex.

JEREMY. Isn't that expensive?

MARLENE. Herbert makes a ton of money.

JEREMY. When we split up, you swore you'd never live with another man.

MARLENE. We never yell. We never scream.

JEREMY. Sounds pretty quiet.

MARLENE. We're planning to be married in May. I'm meeting his parents this weekend.

JEREMY. Looking forward to it?

MARLENE. Scared to death.

JEREMY. Why do it?

MARLENE. It's important to Herbert.

JEREMY. What about you?

MARLENE. We have a life based on mutual sharing.

JEREMY. It's obviously working. You've never looked better.

MARLENE. When we first get up, he gives me a hug and says, "Hi, BEAUTIFUL, HERE'S ANOTHER DAY." For Herbert it's not a line. It's what he really feels. Herbert's full of feeling. He calls me from work every day around two, no matter what.

JEREMY. Suppose you feel like going out?

MARLENE. He brings me flowers. He surprises me with presents. He's always leaving me notes under my pillow. He calls when he's going to be late. No matter what, we're together every weekend. He remembers the little things.

JEREMY. They all sound pretty big to me.

MARLENE. That's what he's always saying: "ONLY IF BOTH PARTIES REMEMBER THE LITTLE THINGS CAN LOVE GET BIG." He's everything I've always wanted.

JEREMY. Everything I could never be.

MARLENE. He never leaves his clothes around. He never farts ... at least not in front of me. He never picks between his toes and smells it. He never sits playing with his balls. He doesn't need girlie magazines. He's beyond talking dirty. There's nothing with batteries in his drawer.

JEREMY. That was only toward the end.

MARLENE. He does the dishes. Shares the shopping. Oh sweet Jesus, can you hear it in my voice?!

JEREMY. What?

MARLENE. I'm as angry at you as the day I threw you out.

JEREMY. Is that how you remember it?

MARLENE. Don't start with changing things. You're a real ace at clouding everything up.

JEREMY. Next you're going to tell me we were never happy!

MARLENE. For about an hour.

JEREMY. What about the month on Martha's Vineyard?

MARLENE. It was only ten days.

JEREMY. Tell me the three months in L.A. weren't fun?

MARLENE. All I did was vomit and cry. Vomit and cry.

JEREMY. I dare you to tell me the trip to Florida was—

MARLENE. I've got to get out! (*Jumping up from bench.*) If I don't, I'll have nothing right!! (*Starts off in full sprint, three strides, suddenly collapses to ground, holding leg in agony.*) Shit! Goddamn Shit!! Piss fuck shit!! (*Slapping at left leg.*) Cramp. Left leg. Always when I sit too long.

JEREMY. Want me to rub it?

MARLENE. Someone's got to.

(*JEREMY bends over Marlene.*)

MARLENE. O God. The pain.

(*JEREMY starts to rub.*)

MARLENE. Good. More left. Better. Ah!

(*JEREMY following instruction.*)

MARLENE. Dig deeper ... Hard ... All you've got. Hurt me.

(JEREMY continuing.)

MARLENE. Gone. Help me to the bench.

(JEREMY helps MARLENE to feet, leads her to bench, sits down next to her. SILENCE. MARLENE laughs.)

JEREMY. What's so funny?

MARLENE. That's the one thing you could never do back then.

JEREMY. What?

MARLENE. Help me when I was in pain.

JEREMY. A lot of the time you—

MARLENE. If I had menstrual cramps or that time I couldn't stop crying when Elvis died, you would just turn away and change the subject to something pleasant.

JEREMY. I keep looking for your name in the paper.

MARLENE. See, there you go!

JEREMY. Do you think you'll ever act again? People really miss your acting. Everywhere I go, people who remember us as a pair always ask, "How's Marlene? She's the best young actress we ever watched. I wonder why she just walked away? If you ever see her, tell her we'd like her back!" Everything was going so perfectly. You started with the play at Yale. Moved with it to Broadway. You won the Tony.

MARLENE. Jeremy, I never won the Tony.

JEREMY. You deserved it.

MARLENE. Deserving isn't winning.

JEREMY. What happened that summer at Williamstown after all your success? If you'd still been

with me, I would've helped you through. I would never have let you quit. I would've made you push on. The critics were right: You were the best Masha they ever saw in *Three Sisters*.

MARLENE. This is getting so like Chekhov, I can't breathe.

JEREMY. Remember how I used to come by the theatre all the time and watch you do the third act? I must've caught that third act at least fifty times?

MARLENE. Sixty-three.

JEREMY. And that curtain call. People screaming. Leaping to their feet.

MARLENE. I miss all those "bravos." Jeremy, tell me the theatre needs me back.

JEREMY. Marlene, the theatre needs you back.

MARLENE. Again!

JEREMY. The theatre needs you back.

MARLENE. Tell me something else great.

JEREMY. I've just written my first play.

MARLENE. Come again?

JEREMY. I've written a play.

MARLENE. For the stage?

JEREMY. Two acts.

MARLENE. You've never written a play.

JEREMY. That's why it's my first.

MARLENE. What about your critic stuff for the *East Village Other*? What about your acting students—the Melvin Method?

JEREMY. Remember how great you were in my Master Class when you—

MARLENE. That review you gave me for *The Stronger* at the Public with Gerry P.? It was almost—embarrassing!

JEREMY. You knocked me out! You were so deep and dark, and yet so light and if Strindberg himself were to come back right now, he'd have no choice but to—

MARLENE. Is it any good?

JEREMY. What?

MARLENE. Your play.

JEREMY. It's going to be produced.

MARLENE. Where?

JEREMY. At a theatre in the West Fifties called APT.

MARLENE. APT?

JEREMY. Actors and Playwrights Theatre. Part of a new play festival. It's called *The Marathon*. It goes day and night for several weeks.

MARLENE. How many characters?

JEREMY. A man and a woman.

MARLENE. Anything in it for me?

JEREMY. Read it and see.

MARLENE. If I like it, I'll do it!

JEREMY. Why don't we go a step at a time? That way there won't be any—

MARLENE. The publicity people'll have a field day. Actress returns to stage in new play penned by former. It sound so ... so ... so—

JEREMY. Chekhovian—I know. If he were still alive, he and I would've been close friends.

MARLENE. Great artists never have close friends.

JEREMY. I would've been his first!

MARLENE. First what?

JEREMY. Chekhov's first close friend. A great artist needs one. I see us out in Yalta. He coughs. Makes a joke about the weather. I get up. Get him his tea. I come back. His blanket has slipped off. I put it back on. He says, "Thank you" in English. We talk about Tolstoy. I explain how much I love *Anna Karenina*. Chekhov laughs. I ask him why. He only smiles. I smile back. Now he knows I'm truly interesting. He asks about America. I tell him about Brooklyn. He asks why I came all the way to Yalta. "Someone has to take care of you!" "My wife would," says

Chekhov, "but she's in Moscow rehearsing my new play." He bows his head. I ask what's wrong. He says, "As the end approaches, I cry at the silliest things." I take his hand. He whispers, "Thanks, close friend." Suddenly there is wind. Thunder. Before I can—

MARLENE. Jeremy, you've changed, too. You're creating. Making up stories.

JEREMY. Can I finish now?

MARLENE. What?

JEREMY. Me and Chekhov. I was just about to explain how he and I—

MARLENE. I'm already late.

JEREMY. What for?

MARLENE. Till tomorrow. Same place. Same time. One on the button. That way I'll be back home in plenty of time for Herbert's call at two. (*Kissing Jeremy on the cheek.*) Promise you'll bring them tomorrow!!

JEREMY. What?

MARLENE. Five or six copies of your new play.

JEREMY. Why five or six?

MARLENE. I have a hunch about you. I still hate you more than ever, but you've still got that look in your eye. You may have the talent to write something that could bring me back. (*MARLENE starts off.*) CIAO!

JEREMY. Marlene!

(*MARLENE suddenly stops.*)

JEREMY. Please don't say CIAO. I hate people who say CIAO. That's what we used to say.

MARLENE. I'm not well enough to be followed. Please stop following me! (*Exits running.*)

BLACKOUT

ACT I

Scene 2

*Again, the park bench in Riverside Park in the West 80's.
The following day. It is forty minutes after one.*

LIGHTS up. No sight of Jeremy. He is late. MARLENE is dressed in a beautiful wool outfit. Jewels, makeup, the works. SHE paces. Spitting, snorting, growling. SHE is furious. Brief seconds then JEREMY stumbles on in ratty old raincoat, ratty sneakers, ratty hat. In his arm HE carries package wrapped in string. Breathing heavily, HE takes several seconds to catch breath ...

MARLENE. What happened? You're forty-six minutes late.

JEREMY. I got way behind.

MARLENE. Why didn't you grab a cab?

JEREMY. I had nothing but tokens.

MARLENE. Why are you dressed that way?

JEREMY. I've always dressed this way.

MARLENE. Suppose I had people for you to meet?

JEREMY. Marlene, about these people of yours—

MARLENE. Are you still in love with failure? Do you think being unknown and broke is the great crowning glory? Tell me you're not one of—

(Suddenly JEREMY hurls package on ground.)

MARLENE. What's that?

JEREMY. Copies of my play!

MARLENE. How can you call yourself a serious playwright? Would a serious playwright throw his work on the ground?

JEREMY. Shut up or I'll ... I'll ... I'll—

MARLENE. You'll what?!

JEREMY. Don't you understand? It's over!

MARLENE. We were dead years ago, Buster.

JEREMY. That's not what I'm talking about!

MARLENE. What are you talking about?!

JEREMY. It's cancelled!!

MARLENE. What's cancelled?!!

JEREMY. My play in the new play marathon.

MARLENE. When did you find out?

JEREMY. I went over there on my way here. I was supposed to sign a contract. APT's real big on contracts. I walk into the office. Immediately this big guy with a beret wearing glasses says, "Jeremy, all morning we've been trying to reach you!" "What's wrong?" "Our big funding source hasn't come through. We can only do two productions." "Why aren't I one of the two?" "Choices had to be made." "Political or artistic?" "Don't be a wise guy, Jeremy. You're a great writer, Jeremy. Great writers don't have to be wise-guys." A blonde jumps in, "We love your work. Don't let this stop you." I step back and smile like Duvall. "Gentlemen, Ladies, by dark your theatre's going to be a parking lot."

MARLENE. Why did you threaten them?

JEREMY. Cause they were lying.

MARLENE. Lying how?

JEREMY. About why they dumped me! They dumped me because they're terrified of real sex!!

MARLENE. What's that got to do with your play?

JEREMY. My play has serious and deep sexual overtones.

MARLENE. You wrote a play with sexual overtones?

JEREMY. Other people have.

MARLENE. I know but ... but ... How long is the first scene?

JEREMY. I've never timed it.

MARLENE. Read it to me! I'll stop if it gets too long.

(JEREMY tears string from package, tears package open, takes out copy of his script, lays other copies down on bench.)

JEREMY. Ready?

MARLENE. Set the scene.

JEREMY. What's that mean?

MARLENE. Where are we when the play opens.

JEREMY. Fifth floor walk-up. Two-thirty-eight West Fourth Street.

MARLENE. That was our first apartment.

JEREMY. Dawn. A radio plays. The woman sits alone.

MARLENE. Waiting?

JEREMY. Yes.

MARLENE. The man's late?

JEREMY. Very.

MARLENE. An hour?

JEREMY. Almost five.

MARLENE. What's he been doing?

JEREMY. It's in the dialogue.

MARLENE. What's she been doing?

JEREMY. Man enters, she screams, "IN ANOTHER MINUTE I WAS GOING TO CALL THE COPS."

MARLENE. That's me. At least twenty times I said to you, "IN ANOTHER MINUTE I WAS GOING TO CALL THE COPS."

JEREMY. The man says, "I GOT WAY BEHIND."

MARLENE. "I GOT WAY BEHIND" is so you. That's what you said just before, "I GOT WAY BEHIND." Oh

sweet Jesus in Heaven, the bum's written a play about us. Jeremy, you super, clever, bastard you.

JEREMY. Marlene, I'm going to continue now.

MARLENE. If it's about us, I might as well read my own part. You read you. I'll read me.

JEREMY. But—

MARLENE. (Reading from script.) IN ANOTHER MINUTE I WAS GOING TO CALL THE COPS.

JEREMY. I GOT WAY BEHIND.

MARLENE. WAY BEHIND? IT'S DAWN. WHERE WERE YOU?

JEREMY. WANDERING. THINKING. CONSIDERING.

MARLENE. WHO WITH?

JEREMY. MYSELF.

MARLENE. WHERE?

JEREMY. HUDSON RIVER. NEAR WHERE WE ALWAYS WALK, DOWN BY WEST STREET.

MARLENE. YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO MEET ME OUTSIDE THE STAGE DOOR AT 11:15.

JEREMY. I WAS THERE. Character takes out piece of paper. (JEREMY acts out taking out piece of paper.) I TOOK A LOT OF NOTES IN THE LAST ACT. YOU WERE WAY OFF IN THE GOOD-BY WITH VERSHININ. HERE. (JEREMY gestures as though handing her a piece of paper.) Here is where the female tears up the note. Do it.

MARLENE. Do what?

JEREMY. Act like you're tearing up the note.

MARLENE. I work only with real notes.

JEREMY. Then say the line after the note.

MARLENE. TARDY BOYS DON'T TELL BROADWAY STARS HOW TO PLAY THE FINAL SCENES IN CHEKHOV. Jeremy, you're good. You have a serious talent. It's us but it's not us. Your dialogue lives.

JEREMY. Can we get back to the dialogue?

MARLENE. But for a first play you're so—

JEREMY. Marlene, stop or I'll take my play away.

MARLENE. It's your line.

JEREMY. THEY WOULDN'T LET ME IN.

MARLENE. WHO?

JEREMY. THAT WOP AT THE STAGE DOOR. HE SAID HE DIDN'T RECOGNIZE ME.

MARLENE. MAYBE IF YOU DRESS BETTER—

JEREMY. THAT'S WHEN MERLIN ZALINSKY CAME BY. I SAID, "MERLIN, HOW 'BOUT GETTING ME IN?"

MARLENE. WHAT DID HE SAY BACK?

JEREMY. "PLEASE, NOT RIGHT NOW."

MARLENE. DID HE EVEN LOOK UP AT YOU?

JEREMY. NO.

MARLENE. HE HAD ONLY YOUR VOICE. YOU CAN'T EXPECT PEOPLE TO KNOW IT'S YOU IF ALL YOU GIVE THEM IS YOUR VOICE. HE HAD A LOT ON HIS MIND.

JEREMY. I HEARD WHAT HE SAID TO YOU IN THE DRESSING ROOM.

MARLENE. I THOUGHT YOU COULDN'T GET PAST THE DOOR.

JEREMY. I WALKED PAST THE ITALIAN. "IF YOU WANT TO EAT SOFT FOODS FOR A MONTH, STOP ME." AS I WAS ROUNDING THE CORNER TO THE DRESSING ROOM, THAT'S WHEN I HEARD MERLIN SAY IT.

MARLENE. SAY WHAT?

JEREMY. "THE WIMP'S WAITING AT THE DOOR."

MARLENE. AND I SAID BACK?

JEREMY. "LET THE WIMP WAIT."

MARLENE. I ONLY DO THAT TO EXPEDITE THE CONVERSATION.

JEREMY. EXPEDITE!!!

MARLENE. THE PEOPLE AROUND ME ARE ALWAYS PUTTING YOU DOWN. THEY MAKE FUN OF YOUR CLOTHES. HOW YOU TALK SO FAST IT SOUNDS LIKE ANOTHER LANGUAGE. HOW YOU HAVE NO TALENT.

JEREMY BUT—

MARLENE. IF I WERE TO STOP THEM AND TELL THEM HOW WARM AND WONDERFUL YOU ARE, HOW SPECTACULAR YOU ARE IN BED, HOW SUPPORTIVE YOU ARE OF MY CAREER, HOW HELPFUL YOUR NOTES ARE WHEN YOU COME TWO OR THREE TIMES A WEEK TO WATCH THE LAST ACT. Jeremy, this is exactly the sort of thing I've always wanted to say to you. (*Returning the script.*) IF I WERE TO STOP THEM AND TELL THEM HOW WARM AND WONDERFUL YOU ARE, HOW SPECTACULAR YOU ARE IN BED, HOW SUPPORTIVE—

JEREMY. You've already said that speech.

MARLENE. But what a speech! If I can do it right, they'll see my character's good side. They'll titter, they'll gasp, they'll cheer.

JEREMY. Marlene!

MARLENE. It's your line.

JEREMY. It's a stage direction. (*Reading stage direction.*) "Man exits and returns with suitcase."

MARLENE. Oh God, it's my line. (*Returning to script.*) WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

JEREMY. SPLITTING.

MARLENE. (*Reads quickly ahead in scene.*) I KNOW I'M A BITCH, A KILLER, A SHARK. TO ADVANCE MY CAREER I'D DROWN A BABY. (*Closing script.*)

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This section needs some rewriting. It's too direct. Too melodramatic. I mean, what has she done that's all that bad that he's got to—

(JEREMY rips script out of Marlene's hand.)

MARLENE. I've been thinking about going back to classes. I'm very happy being a wife, I mean, an about-to-be wife. But sometimes I get this ...this ... *(Suddenly taking Jeremy's hand.)* Last week Herbert and I saw Meryl B. in this new play by David L. and I could have done it better. Not the first act, because, well, she is technically a genius. But in the second act where the soul had to shine through, I would have definitely served the playwright better. *(Pause.)* Also, Williamstown has offered me Masha in *Three Sisters* for the summer which I'd love only ... only after what happened last time— *(Suddenly MARLENE stops and puts face in her hands.)*

JEREMY. Are you crying?

MARLENE. Dust in my eye. The West Side's much dustier than the East Side.

(JEREMY turns ahead in Marlene's script and then hands script back to her.)

JEREMY. Read the good-by speech at the end of the scene.

MARLENE. *(Quickly looking speech over.)* She's trying to get him to stay?

JEREMY. Absolutely.

MARLENE. So far as to beg?

JEREMY. What do the stage directions say?

MARLENE. *(Reading from stage directions.)* "Crawls on knees and begs." *(MARLENE gets to knees and reads speech from script.)* I KNOW THE ACTRESS IN ME

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KEEPS GETTING IN THE WAY. WHEN THE ENDING COMES TO *THREE SISTERS* AND I AM SAYING THOSE FINAL LINES "IF WE ONLY KNEW, IF WE ONLY KNEW," I STAND SWAYING IN THE MIDDLE, OLGA ON MY LEFT, IRINA TO THE RIGHT, I FEEL AS IF I AM CARRYING FEELINGS SO LARGE AND POWERFUL THAT I COULD ACTUALLY FLAP MY ARMS AND FLY OUT THE BACK OF THE THEATRE. IN THE DRESSING ROOM I CAN'T COME DOWN. OUTSIDE ON THE WAY TO A BAR I CAN HARDLY FEEL THE GROUND. I MUST BE SURROUNDED BY ADMIRERS ONLY. I WANT ONLY TO BE STROKED. NO NORMAL TALK. NO EVERYDAY OBSERVATIONS. I MUST HEAR ONLY "MARLENE, YOU WERE BRILLIANT," "HOLLYWOOD DOESN'T KNOW WHAT THEY'RE MISSING." "EVEN CHEKHOV HIMSELF WOULD'VE HUGGED YOU." I AM SORRY I CAN NEVER BE THERE FOR YOU AT NIGHT. AFTER CHEKHOV, TO BE WITH YOU IS TO BE HELD DOWN. AFTER CHEKHOV, YOU'RE JUST NOT—*(Letting script fall, screaming out to Jeremy.)* Jeremy, how can someone as crazy as you write something as clear as this?

JEREMY. The scene's not over. Can we go back to where—

MARLENE. I can't wait to start rehearsals!

JEREMY. The play's cancelled. There's no production.

MARLENE. We'll do our own.

JEREMY. What?

MARLENE. Herbert wants me out of the house more. He'll back anything I want to do.

JEREMY. But—

MARLENE. Lots of people want to be involved in my comeback. All we need is someone to play you. Sweet Jesus in Heaven, I wonder if he'd consider it?!

JEREMY. Who?

MARLENE. Then there's the director. There aren't many that I'll work with.

JEREMY. What about—

MARLENE. He stinks!

JEREMY. I didn't even say his name.

MARLENE. Jeremy, listen—

JEREMY. Marlene, enough!

MARLENE. Enough what?

JEREMY. (*Slapping bench.*) Sit, *NOW*.

MARLENE. Suppose I don't—

JEREMY. (*Screaming*) SIT!!

MARLENE. (*Sitting next to Jeremy.*) Breathe deep. You forget to breathe deep when you're angry.

JEREMY. (*Even louder scream.*) MY MOTHER'S DEAD! STOP!!! (*Pause.*) I wrote this play because I hated you so much. When we first split up, I dated a lot. Everyone I went out with brought you back. A gesture, a smile, a way of holding a cigarette. I gave up dating. Next, every woman I passed on the street became you. I avoided restaurants. I wouldn't board a bus. More and more I spent my days at home. Every night a different movie. Hours browsing in bookstores. One Thursday late I saw a book about Chekhov with his picture on the cover. I bought it. Took it home. Sat it on the desk. Stared at it. His mouth on the cover spoke, "THE MORE YOU HATE, THE LESS YOU REMEMBER!" I grabbed a piece of blank paper. Wrote down a sentence, "IN ANOTHER MINUTE I WAS GOING TO CALL THE COPS." I went to bed. Couldn't sleep. Jumped up. Wrote the next four lines. Thought I saw Chekhov on the cover smile. Then it hit me. That's what writing's about: the real remembering! By dawn I had the whole first scene copied. I read it. It wasn't great, but I saw what I had done. I had taken the resentments and revenges and hates I held against you and I

had stripped them back. What I had found was sadness and hurt and under that the real you. I had gotten back to what was there when we first met. I had dug up the forgotten you, the Marlene I had cared about and trusted. I think that's a great lesson for both of us, don't you?

MARLENE. What?

JEREMY. THE MORE YOU HATE, THE LESS YOU REMEMBER.

MARLENE. I'm glad you said what you said. Cleared the air. Made me aware. I'm too big to cry. (*Picking up copies of play, MARLENE puts them under your arm.*) I'll read it. It could be awful. It could be great. You're just starting out. I remember how I was when I first started out.

JEREMY. Better get going. Don't want to miss Herbert's call.

MARLENE. Good-by, Playwright! (*MARLENE starts off, stops.*) Already I'm getting better. I didn't say CIAO. (*MARLENE exits running.*)

(JEREMY sits there)

BLACKOUT

ACT I

Scene 3

Again, the park bench in Riverside Park in the West 80's.

The following day. Just after one in the afternoon.

LIGHTS up. JEREMY sits on bench dressed in a lovely tan three-piece suit and holding half-a-dozen red roses. He also wears bowler hat and leaning at his side, a fancy walking cane. Nervously looking left and right, HE

spots someone approaching and dashes off. Brief seconds and enter MARLENE D. Hair dishevelled, worn sweater, old and tattered skirt, SHE sits on bench and hums. JEREMY returns laughing ...

MARLENE. I saw you run off.

JEREMY. I couldn't bear to be the one waiting.

MARLENE. Didn't sleep at all, did you?

JEREMY. What a night!

MARLENE. You were always the same back then. Bouncing around, hands flapping like a chicken with its head half off. Talking, so fast no one could—*(MARLENE bursts out laughing.)* 'Member that Sunday you met my mother for the first time? Talk about manic. Jump up. Sit down. Bathroom in. Bathroom out. *(Suddenly MARLENE starts imitating Jeremy from that day.)*

JEREMY. Thank God for Chekhov. He's the only one who can calm me down. After I left you yesterday, I stopped for one drink each at all these different bars. Only works me up more. Get home at 5, flip on *Six Million Dollar Man*. At 6 I switch to 11 for *The Jeffersons* and *Barney Miller*. At 7 back to 5 for *Mash*. I'm exploding. I throw on my sweats. Seventeen times around the block. Up my five flights three and four steps at a time. I swing open my door. Flop to the floor for a set of push-ups. I notice his foot. Stop. Look up. He's sitting in my favorite rocker. Beautiful white linen suit. Felt hat. Walking cane. In his hand a bottle of something Russian. "Like some kvass?" "What's kvass?" He smiles. Pours me half a glass. He toasts, "To you!" "Why me?" "Tomorrow you'll be hearing what people think of your first play." He continues. This visit he's speaking Russian but somehow I hear it in English. "Plays make your life no longer your own. With stories you write it, mail it, good-by. But plays! Rehearsals. Production meetings. Picking the

actors." Suddenly he seems about to go on and on. More kvass. He laughs and says, "I don't mind my characters when they go on and on, but I hate to do it myself. How about more kvass?" Another half glass. Now I'm tipsy too. "Close Friend," he mumbles, "you and I are alike in a very big way. We're afraid to let go. We're both way too serious." I smile. He smiles. Now I know why he keeps coming back. He almost drops the bottle and chuckles, "From a tipsy Russian take some silly advice: 'ANY NUMBER OF PEOPLE CAN BE LUCKY ENOUGH TO WRITE ONE GOOD PLAY, BUT ONLY A FEW OF US ARE SMART ENOUGH TO DRESS LIKE WE'RE CAPABLE OF WRITING MANY!'" Chekhov laughs. I laugh. No two writers have ever howled louder. He goes on, "It's not only how you dress. It's any little thing that makes business easier. The right pencils. Paper you love to touch. A chair to work in that makes your back never hurt. Your desk in front of a window you love to look out of." He grabs my hand so tight I yelp. "CLOSE FRIEND, CONCENTRATE ON THE LITTLE THINGS. THEY'RE THE ONLY THINGS THAT ADD UP." He gets up, flips open the door with his walking cane, and wobbles off. *(Suddenly turning in place like a male model.)* Do I move like a writer of many great—Marlene, what's that ratty dress?

MARLENE. It's how I see myself in Act II.

JEREMY. What about Act I?

MARLENE. I love it all. Every comma got to me ... It's ... it's ... I only hope I can!

JEREMY. Can what?

MARLENE. Change as much in life as you've made me change in the play. It brought back all my lies. How pushy I was. How East Side I've become. From your play I finally know how I sound. I mean, I knew that's how I

sound but I only hear it when I say your words. We had a reading last night.

JEREMY. You should've asked first.

MARLENE. Actually we had two readings.

JEREMY. I'm the playwright. Nothing can be done with my play without first—

MARLENE. Archer Valentine read you.

JEREMY. He's famous. He can do anything.

MARLENE. I'm not so sure he can do you.

JEREMY. He's good enough.

MARLENE. You weren't even there.

JEREMY. But a name like him could really help get my—

MARLENE. At 8 o'clock we had our easy friends in. The ones who are open. Not critical. Before we got to the end of Act I, I heard snuffles. Act II produces several gasps. People leap out of their chairs at the end. Even Adriana De Stephano is taken!

JEREMY. Who's Adriana De Stephano?

MARLENE. We get the first group out quickly. New bottles of wine. Fresh hors d'oeuvres. Pillows fluffed. Herbert renews his smile. The doors are re-opened.

JEREMY. Doors re-opened? What theatre was this?!

MARLENE. We have a seventy-foot living room. Double French doors. The second crowd files in. Now there's a whole different vibration. Critical. Suspicious. Only death impresses them. They sit down. Archer and I go at it again. You could cut the air. The tension is beyond words. You've never acted, but for an actor to perform, you first need—

JEREMY. Stop! Did they like what they heard? Did my great new play go over well?!!

MARLENE. They went more wild than the first group. The coldest bitch in my crowd, Cocky Mendenhall,

screamed "THAT'S ME, THAT'S ME" and burst into deep tears.

JEREMY. Did you tell her?

MARLENE. I let her wait on.

JEREMY. Only you, Marlene, only you.

MARLENE. Several people were still crying when their limousines called. Herbert's psychiatrist smiled for the first time since Herbert left his wife for me. A whole group kept yelling "THE NEW YORK THEATRE STILL HAS HOPE!"

JEREMY. I'm good, sure, but let's not—

MARLENE. After we cleared everyone out, Herbert gave me one of his hugs and said, "TO MOVE IN WITH ME YOU DUMPED A BUDDING GENIUS."

JEREMY. "DUMPED"?

MARLENE. Herbert's so mature. Most men would be jealous. Could you see yourself listening to a play written for me by someone else?

JEREMY. I'm sure Herbert felt pretty threatened.

MARLENE. After we do this play and we're all great successes, you've got to get close to Herbert. He's so much what you ... you ... Want to know how my mother compares you two? Herbert's wise and gentle while you're more—

JEREMY. Could we talk a little more about Archer Valentine?

MARLENE. Herbert thinks we can do a whole lot better.

JEREMY. He's the same about you.

MARLENE. Herbert?

JEREMY. Archer.

MARLENE. He's the same about me *HOW*?!!

JEREMY. I met him on the subway coming here.

MARLENE. Archer?

JEREMY. The guy from APT.

MARLENE. APT?

JEREMY. Actors and Playwrights Theatre. *THE MARATHON*? Remember the guy with the beret wearing glasses who I explained—

MARLENE. What's he got to do with Archer Valentine?!

JEREMY. When the guy in the beret wearing glasses ran into me on the train, he had just left a two-hour meeting with Archer.

MARLENE. What was discussed?

JEREMY. Can't you see what's happening? Haven't you a sense where all this is leading?

MARLENE. Tell me.

JEREMY. This time I'm not falling down that hole!

MARLENE. What's that mean?

JEREMY. No matter what, I cannot be around this.

MARLENE. Be around *WHAT*?

JEREMY. I'm going with someone else.

MARLENE. Someone else *WHERE*?

JEREMY. In your part. Rehearsals start a week from Wednesday.

MARLENE. Is Archer playing you?

JEREMY. Yes.

MARLENE. Who's doing me?

JEREMY. Constance Guthrie.

MARLENE. I've never heard of her.

JEREMY. She's amazing. Fabulous. Wonderful.

MARLENE. What have you seen her do?

JEREMY. Actually—

MARLENE. You've never seen her work, have you?!!

JEREMY. That doesn't mean—

MARLENE. How do you know she can do me?!!

JEREMY. The guy in the beret wearing glasses and Archer both consider her the best available choice. The guy in the beret and I really get along. He's crazy. Mad. Mean.

Vicious. He makes me feel like a brother. When he starts to talk, you know he knows what he's saying. He's had nothing but trouble with actors playing parts in plays written for them by friends.

MARLENE. But he's never seen me work!

JEREMY. He finds your technique lacking. He says in emotionally demanding scenes you tend to push.

MARLENE. What's he seen me in?

JEREMY. If Constance Guthrie doesn't work out as you, he and Archer both agree you'll be the one to step in next.

MARLENE. Jeremy, don't do this to me!

JEREMY. Art's not about old friends. The play's the star. Not you. Not me.

MARLENE. I'll do anything!

JEREMY. It's all been done!

MARLENE. Do you know how hard it is to be me? How can this other woman even start to be me? Do you know what makes me up? Even a brilliant actress would need months and months!

(JEREMY starts to go, MARLENE grabs him by the arm.)

MARLENE. Let me do the monologue from the end of Act I. I've got it almost all memorized. Tell me "OUT OF THE WAY" and give me a big shove.

JEREMY. What are you talking about?

MARLENE. That's how your first act ends.

(Again JEREMY starts to go, again MARLENE grabs him.)

MARLENE. See, you're so confused you've forgotten how your first act ends!

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JEREMY. Tomorrow could we meet? Same time? Same place.

MARLENE. What for?

JEREMY. To get the copies of my play back! Nothing against you but I don't want any loose copies floating around.

(JEREMY starts off, MARLENE dives to tackle him, misses, ends up on ground.)

JEREMY. I'm tired. I'm scared. I'm happy. I'm worried. I'm lonely. I am sorry but I have nothing more left for you today *(JEREMY starts to go, rushes back to Marlene on ground.)* Please be on time with my play. Don't make me send people after you.

(Exit JEREMY in a rush. MARLENE continues to sit on ground.)

BLACKOUT

End of Act I

ACT II

Scene 1

*Again the park bench in Riverside Park in the West 80's.
The following day. One in the afternoon.*

LIGHTS up. MARLENE sits alone on bench. On her lap the five copies of Jeremy's play neatly bound by string. She is wearing a lovely fall outfit. SHE looks beautiful and serene. For a reason known only to her, SHE laughs to herself, can't stop, holds stomach, laughing on ... as JEREMY enters. He is wearing same outfit as yesterday but it looks slept in, haggard...

JEREMY. Is that a new dress?

MARLENE. I always look great when I'm falling apart. I don't know if you remember this, but the first month we lived together my father died.

JEREMY. I wanted to accompany you to the funeral. I remember you screaming back: "FAMILY! STAY OUT!!!"

MARLENE. At the cemetery I looked absolutely ravishing. As they lowered his casket into the ground, everyone's eyes were on me. When I told Herbert last night that you were using someone else to play me—

JEREMY. Marlene, listen! I have something to—

MARLENE. He smiled, put his arm around me and sat me down in the couch. We have that couch you and I used to admire from that antique store on Columbus and 87th. Herbert bought it for me for our second anniversary.

JEREMY. Marlene, that's all very nice but—

MARLENE. So we're sitting there, me in tears and Herbert says, "WE ADMIRE JEREMY'S PLAY MORE

THAN EVER. WE STILL LOVE THE CHARACTER HE BASED ON YOU. WE WANT IT TO RUN FOREVER." Suddenly I scream, "SO TELL ME WHAT WE DO?" Herbert smiles and says, "LET'S SIT WITH THE PLAY AND LET IT TELL US." We each lay a copy across our laps. Herbert opens to page one and begins reading me. I do you. We stop after six pages. The doorbell rings. Our two favorite actors from upstairs. They take over. We listen. They read the play through a second time. Suddenly all four of us zero in on Act II. Our two actor friends read through Act II three consecutive times.

JEREMY. They must've really loved my words! Who are they?

MARLENE. They're famous but they're both wrong for the play!

JEREMY. But who's to—

MARLENE. The four of us tear apart Act II for over two hours.

JEREMY. Hold it! Where do you get off—

MARLENE. Herbert brings out his recording equipment. He loves anything mechanical. We each speak what we feel. All four of us agree on two things: Act I is perfect or nearly so; and Act II can be taken a whole further step. (*Handing Jeremy copies of his play neatly wrapped.*) Inside all our suggestions are neatly typed up. That's a good play. It has the potential to be great. Please do the goddamn work!

JEREMY. (*Hurling package of scripts to ground.*) Chekhov told me the same thing. Goddamn pain-in-ass Russian know-it-all. (*Suddenly kicking at package.*) I wanted my first play to be fun. Peaceful. Pleasant. No waves. All smiles. No people around me who make my stomach hurt. Young girls who know nothing about me except that I'm the author of a startling new work!

MARLENE. Jeremy, it can never—

JEREMY. Yesterday I got drunk after I left you.

MARLENE. With me you never overdid anything!

JEREMY. I stumble up the stairs. My door is already open. He's sitting there in his only dark suit.

MARLENE. How do you know it's his only dark suit?

JEREMY. He says, "This is my only dark suit." This time he sounds almost English. I say "Anton, Close Friend, why a new accent every day?" He smiles and says "Today no questions, Fellow Writer. Today you do nothing but hang your arrogant ears on the nail of humble attention." I scream, "no one can call me arro—" Suddenly he grabs my vodka bottle, downs the last swig, and slams me into my chair at my work desk. He grabs my neck and twists it to face the far, bare wall over my bed. With one of my magic marker pencils he has scrawled, "GOOD ART NEVER EXCUSES BAD LIVING." I scream "Sober up and make sense." He slaps my face and says, "I ALSO WANTED IT TO BE FUN. PEACEFUL. PLEASANT. NO WAVES. ALL SMILES." I'm stunned. Finally to meet someone who knows even more than me. He takes my hand and explains, "Close Friend, you can't just write a play. You've got to go through with it. When I finished *Three Sisters*, I wanted to stay in Yalta. A blanket around me, smiling at the sun, waiting for that young girl to bring me the reviews. Close Friend, writing a play is like baking a cake. Every step you skip shows up in the end. I got up my strength, hitched up the horses and started for Moscow. The bumpiest ride of my life. Awful food at every stop. My sister Anna greets me at the door. Olga's out shopping. They cook me a wonderful dinner. Next day rehearsals start. I sit through them all. Every last one. I'm open to rewriting. The speech that ends the play, "IF WE ONLY KNEW, IF WE ONLY KNEW!" —I write the eleventh day of rehearsal. After rehearsals I greet people on the street. I shake hands. I accept admiration. I am shy. I

am scared but I am taking every little step to make my cake come out right. Every night before retiring I get on my knees and say, "I MAY DIE OF TB BUT I WILL NOT DIE OF ARROGANCE. I AM FOLLOWING MY LITTLE STEPS. MY LITTLE STEPS ARE ADDING UP." Chekhov is now smiling. My writing friend wears a glow. He takes my hand and says, "Young Fellow, she is your biggest little step of all." For a second, confusion, but then I knew. I smile. Get hold of my glow. *(Suddenly holding Marlene's hand.)*

MARLENE. Why are you holding my hand?

JEREMY. I want you in my play. I won't do it with anyone else.

MARLENE. Again!

JEREMY. I want you in my play. I won't do it with anyone else.

MARLENE. One last time!!

JEREMY. I want you in my play. I won't do it with anyone else.

MARLENE. Say, "MARLENE, I'LL KILL MYSELF IF YOU'RE NOT UP ON THAT STAGE OPENING NIGHT."

JEREMY. I'LL KILL MYSELF IF YOU'RE NOT UP ON THAT STAGE OPENING NIGHT!

MARLENE. Say, "BROADWAY HASN'T GLOWED SINCE YOU HAD YOUR BREAKDOWN."

JEREMY. BROADWAY HASN'T GLOWED SINCE YOU HAD YOUR BREAKDOWN!

MARLENE. Say, "MARLENE, YOU'RE THE GREATEST ACTRESS OF OUR TIME. IT MUST BE SOMETHING VERY SICK IN ME THAT MAKES ME PUNISH YOU FOR YOUR TALENT."

JEREMY. MARLENE, YOU'RE THE GREATEST ACTRESS OF OUR TIME. IT MUST BE SOMETHING VERY SICK IN ME THAT MAKES ME ... MAKES ME

... *(Suddenly stops, lets out a muffled cry.)* Since I ran into you a few days ago, I've gotten all whipped up. Filled with these ... these ... They've all come rushing back. I can't eat! I can't think!!

MARLENE. Stomach's in a knot. Brain on fire.

JEREMY. Exactly! And I go to bed ... only an hour later I wake up screaming for you

MARLENE. "MARLENE., HOLD ME, SAVE ME, MAKE ME WHOLE!"

JEREMY. Exactly! This morning I tore up the closet for that old picture of you!

MARLENE. In my bathing suit from that last happy summer in Williamstown?

JEREMY. Exactly! I'm a wreck. I don't want to ...to ... *(Suddenly beats at stomach with furious fists.)* I'm so scared! So scared!! So scared!!! Thank God for you and Chekhov. I can't wait for rehearsals.

MARLENE. First, I'll have to see the second act rewrites.

JEREMY. Please don't!

MARLENE. Can you see them?

JEREMY. WHO?!!

MARLENE. The opening night audience. *(MARLENE "acts out.")* Curtain up. Me and the guy playing you charge out of the gate. No more than ten minutes and we've got them riveted. They gasp at the first act ending. The lobby's buzzing. Hear the buzz? Catch the chatter? *(Suddenly "imitating WOMAN" in lobby.)* "O GOD, IRENE, THE MALE CHARACTER'S JUST LIKE MY FRED!" Look over in the corner. Two gays giggling. *(Acts out "Two gays giggling.")* And that eighty-two-year-old blue-haired lady in mink whispering to the boy working the concession stand. *(Suddenly imitates "eighty-two-year-old lady.")* "... HAD I DIED LAST YEAR, I WOULD'VE MISSED THIS!" Your first act has unified the crowd. Now

they're filing back in for the second act. They're expecting the birth of a true, honest-to-goodness original. They all want to be able to say, "YES, I WAS THERE THAT INCREDIBLE NIGHT." Jeremy, the second act as written now and they'll get angry. Mad. You promised roses and delivered dandelions.

JEREMY. Yesterday you said it was the greatest thing since—

MARLENE. And the critics! The one, clear, unmistakable thing that unifies them is disappointment. Once a year on Broadway they let their anger out, not at some amateur American or overrated Britisher, but at some promising talent who pumps them up in Act I and doesn't deliver in II. Please don't let them hang you by the ankles. Please don't let them make you never want to write again.

JEREMY. Tell me where to start.

MARLENE. The SEX!!

JEREMY. WHAT?!!

MARLENE. All this moaning and groaning and who screamed the loudest.

JEREMY. We were an exceptionally loud pair!

MARLENE. What about those final months when the only conversations were notes scribbled to each other on the bathroom mirror?

JEREMY. Hold it! I thought —

MARLENE. What were we both afraid of? Why was it a look of need in your eyes and I'd disappear for days?!

JEREMY. But —

MARLENE. At the end we were even too tired to scream. (*Suddenly grabs Jeremy.*) Hate like ours is special. Dig down. Look around. Forget your glands. Talk from the heart. Bad art's about what we already know. Good art's about where we've never been.

JEREMY. (*Writing in "pocket notebook."*) "Bad art's about what we already know. Good art's about where we've never been."

MARLENE. It's the last thing Herbert says ever night when we're going to bed.

JEREMY. Is there anything Herbert doesn't do?

MARLENE. One thing he won't do is produce the play with Archer Valentine.

JEREMY. I already promised it to him.

MARLENE. Right now Herbert's explaining to him why he's not good enough. We need a secure star or a brilliant unknown. Someone dangerous, brilliant, moody, incredible. Casting people all over town are already hot on it. You of course will have final approval.

JEREMY. Anything else you want to let me in on?

MARLENE. During rehearsals only the director gives me notes. I'll listen to anything you have to say but only and always through him.

JEREMY. What's his name?

MARLENE. Howard Macklin.

JEREMY. He's the best. Where'd he come from?

MARLENE. Herbert locked him up this morning.

JEREMY. You knew all along, didn't you?

MARLENE. (*Suddenly laughing.*) Wouldn't it be something if this were only the beginning.

JEREMY. Beginning of what?

MARLENE. One play isn't enough. You write another—call it HOW THE FIRST WASN'T ENOUGH. Go on to a third. That one's titled ONLY A THIRD WILL DO. Play after play your main character is always me. Every time I'm the perfect one to play it. We grow together. We're always mentioned in the same breath. We're a leading artistic tandem.

JEREMY. What about our personal lives? What about these feelings I have for you that won't—

MARLENE. Put it into the rewrites!

JEREMY. Give me some hope for us. A word, a gesture, your old smile, what about —

MARLENE. (*Smiling.*) The rewrites are due a week from today. Same time. Same place. I'll be here.

JEREMY. But —

MARLENE. None of your Catholic long-hand. (*Reaching into pocket, business card, handing to Jeremy.*) Here's her number. A hundred words per. Any time of the day or the night she can be at your door in twenty minutes.

JEREMY. Marlene, I can't afford to pay a woman to —

MARLENE. (*Reaches into pocket, hands Jeremy green savings passbook.*) Herbert opened an account at the bank on your corner in the Village.

JEREMY. (*Reading from savings book.*) Five Thousand?

MARLENE. Consider it your option money.

JEREMY. The guy in the beret wearing glasses told me that the standard first payment was only —

MARLENE. (*Handing Jeremy second card.*) Call your new agent. Let him fill you in.

JEREMY. But —

MARLENE. (*Handing Jeremy third card.*) If you have trouble sleeping, here's a doctor. (*Handing Jeremy fourth card.*) If you need to stay awake, here's another. (*MARLENE suddenly puts hands around Jeremy's neck and gives him long, sustained "soul kiss."*) Work hard, Gifted Playwright!

(*MARLENE runs off. JEREMY sits on bench. JEREMY holds script.*)

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Scene 2

Again, the park bench in Riverside Park in the West 80's. Two weeks and two days later. Twenty minutes after one.

LIGHTS up! MARLENE sits alone on bench. Sweat suit, running sneakers. Does series of stretch exercises, checks watch, does series of deep breathing to relax. Lets out eight or nine horrendous screams of rage. Enter JEREMY. HE is tired, drawn, red-eyed, clothes dirty, bloody, wobbly with exhaustion. He wears an enormous raincoat. Over his eye a butterfly bandage to cover cut requiring ten stitches ...

JEREMY. Sorry I'm late.

MARLENE. It's only nine days.

JEREMY. Each day when I knew it was another day, one o'clock made me feel something very ... very ... Twice I threw up. Once I cried. Today when I saw I was going to finally get here, God, did I want to be on time. I tried my best. Twenty minutes is a lot better than the old days.

MARLENE. The other night at a party given by the mayor to raise money for the New York City Ballet, I met a man named Eddy October who, when he heard what you had pulled, smiled and said, "LET'S HAVE THE FUNERAL ON A TUESDAY. THREE THOUSAND TWO HUNDRED FIFTY-FIVE IN CASH IS ALL IT TAKES!"

JEREMY. Why three thousand, two hundred fifty-five?

MARLENE. (*Exploding.*) You don't deserve to live, you worm, you inanimate piece of ... of ... Generous,

kind, and caring people count on you and you just ...just ...

JEREMY. I'm beat. Burned. It's been a rough couple weeks. Why don't we just—

MARLENE. The detective reported everything! (MARLENE produces two pages of Jeremy's activities. Reads slowly, a bomb ready to go off.) The first night you got into a fight outside *Page Six*, a Village after-hours club. 6:18 A.M. Cocaine dripped from your nose.

JEREMY. Want to hear what started it? I told this producer guy about the play. He says "SHE'S THE MOST OVERRATED TALENT IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE!"

MARLENE. The third day you took thirty-seven hundred out of your account.

JEREMY. What's this? Russia!

MARLENE. Tell me about the five hookers at the start of the second week?

JEREMY. I figured reading them the first act might—

MARLENE. Tell me about the cocaine.

JEREMY. I did a lot.

MARLENE. How much heroin?

JEREMY. Once scared me.

MARLENE. The report says *three* times.

JEREMY. O.K., three times scared me more.

MARLENE. Is it or is it not true that the night before last you offered one Julio Mendez two hundred dollars to shoot you?

JEREMY. Since I couldn't do the rewrites, I figured—

MARLENE. Did you or did you not spit in a policeman's face and then when he pulls his gun, you laugh and say, "I'LL CATCH THE BULLET AND STICK IT RIGHT BACK UP YOUR ASS!" Night before last did you actually—

TALKING THINGS OVER WITH CHEKHOV

JEREMY. Did your detective tell you what I Chekhov?!

MARLENE. Tell me!

JEREMY. I threw him down the stairs.

MARLENE. WHAT?!!

JEREMY. I crawl up the stairs. Door open. He's nowhere to be seen. Suddenly I hear the toilet flush. The door opens. He's got on the smoking jacket Gorky gave him. He's wearing a smile I've never seen before. Already I'm pissed. "Writing Friend," he says, "we'll need more toilet paper soon!" I want to rip out his throat. Next he directs me to the far wall. Where earlier he had scrawled, "GOOD ART NEVER EXCUSES BAD LIVING," now he's written, "LET ANTON CHEKHOV BE FOR YOU WHAT LEO TOLSTOY COULDN'T BE FOR HIM." He puts his arm around my shoulder. "Talented Friend," he says with just the trace of a French accent, "not only is dear Marlene right about the sex in Act II, but these two people can't end up together in the final scene." "Russian Schmuck," I scream, "it's why I'm doing it. To end up with her in the end!"

MARLENE. Jeremy, listen: if that's—

JEREMY. Suddenly Chekhov pulls out a copy of *Cherry Orchard*. "I had the same problem as you writing my final act. I wanted so badly for things to turn out happy. I was so desperate for Lopahin and Varya to end up together that I pulled in my own ten-day vodka bender." Through his tears he talks on. "Like you, all I needed was someone looking over my shoulder. I went to Tolstoy. Much as the bouncing carriage hurts, I make his house in less than a day. I knock ... The minute I see the white beard, I say, "Uncle T, I am having trouble finishing the last act of my new play. Will you come and cast a warm shadow?" He laughs that laugh of his. "Anton, your fiction is superb, but as I told you at the opening of *Three Sisters*,

that snowy night in St. Petersburg, I hate your plays." "Uncle T, you were drunk." "I will tell you the same thing sober. YOU ARE WORSE THAN SHAKESPEARE, do you hear me, WORSE THAN SHAKESPEARE!" He slams the door. I begin to laugh. I crack the reigns. The sled starts for home. I keep laughing and yelling proudly at the snowy countryside, "WORSE THAN SHAKESPEARE! WORSE THAN SHAKESPEARE." Marlene, I have never seen him so happy as he was in telling this story. That's when he turns to me, his smile fading as quickly as it had come. His hand lies heavy on my arm, the tears are filling up again, and in a choking, quavering whisper he says, "I had to let my characters not end up together, and you must do the same." That's when I pick him up and throw him down the stairs.

MARLENE. It wasn't you, Jer. It was all the cocaine.

JEREMY. The sound of him tumbling was awful. He yells back: "IT'S A COMPOUND. I'LL HAVE THEM SET IT AT ST. VINCENT'S. READ THE WALL TILL I GET BACK."

(Long SILENCE. JEREMY stands relaxed, smiling broadly. MARLENE, nervous, ready to leap.)

MARLENE. Did he ever get back? Is he alive? Dead? WHAT?!!

JEREMY. Ready to read my new second act?

(MARLENE cannot form the words. SHE is so stunned. Out of his left pocket HE pulls copy of new Act II.)

JEREMY. Finished it an hour ago. *(Out of left pocket HE pulls second copy. Crosses to her, hands it to her.)* Marlene, a Xerox for you. That's why I was late. Old

machine. Didn't collate. Me and some Chinese kid all by hand.

MARLENE. Jeremy, if you think you're going to pass off something you whipped off during some drug-induced—

JEREMY. You've got the opening lines.

MARLENE. *(Reading from script.)* I PACKED YOUR BAGS. I KNOW IT'S TIME AGAIN.

JEREMY. I NEVER GOT TO SEE ANY OF IT.

MARLENE. SEE ANY OF WHAT?

JEREMY. FIRST ROW OF THE BALCONY. NEXT TO ME, TWO GUYS ABOUT THIRTY. THE LIGHTS GO OUT. THE CREDITS ROLL. CAMERA JAMS. FILM GOES CRAZY. LIGHTS FLASH BACK ON. CROWD BELOW IN THE LODGE GOING WACKY, THROWING ALL KINDS OF CRAP AT THE SCREEN. THE GUY AWAY FROM ME SAYS TO THE GUY NEXT TO ME, "WATCH MY POPCORN. I WANNA CATCH HER BEFORE REHEARSALS."

MARLENE. Jeremy, this is hardly the sort of thing I—

JEREMY. THE ONE LEFT NEXT TO ME OFFERS ME POPCORN. I SMILE. THE OTHER RETURNS. "MISSED HER. HER MACHINE SAYS AFTER ELEVEN SHE'LL BE AT THE CAFE." THE GUY NEXT TO ME LAUGHS, "AREN'T YOU EVER AFRAID OF HER OLD MAN CATCHING ON?"

MARLENE. Jeremy, really? Now. Broadway won't—

JEREMY. CATCHING ON TO WHAT? HE'S A WIMP!! TO THE GUY WHO OFFERED POPCORN I WHISPER, "I'M THE WIMP. WANNA WATCH?" IN TERROR HE FLIES UP THE AISLE. NOW IT'S JUST ME AND LOVER BOY. *(Suddenly JEREMY leaps to feet and begins "ACTING OUT" incident.)* I WHIP OUT MY NEW SCHAEFFER INK PEN AND STAB HIM IN THE CHEEK. "INK AND BLOOD," I SCREAM. "INK AND BLOOD." HE TRIES TO RUN. I SLASH AT HIS EAR.

A PIECE COMES OFF ON THE TIP OF MY PEN. HE SCREAMS, "POLICE! POLICE!!" BUT I STUFF THE POPCORN BOX IN HIS MOUTH AND GO FOR HIS THROAT. I SPIT, "WHAT'S IT LIKE INSIDE HER? SHE EVER SCREAM OUT MY NAME?" I THROW HIM OVER THE RAILING AND GRAB HIS ANKLES. I SCREAM, "SAY YOU'LL NEVER SEE HER AGAIN." "UP YOURS, WIMPI!" I DROP HIM. A SPLIT SECOND AND THEN ON THE CEMENT.

MARLENE. O GOD, DID HE LIVE?

JEREMY. DID *WHO* LIVE?!

MARLENE. FRANK! IS FRANK LIVING?!!

JEREMY. WHAT'S HIS NUMBER?!

MARLENE. 838-1165.

(Suddenly from out of pocket of raincoat JEREMY pulls cordless phone receiver with push buttons in handle. Quickly dials number, hands phone to Marlene.)

JEREMY. Ask Frank yourself!

MARLENE. *(Taking receiver.)* GOD, I'LL DIE IF HE—*(Suddenly stopping.)* HOLD IT! HOW CAN HE BE ALREADY HOME IF YOU JUST—*(Bursting into laughter, MARLENE hugs Jeremy.)* Jeremy, brilliant, brilliant, brilliant. You tricked me, I mean, my character into—

JEREMY. *(Pulling back.)* Please stick to the script.

MARLENE. It's your line!

JEREMY. *(Pantomimes handing note to Marlene.)* READ SLOW! HIT THE WORDS HARD UNDERLINED IN RED!

MARLENE. *(Into receiver.)* FRANK, GOOD-BYE. DON'T CALL. THANKS FOR NOTHING.

JEREMY. NEXT WE CALL MARK T. AFTER THAT ROBBY C. THERE ARE ONLY THREE, RIGHT?

MARLENE. For so long Broadway has wanted to see me in something like this. Dangerous, dark and yet —

JEREMY. Marlene, just say the next line. Forget —

MARLENE. The scene has real drive. True momentum. Herbert believed in you. I doubted. We've got him to thank.

JEREMY. *(Angrily turns pages of Marlene's script forward.)* Try near the end! *(Stabbing gesture points toward something on new page.)* Say it!

MARLENE. What a breakdown speech. Guts all over the floor. Once I'm able to personalize the feelings, I'll have the audience eating out —

JEREMY. I want my words, *NOW!*

MARLENE. Go back a few lines. Warm me into it. Break me down!

(JEREMY turns to previous page in revised Act II. Just as JEREMY is about to start, MARLENE makes suggestion)

MARLENE. Start with "FRANK IS NOT THE FIRST TIME."

JEREMY. *(From script.)* FRANK IS NOT THE FIRST TIME. I FOLLOWED YOU TO THE MAYFLOWER OVER A YEAR AGO. I STOOD WITH MY EAR TO THE DOOR. I HEARD THE SCREAMS THAT SHORT ACTOR GOT OUT OF YOU.

MARLENE. Jeremy, listen —

JEREMY. The character's called "MARVIN."

MARLENE. MARVIN, LISTEN—

JEREMY. I KNOW ABOUT THE GUY IN THE MOTEL AFTER YOUR FATHER'S FUNERAL. I KNOW ABOUT THE DIRECTOR BOTH ON BROADWAY AND UP IN WILLIAMSTOWN. I KNOW

ABOUT THE ACTOR WHO UNDERSTUDIED SOLYONY!

MARLENE. I REALLY DON'T COUNT ONE TIME AS—

JEREMY. ALL I WANT TO KNOW NOW IS: ARE THERE ANY I MISSED? IS IT O.K. TO GO TO THE MOVIES AND NOT EXPECT ANOTHER FRANK? (MARLENE stands there. LONG SILENCE. No reaction. JEREMY in a stage whisper.) The script says "SMILE"

MARLENE. I'm a slow smiler. (MARLENE slowly finds a smile).

JEREMY. WHY ARE YOU SMILING THAT SMILE? THAT'S NOT A SMILE I KNOW.

MARLENE. REMEMBERING.

JEREMY. REMEMBERING?

MARLENE. THE EXCITEMENT.

JEREMY. WHAT OF?

MARLENE. KNOWING YOU KNEW.

JEREMY. YOU KNEW I KNEW?

MARLENE. I FELT YOU OUTSIDE THE DOOR AT THE MAYFLOWER. IT ADDED TO MY SCREAMING. EVERY TIME I LEFT THE HOUSE TO GO GET IT, I FELT YOUR EYES FOLLOWING.

JEREMY. WHY DID YOU NEVER SAY TO ME, "I KNOW YOU KNOW? FEELING YOUR EYES FOLLOWING IS BREAKING MY HEART?"

MARLENE. BREAKING MY HEART?!! (Laughing.) I WAS HOT ALL THE TIME. YOUR EYES BEHIND, HIS COCK AHEAD. I WAS QUEEN. I WAS CENTER. I HAD ALL YOU BASTARDS ON THE DANGLE. YOU ASK WHY I NEVER SAID ANYTHING. I SAY, WHAT ABOUT YOU?! I'D STILL BE WET FROM ONE OF THEM. I COULD SMELL MY SMELL. I'D SMILE, SAY TO MYSELF, "TODAY HE'LL SMELL MY SMELL AND FINALLY SAY IT." BUT, NO, NOT

YOU. I LEFT MY DIARY OUT. MY SUCK AND FUCK CHART I'D USE TO MARK A BOOK WE WERE BOTH READING, I'D ... I'D ... (MARLENE cannot continue. Takes deep breath and goes back to middle of speech.) I SAY, WHAT ABOUT YOU? I'D STILL BE WET FROM ONE OF THEM. I COULD SMELL MY SMELL. I'D SMILE, SAY ... SAY TO MYSELF, "TODAY HE'LL SMELL ... SMELL." (MARLENE cannot continue. Let's out a muffled cry from somewhere deep. Holds stomach. Crosses to bench. Sits.)

(JEREMY sits. LONG SILENCE.)

MARLENE. Doing this eight times a week's going to be a lotta fun.

JEREMY. Wait till you read the final scene!

(BOTH laugh, JEREMY takes Marlene's hand.)

MARLENE. Jeremy, you really ... really ...

JEREMY. Oh, Marlene!

MARLENE. Dear Jeremy!

(JEREMY embraces Marlene, a mad, hot kiss.)

MARLENE. Please, not the tongue right away!

(JEREMY again with a mad, hot kiss.)

MARLENE. (MARLENE instantly responds. Suddenly flailing arms and moans, etc.) What if someone sees us?

JEREMY. It's only a rewrite. (THEY resume.)

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Scene 3

Again, the park bench in Riverside Park in the West 80's.
A month later. Morning. Just after dawn.

LIGHTS up! A long JEREMY sits on bench waiting. HE wears a black tuxedo from the evening just ended. (It was "opening night.") Bow tie loosened, tuxedo shirt hanging out. Checks watch, jumps up, moves about rubbing hands for warmth. Suddenly struck by idea, HE moves to center of bench and looks out as if at filled theatre. Holding imaginary Tony Award in hand, HE addresses imaginary audience ...

JEREMY. Thank you ladies and gentlemen and Tony voters. Thank you very much. This award I hold in my hand I totally and completely deserve. Not that the competition was in any way lacking but that I was in every way outstanding. Oh, I almost forgot! Chekhov told me just before I left that he wanted to be here but couldn't because he's hard at work on a new play called EXPLAINING THINGS TO JEREMY.

(Suddenly MARLENE appears in evening gown and mink coat with a newspaper in HER hand. However, JEREMY is so involved SHE stops, stands statue-still and listens)

JEREMY. All joking aside, I'd like to address all you future winners with the words, "FORGET YOUR GLANDS. LISTEN TO YOUR HEART. DIG DOWN AS DEEP AS THE WELL GOES. MOST OF ALL, LISTEN

TO EVERYTHING CHEKHOV TELLS YOU. LOOK, IT WORKS!!!"

(MARLENE suddenly screams, yells, claps, jumps, etc.)

JEREMY. Did you?

MARLENE. Nope.

JEREMY. Not even a quick one?

MARLENE. We agreed to here. Together. Not till now.

(MARLENE opens newspaper searching for page on which review appears. JEREMY so excited breathing is hard. Slaps chest.)

JEREMY. If it's good, you're back on top and I'm part of history.

(MARLENE laughs)

JEREMY. You wouldn't laugh if you hadn't already—

MARLENE. (Finding page.) JEREMY!

JEREMY. O.K., 1... 2... 3... READ!! (JEREMY races to bench, sits. Covers ears, closes eyes, begins slow breathing.)

(MARLENE reads, quickly let's out yelp of joy. JEREMY leaps up from bench.)

JEREMY. Are we?

MARLENE. Yup!

JEREMY. How big?!

MARLENE. Enormous!!

JEREMY. Let me read!

MARLENE. (Reading from newspaper.) GOD, WHAT A TOWERING TALENT FROM THE —

JEREMY. I know I'm fairly tall but —

MARLENE. My acting!

JEREMY. Oh?

MARLENE. "GOD, WHAT A TOWERING TALENT! FROM THE TIME THE CURTAIN RISES ON MS. DUMLER IN A GREENWICH VILLAGE CAFE WAITING UP UNTIL HER INCREDIBLE BREAKDOWN SPEECH WHEN SHE REVEALS KNOWING MUCH MORE THAN WE EVER EXPECTED, MS. D—"

JEREMY. That's not what I intended! Why can't these bastards ever get what we intend?!

MARLENE. The last line, listen!! (*Quoting from newspaper.*) "IF YOU MISS HER, I'LL BE SURE TO MISS YOU."

JEREMY. Now read from the top!

MARLENE. (*Reading.*) "JEREMY MELVIN IS THE LUCKIEST PLAYWRIGHT IN RECENT MEMORY. HAVING CREATED A ... A TOUCHING PICTURE OF..."

JEREMY. (*Grabbing paper, reading.*) "HAVING CREATED AN ENTERTAINING THOUGH SLIGHT, PROVOCATIVE YET PREDICTABLE PICTURE OF LOVE, LOSS, HATE, AND HORROR BETWEEN A DEEP WOMAN AND A SHALLOW MAN, MR. MELVIN THEN SITS BACK AND LETS THE INCREDIBLY LOVELY, SOFT, AND MULTI-TALENTED MS. DUMLER FILL IN THE MISSING GAPS AND BLATANTLY SHODDY SKIPS IN LOGIC." (*JEREMY crunches up paper.*)

MARLENE. It's a money notice. We're a huge hit!!

(*JEREMY tears paper in half.*)

MARLENE. All the T.V. were super raves! You did much better on T.V. than Chekhov did with me in *Three Sisters*!

(*JEREMY tears paper several more times.*)

MARLENE. *THE DAILY NEWS* says you're the discovery of the season!

(*JEREMY spits at paper, punches it several times.*)

MARLENE. *THE POST* calls you the funniest writer since Simon turned serious!

(*JEREMY hurls paper on ground and jumps on it several times. Next HE opens fly, his intention to get it out.*)

JEREMY. Erase me from history? Steal my TONY? I piss on your arrogance, *NEW YORK TIMES*.

(*About to take it out but MARLENE grabs him and pulls him back. HE grabs stomach, screams, again tries to unzip, again MARLENE stops him.*)

JEREMY. I am not "ENTERTAINING YET SLIGHT."

MARLENE. You're serious, you're heavy!

JEREMY. I am not "PROVOCATIVE BUT PREDICTABLE."

MARLENE. You're direct, you're a surprise a second.

JEREMY. Call me shallow? Shallow?! Shallow!!!

(*Again JEREMY tries to unzip, again MARLENE stops him.*)

JEREMY. Drink some of this.

MARLENE. Jeremy, you're not shallow.

JEREMY. Again.

MARLENE. You're not shallow.

JEREMY. Again.

MARLENE. You are not shallow.

JEREMY. Say, "Jeremy you're one of our last hopes!"

MARLENE. Jeremy, you're one of our last hopes.

JEREMY. Say, "You're a legend in the making!"

MARLENE. You're a legend in the making.

JEREMY. Say, "You're bleeding but you'll be back."

MARLENE. You're bleeding but you'll be back.

JEREMY. Hear that, arrogant prick!! (*Suddenly "giving finger" to newspaper on ground.*) Rotate your vegetables on this! You don't like my play? Meet me at the bank on Monday. (*Continuing to "give finger."*) Fag wimp! Put-down!! Limp Joint!!! (*Running around newspaper like a boxer over a fallen foe.*) I don't need you! You need me!! (*Suddenly a mad laugh.*) Did I tell them off or WHAT?!!

MARLENE. Wow!

JEREMY. Talk about a sustained finger job!!

MARLENE. Wow!

JEREMY. Talk about getting it all out!!!

MARLENE. Wow!! (*Suddenly JEREMY puts hands in face. MARLENE sits him back and begins to rub his stomach.*)

JEREMY. Please I never let anyone.

(*MARLENE continues. JEREMY struggles but finally gives in. Like a door down deep finally opened, tears flow. HE sobs loudly. MARLENE hands him handkerchief. HE dries eyes, blows nose. HE hands her handkerchief back. SHE puts her arm around him.*)

JEREMY. I wanted so bad to be a New York big deal. So bad I wanted to tell Chekhov, "ANTON, *THE TIMES* SAYS YES." (*Silence.*) So?

MARLENE. So!

JEREMY. When do we tell him?

MARLENE. Who?

JEREMY. Herbert.

MARLENE. What about?

JEREMY. Us.

MARLENE. On the kitchen wall next to the phone hangs this thing we all call CORKBOARD OF SECRET FEELINGS AND UNSHARED ACTS. It is divided into four squares. The North West quadrant is for unshared acts. There's also along the edge three rows of colored push-pins stuck in. Yellow is for "considering it." Blue is for "soon." Red is for "already doing it." This morning it read JEREMY with four reds surrounding you.

JEREMY. Are you saying Herbert's known all along?

MARLENE. He encouraged it.

JEREMY. WHAT?!!

MARLENE. You were struggling so hard with that final scene we just ...

JEREMY. But —

MARLENE. That afternoon you went for my throat in Shubert Alley, he whispered later to me at SARDI'S, "IT'S SEXUAL. IF THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES, DO IT!"

JEREMY. But ... But ... what about in the boiler room after the first run-through?

MARLENE. Talk about multiples!

JEREMY. What about at The Mayflower?

MARLENE. The best ever!!

JEREMY. I was so sure you and I— (*Suddenly stops.*) Were you even for a second ever?

MARLENE. Ever what?

JEREMY. Tempted?

MARLENE. Yes.

JEREMY. How often?

MARLENE. For one whole afternoon of rehearsal I entertained the thought of getting back!

JEREMY. What stopped you?

MARLENE. You can write about it but you can't live it every day. Me, all I live for is acting. Buddy, we're two half people who together don't add up to one.

JEREMY. O God! *(Suddenly taking note pad from pocket, JEREMY scribbles madly.)*

MARLENE. What's wrong?

JEREMY. I just figured out the first act ending to my new play.

MARLENE. How many characters?

JEREMY. Two.

MARLENE. Man and a woman?

JEREMY. Two men.

MARLENE. What's it called?

JEREMY. *Talking Things Over With My Old Chick's New Old Man.*

MARLENE. You devil! Herbert'll be so proud!!

JEREMY. This new one's a whole two levels deeper than the one you're doing now.

MARLENE. What about tonight?!

JEREMY. I don't follow.

MARLENE. We're having some people over tonight for drinks and dinner. Many of them backers. All of them fans. They'd love to hear you read it. O God, I knew we could all be friends. Finally, you and Herbert get to sit down and really—

JEREMY. I'll be 3,000 miles away.

MARLENE. LA?

JEREMY. Chekhov and I are on the United noon flight.

MARLENE. Movie offer for our play?

JEREMY. Yup.

MARLENE. Which studio?

JEREMY. Bad luck till it's locked in.

MARLENE. I'll be rooting for you.

JEREMY. I'll push for you but then again it is the movies.

MARLENE. The original Broadway cast almost always gets dumped.

JEREMY. Everything's worked out so far. *(Suddenly pointing toward Hudson River.)* Look.

MARLENE. Where?

JEREMY. It's him.

MARLENE. Who?

JEREMY. Over by the railing in the white suit. I'm not exactly sure I—

JEREMY. He's waving. *(JEREMY waves.)* Wave back.

MARLENE. *(Waves.)* He's holding up a white cardboard sign.

JEREMY. That's all he does anymore. Magic marker on his white signs.

MARLENE. O God! It's to me!! *(Reads aloud.)* "MARLENE, YOU ELEVATE HIS WORK. LAST NIGHT YOU WERE INSPIRED."

JEREMY. Look, another sign.

MARLENE. "I ALSO LOVED YOU FIVE YEARS AGO IN THREE SISTERS YOU'RE MY BEST MASHA SINCE OLGA K."

JEREMY. Olga K. means Olga Knipper.

MARLENE. Look, for you!

JEREMY. *(Reading aloud.)* "JEREMY, NO WISE-GUY STUFF. KEEP YOUR TONGUE TO YOURSELF. SAY GOOD-BY NICE." *(JEREMY opens arms, hugs MARLENE warmly.)* See you in a week or so.

MARLENE. Take care.

JEREMY. Gotta run.

58 TALKING THINGS OVER WITH CHEKHOV

MARLENE. Hurry back. I'll need a new play for next season.

*(JEREMY rushes off, MARLENE waves "goodby."
MARLENE sits on bench, about to be sad—as
JEREMY bursts back on in a winded rush.)*

MARLENE. What's wrong?

JEREMY. He wants to photograph us together.

(THEY sit together on bench. Quickly find comfortable position holding each other's hands. For a very long time nothing happens.)

MARLENE. What's taking him so long?

JEREMY. He's never used a flash before.

*(Suddenly two FLASHES go off. BOTH leap to feet only
MARLENE suddenly points toward Chekhov.)*

MARLENE. Look, another message.

JEREMY. "I WANT TO SHOOT A WHOLE ROLL.
PLEASE STAY STILL AND JUST SMILE."

(THEY sit back on bench, take original positions, hand in hand.)

MARLENE. How's that?

JEREMY. How's this?

(BOTH assume posed smiles. As LIGHTS begin to fade to dark, flashbulb FLASHES fill the descending light.)

TALKING THINGS OVER WITH CHEKHOV 59
COSTUME PLOT

I-1

JEREMY: Sweat suit (mismatched, old); old sneakers; ratty sweat cap

MARLENE: Sweat suit (stylish and new); new running shoes; oversized sunglasses, new cap

I-2

JEREMY: Ratty hat, ratty coat, same sneakers, ratty gloves

MARLENE: Beautiful wool suit, jewelry, high heels, alligator pocketbook

I-3

JEREMY: Bowler hat, walking cane, three-piece suit, same sneakers

MARLENE: Old sweater, old skirt, old shoes

II-1

JEREMY: Same suit as in I-3

MARLENE: Sexy red dress, high heels, jewelry

II-2

JEREMY: Oversized coat, bandage on one eye, same sneakers

MARLENE: Same running outfit as in I-1.

II-3

MARLENE: Fur, gown, high heels, jewelry

JEREMY: Tuxedo, same sneakers as usual

PROPERTY PLOT

Six copies of play in binders (Jeremy)

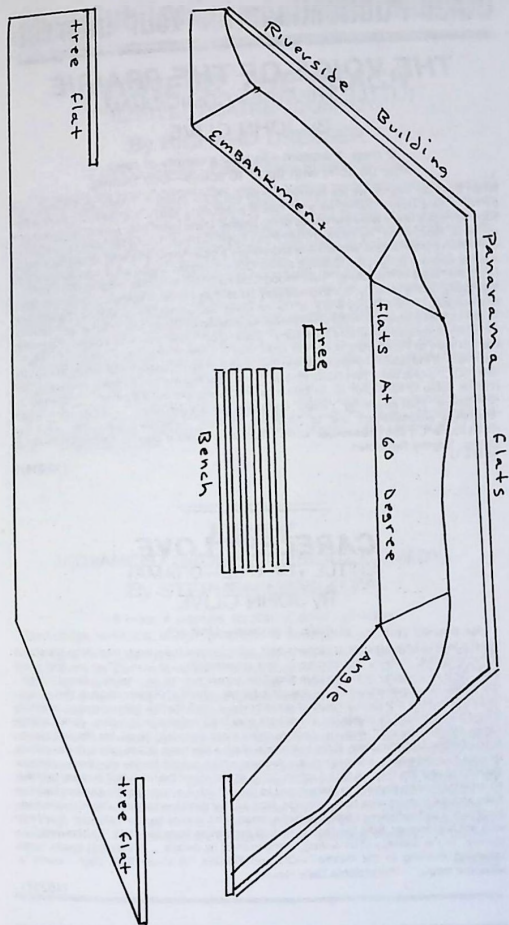
Pen, pad (Marlene)

One dozen red roses (Jeremy)

Six copies of play in binders, notes on revisions (Marlene)

Copy of *New York Times* (Marlene)

Camera with flash (Chekhov)



Other Publications for Your Interest

THE VOICE OF THE PRAIRIE

(LITTLE THEATRE—COMIC/DRAMA)

By JOHN OLIVE

2 men, 1 woman—to play a variety of roles
May be done with up to 10 actors—Unit Setting

When this play begins, we are listening to an old hobo (named "Poppy" by his avid companion young Davey Quinn) tell a tall tale. It is the early 1890's, and itinerant story tellers such as Poppy really were the voices of the prairie. Many years later, when Davey is grown up, he is "discovered" by radio entrepreneur Leon Schwab, telling his tales of Poppy and of Frankie the Blind Girl, whom he rescued from a cruel father and with whom he went on a cross-country adventure. Schwab thinks Quinn's stories would attract an audience for radio, the "wave of the future." Sure enough, David Quinn becomes famous as the Voice of the Prairie, as the cleverly-constructed play cross-cuts between scenes of Leon and David and scenes of young Davey and Frankie the Blind Girl, on the lam, in search of adventure. These scenes culminate in the unfortunate separation of Davey and Frankie, as Frankie is recognized, captured and sent back home. David Quinn, the grown-up Voice of the Prairie, has not been heard from her since. Until, that is, Leon locates her in hopes of using his discovery of the actual, famous Frankie the Blind Girl for its sentimental value, to keep the new F.C.C. off his back. Will David forgive Frankie for leaving him so many years ago? Will Frankie agree to help Leon avoid jail for broadcasting without a license? "Endearing,"—N.Y. Times. "That rare thing, a small, skillful play with a deft heart."—Los Angeles Times. "Beguiling entertainment and as American as corn."—Hartford Advocate. "First-rate entertainment. I can't remember when I last so enjoyed a play."—Torrington Register Citizen. Slightly Restricted.

(#24047)

CARELESS LOVE

(LITTLE THEATRE—DRAMA)

By JOHN OLIVE

1 male, 1 woman—Unit set

What a terrific little play for an actress and actor to sink their teeth into! And, it's about something that matters: commitment, and responsibility, in love. When we first meet Jack, he is an aspiring actor, serious about his career but not very serious about his girlfriend, Martha, a waitress who is an aspiring dancer, who is a lot more serious about Jack. The couple drifts along on a cloud of good times—until Martha gets pregnant, at which time a Choice must be made. As the debate over their options progresses, Jack's acting career starts to take off, and he starts to think more seriously about his life and his responsibilities. Unfortunately, at the same time Martha has been driven into self-absorption by Jack's carelessness, and has made a decision which is right for her. She thinks: she has decided to give the child up for adoption. So—at just about the time Jack is ready to make an emotional commitment to Martha and to their child, it is too late. Martha has had the baby and put it up for adoption. This was, after all, her decision to make. Right? In the end, Martha is a self-sufficient contemporary woman, who makes her own choices. It is Jack who will hurt forever, from the pain of eternal separation from his child. "Bittersweet"—Variety. "In the delicacy of its writing, in the truth of its details... it is a most lovely, most satisfying evening in the theatre."—Chicago Tribune. "A lovely little play... works a winsome magic."—Philadelphia Daily News.

(#5237)

Other Publications for Your Interest

ALONE AT THE BEACH

(LITTLE THEATRE—COMEDY)

By RICHARD DRESSER

4 men, 3 women—Combination Interior/Exterior

"So you thought the kind of comedy that sends audiences home happy had disappeared from the American theatre scene?" "Wrong!" enthused the Louisville Courier-Journal over this literate, witty comedy, which had the audience at Actors Theatre of Louisville's famed this Humana Festival whooping with laughter. George, a mild-mannered man in his mid-30's, has inherited a beach house in the Hamptons on Long Island. In order to afford to keep it, he has let out rooms to boarders. Manhattan-ites desperate to get out of the city on the weekends. Blindly, and blithely, George has not actually met any of these denizens of the yuppie sector of the urban jungle. If everyone were Great Fun and Easy To Get Along With, everyone would have a great time—but the audience, of course, wouldn't. Who wants to watch a bunch of friendly, well-adjusted people have fun in the sun? Thankfully, Dresser gives us a motley crew of urban neurotics, male and female, who begin to drive George, and everyone else, crazy the moment they arrive. Somehow, though, everyone survives the experience, egos intact; and, in fact, some of the most unlikely romances develop, before everyone has to face reality: Labor Day and, subsequently, the trek back to New York City for good—until next summer? "Has a unique sparkle." New Albany Tribune. "A winner... a riotously funny sex farce."—Detroit News. "A charming romp that should turn up in regional and community theatres all over the place."—Houston Post. "Has the pacing of a Neil Simon script but with some of the dry, more cerebral wit of Jules Feiffer."—Evanville Courier.

(#3118)

EMILY

(ADVANCED GROUPS—SERIOUS COMEDY)

By STEPHEN METCALFE

8 men, 4 women, to play a variety of roles.

Bare stage, w/drops, wings, projections & wagons; or, may be unit set.

This brilliant, cynical, contemporary new comedy by the author of *Strange Snow*, *Vikings*, *Sorrows and Sons* and *The Incredibly Famous Willy Rivers* dares to take what amounts to a politically "incorrect" stance about the successful "New Woman." Emily is a successful New York City stockbroker who mixes it up with the boys and always comes out on top. In fact, she was described by one misguided critic as coming off like a "man in drag"; because, as we all know, women are caring, loving, nurturing creatures—and what a wonderful world it would be if they were in positions of political and/or business power, instead of those insensitive jerks, the men. Emily is just as cynical and ruthless as any man in her position; until, that is, she meets a caring, sensitive, aspiring actor (in other words, a nice guy with no money) who doesn't fall for her manipulative ruses; but, rather, for the real Emily he sees inside the ruthless yuppie—who may, or may not, exist. "Glorious... a sparkling comedy with bite to it. The title character is a gold mine of a role for an actress."—San Diego Tribune. "A real winner... a bravura balancing act right on the edge of sentimentality, finally and triumphantly crystalline in its emotional honesty... A triumph."—San Diego Union.

(#7076)

Other Publications for Your Interest

LLOYD'S PRAYER

(LITTLE THEATRE—COMEDY)

By KEVIN KLING

3 men, 1 woman (1 man & 1 woman play various parts). Bare stage w/set pieces.
Be amazed! The author of the amazing 21A has fashioned a hilarious comic parable about Bob, the Raccoon Boy, and what happens to him when he is "rescued" from the raccoons who raised him and taught what it means to be human. At first, Bob can only make whirring raccoon sounds, but he is taught to speak by a delightfully whacky "Mom and Dad". He is taken from his cage at Mom and Dad's house by an ambitious ex-con named Lloyd, who sees the raccoon boy as his ticket to fame and fortune. When his first idea—displaying Bob as a carry sidshow freak—fails, Lloyd gets the brilliant idea to become a religious evangelist, displaying Bob as another sort of freak: a miracle from God. Lloyd's pitch, a promise of inspiration "that will bring grown men to a sitting position and women to a greater understanding of themselves", makes them both celebrities. By this time, Bob speaks pretty well ("I've been called many things in my life... But I prefer Bob"), and is on the verge of innocence corrupted when there appears on the scene a beautiful guardian angel, dressed as a high school cheerleader. "Be amazed", she declares, admonishing Bob to beware of Lloyd. What ensues is an amusing tug-of-war between the angel and Lloyd, with Bob the Raccoon Boy as the rope. The unqualified hit of the Actors Theatre of Louisville 1988 Humana Festival, this brilliant new comedy is "a whirlwind of original humor that comes in waves."—Lexington Herald-Leader "Fresh, funny and charming."—Columbus Dispatch. "Kling is quite simply a comic genius."—Dramatics Magazine.

(#13997)

21A

(ADVANCED GROUPS—COMEDY)

By KEVIN KLING

1 man—Bare stage w/chairs.

"Astonishing" was the way Newsweek Magazine summed up this one-man tour-de-force in which Mr. Kling performed all the riders on a Minneapolis city bus, eight characters, including the driver. Structured as a series of monologues which in "real life" are going on simultaneously, this hilarious and decidedly "different" play had them rolling in the aisles. Kling started with the droll driver and moved on to such odd-balls as Gladys, Chairman Franks (a religious proselytizer), Captain Twelve-Pack (a drunk with a beer 12-pack box over his head) and a businessman who is decidedly not "Dave", no matter how fervently Captain Twelve-Pack insists that he is. And, who is the mysterious intruder sitting at the back of the bus? "Stunning."—U.S.A. Today.

(#2237)

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...and that way, without getting into all sorts of technical problems.
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want to say in a way that only you can. Because there's no good saying
what you want to say in a way anyone else could.

If you're talking about something you don't know, the answer is to
know and be willing to take a crack at it. Then you don't get in the way.
Sometimes good writing might work to get done and you get in the way.

unconscious that way without getting into all sorts of formulaic presentations.

The art of good writing is you finally get to a place where you say what you wanted to say in a way that only you can. Because there's no good saying what you want to say in a way anyone else could.

If you're writing about something you don't know, the unconscious may know and be willing to take a crack at it. Then you don't get in the way. Sometimes good writing might want to get done and you get in the way.

It's like jazz men—when things are going good, they know it's good, everyone around them knows it's good, it's a riff. Writing is like that. It can be a riff but there's no royal road to the riff. If you talk about it, or act like a guru, it's nonsense. If you're writing about things that are important about you, you may have the experience where it all comes together. But it helps if you're serious on your subject. Most people are only half-serious or a quarter serious.

I see the unconscious as much more various than we are and the trouble with an advanced writing course is they can't talk about the

I don't meditate. I prefer that nothing come into my head. I sit there with an empty mind for maybe half an hour. If I think of something, I think of something. It's not like TM. I think maybe it works when I'm tired—a tired brain is happy to think about nothing. I think writers are very happy to think about nothing. It's like a hard-working athlete who likes lying down.

LS: So you make a direct effort to think about nothing?

NM: No, no—I don't think about nothing that hard.

Good dialogue depends on a subtle dialectical bounce. Rules won't help you; you need an ear. There has to be something in the following speech that is like the previous one, and something subtly different. But you have to look at good dialogue and analyze it—which, I think is a mistake because they you try to copy it and follow it. I don't even want to talk about dialogue. Some people have marvelous dialogue, some don't, but it's only one aspect of writing, it's not the aspect . . .

I don't think you can teach dialogue. Most kids who have some talent start off with good dialogue because that comes naturally, they have a good ear. It's there, and they have fun. People hear their stories and they laugh and that's the beginning of being a writer.

LS: You used a wonderful phrase I want you to elaborate on: "the tensile strength of a sentence."

NM: Yes. That you can learn from a writing course.

LS: Tell me what you mean by the tensile strength.

NM: You can't change a single word. What is tensile strength? It has all the components working together, so you can't change a single word.

NM: Faulkner said this: "You can't stop a real writer." Now, a real writer can learn a lot from a writing course, but you can't stop him. The writing course won't ruin him. The writers' community won't ruin him or her. A disaster won't ruin him or her. A good writer learns from the disasters and maybe learns more from the disasters. Once in a while a good writer gets stopped by terrible mistakes, but it's not common.

LS: Would you say the converse is true? If he's not a real writer, he's not going to be made by a writing course or workshop?

NM: No, oddly enough, the converse is not true because I've seen mediocre writers who got better because they took good courses and worked very hard at it. And they got good. Not very good, but pretty good.

serious apology. I had no idea the reaction would be so bad. I know what you did wrong, but I shouldn't have done that. I hope you'll forgive me."

Of course, I did, and out of that we became friends. I used to go to his house once in a while. He was very supportive on "The Greatest Thing in the World" which I later sent in to the Story magazine contest.

But talk about existential! I can't tell you how my back was scalded by the laughter—the laughter that said, "Will people's foolishness ever cease? What a whacko was the guy who wrote this!" But that's what can happen to you, and that was maybe the most extreme situation I ever had.

LS: Are you saying it was destructive or constructive?

NM: Both. At first it was very destructive, but ultimately constructive because he didn't read me out of existence and he told me he had made a mistake, not me, which was very important. We became friends, which was constructive, but I ended up knowing I was a good writer who'd made a tremendous error, and one had to know about these kinds of errors. And you had to have a sense of your audience.

moment, they hear shots. So the guy who's telling the story goes upstairs and her face has been blown off. And the husband commits suicide. The way it's described: "I couldn't see her nose, or what was left of her mouth, and I didn't know whether it was spread on the carpet or whether I was breathing it in."

Well, at that point the class started to laugh. And the description went on and on and on, and I had transgressed a guideline. Which is, if you're having something read aloud, you just don't get into certain details because no audience can keep from roaring with laughter. It was the single worst moment I had in a writing class. I didn't know whether to say, "I wrote it," or "Fuck all you. A horrible thing's been done to a good story"—even the teacher said it was good. Or stay totally silent and pretend it was someone else. Maybe be reduced to criticizing it—or stand up and make a fiery speech. Well, when you're in an existential situation and don't know what to do, you usually do nothing, and I did nothing.

I went home and I was so mad. I hardly slept. The next day I had an appointment with him and I went in. Robert Gorham Davis was a gentleman and the first thing he said when I came into the room was, "Look, I owe you a

always go for plot. But to dare to let the characters develop the story for you is a mark of seriousness.

Excerpts from Tape Two

NM: I think writing courses can be good when you start and even into the middle ranges. As I said, writing courses can be an existential experience. You can go through hell in a writing course when you're beginning, real, true hell. I remember once in my second year of Harvard I was taking a course called English 101 with a very good man teaching it, Robert Gorham Davis. At a given moment, he said to the class, "I'd like to read to you an interesting story that's quite good but totally destroyed at the end."

The story, of course, was mine. What it was about was a boy working at a summer hotel, talking about all the guests, all the guys who were screwing the wives of the businessmen who come out on the weekends. And at a given moment, in the middle of the week, one businessman shows up, starts right up the stairs, they can't interfere—it's just a mess. Then at a given

Esquire, I realized I didn't want to write about someone travelling across the country. The first chapter was so intense that the rest of the book would have been a decrescendo. And at the end of the first chapter he killed her. He strangled her to death, I think—I forget—and he throws her out the window. There I was—I was off to the races. Didn't know where I was going next.

Now that book being done as a serial each month, that was a true organiz novel. In that each month I did it to the best of my ability and didn't necessarily know what was coming next and it grew out of itself and it has certain virtues as a result. And one of them is the continuing intensity.

Now I don't recommend that you write every novel that way but that one gave me a knowledge that plot's the last thing—if you're truly serious, plot's the last thing you worry about. Because plot's a straitjacket. I would say plot wrecks more novels than it saves. I would say plot makes mediocre novles more readable because you're into the story and want to know what happens next, what happens next, and plot is a great aid. What's an analogy? You have a great dancer as a partner but you don't feel you're doing the good dancing, you're in the presence of a good dancer. Plot can be like that. It can make you look better than you are which is why most mediocre writers

The thing about organic writing is you don't have a long nose for where the story's going. You may have an idea for the next chapter or two, but you don't have a slavish attitude beyond that suggestion, and as things develop, you're going to move with what comes next.

LS: Does that ever happen sentence by sentence?

NM: Well, I think it happens page by page. When I was writing *An American Dream*, I started doing it as a serial for *Esquire*. In my mind originally, it was going to be about a young man and a young woman living in New York who meet and form a couple and start taking a trip across the country. And as they travel across the country they have different adventures in different towns. Why? Well, because I'd met my fourth wife Beverly, who was a young, rather lovely blonde actress at the time and we were sort of very much in love and [doorbell]

So anyway, I started it with this idea in mind and I wanted something more dramatic than that so I started with a man having a terrible marriage which was breaking up, and by the time I finished the first installment for

words, to take on a truly elevated style, I could possibly start writing a book in iambic pentameter.

You've got to be able to take the cruelest reviews and not do anything about them. You can't answer bad reviews. You can, but then you make a bit of a fool of yourself.

LS: You've done it.

NM: Well, but I did it in fine form. I took the worse reviews I could find, put them all together and made an ad. On The Deer Park, and that worked. At the top of the ad was: "The Year's Worst Snake Pit in Fiction." Under it was: "Golden garbage heap." After it was: "Nasty. . .silly. . .dull. . .botched. . ." Actually, the ad was so good that Advertising Age reprinted it.

So the whole thing as a whole was a modest experience and the fact that the book did well and got good reviews also helped. That enabled me to see it objectively for its modest value.

LS: Have you ever written consciously in that style again? Have you tried to?

NM: Oh, I could do it very easily but I'd need the material.

LS: Not to do a screenplay.

NM: Well, a screenplay's a screenplay. I think it's dangerous to make direct comparisons. I think Larry's novel will have some of the simplicity of The Executioner's Song.

LS: Any work you've done since The Executioner's Song you'd say that about?

NM: Well, The Gospel According to the Son was written in a fairly simple style. You know, I've been around long enough not to say to myself, "what style are you going to use?" By now, I have enough experience that the style I'm using should be the appropriate one--given one's limits. It's the thing we were talking about the other day about stamina in style. Which is crucial. You cannot take on a style that's beyond your resources in stamina. In other

in at all. People had accused you of writing only about yourself. And you talk about it as if in a way it helped you break through vanity. As if it did break through vanity for you.

NM: Yes. In a certain sense, there were no satisfactions to my vanity in writing the book. Well, there was one small satisfaction, a kind of-- [chuckles] The satisfaction was there were those ready to dismiss me--which is always true--there are always critics ready to dismiss you and other writers saying, "Well, he just can't write a simple sentence, can't write simply." My feeling was, "Hey, you guys, it's much harder to write in a baroque style than a simple style. I'm going to show you all." So I did, and I enjoyed that, and I'd snicker to myself with a mean vanity as I was doing--"yeah, kids, this simple style works, it's easy, you minimalists have been living for years on this, getting away with murder, there's nothing to being a minimalist." And by the time I finished, the vanity had built to the point where I thought, "Let's take a look at old Hemingway, see how good he is."

Then I read Hemingway and got my comeuppance. I realized his simple style is far better than mine. No getting around it. He was doing things with language I was certainly not doing.

LS: And after that, you went back to the fiction for two big books. . .

NM: With more style, yes.

LS: And now, here you are writing about intelligence with material--with Larry Schiller again--with material more connected with reality.

NM: Well, a screenplay's not a novel.

LS: Do you see any parallel, any connection between this and The Executioner's Song?

NM: Not huge connections. The connections are sort of matter-of-fact. It was damned interesting getting to know a lot about the FBI. After knowing a fair bit about the CIA--they are kind of different and that was fun. And Larry's gotten a pretty good book together built on my screenplay. A long screenplay. I wrote a six and a half-hour screenplay which will not be the one you see on the screen. The one you'll see is going to be five hours of TV time which means approximately three and a quarter hours of movie time. So on the long script, which will never be seen, Larry built his novel. And it's pretty good.

LS: I look forward to reading it. But I'm very interested in the different remarks I've heard you make over time about The Executioner's Song. One of the first things you said was you decided to write a book that you were not

LS: [unintelligible]

NM: Well, philosophy becomes a great aid to you in a way it never was before. I have arthritis, my knees hurt a little bit--not terrible, just a little bit--all the time. I'm cheerful about it. I figure I'm paying off my bad karma--of which I have plenty--paying it off on the installment plan, a little bit each day. Which is, by the way, a religious principle--absolutely a mortification.

LS: But it's important what you say about The Executioner's Song. That's a very big turning point in your--

NM: Probably. Also that I could write without preening myself on my style. You remember, Alfred Kazin once said with quite some justice, that Mailer's as fond of his style as an Italian tenor is of his vocal cords. Which--you know, I always thought was pretty good for Kazin.

LS: What?

NM: Pretty good for Kazin. Kazin was good but I think he was shining right there. And I thought, "that's absolutely true!" One of the few times I read something a critic said and said, "absolutely true!" All right, by the time I got to The Executioner's Song, I thought there are more things in writing than vocal cords. And so I was particularly pleased to write it in a terribly simple style.

what I've been interested in all my life is getting nearer to reality. Which is why I'm so fascinated with Picasso.

Because it seemed to me that his whole approach, totally different from mine, was similar in one fashion: he was always interested in "What is the nature of reality?" He became constantly fascinated with it. He used forms in his work: let's say he would make a face entirely out of triangles--the eyes would be triangles, the mouth would be a triangle, the chin would be a triangle, the forehead would be a triangle, he'd see "how much can I put together out of one form?" Then he might use a trapezoid or a rhomboid or circles. Or he might decide to use shards, totally broken business where the forms were almost impossible to discern--they were chaotic. And from there he then went on--before and after-- Well, in the center of all that was Cubism. In which--it's as if Cubism, visually speaking, would be equal to a novel written with chronology turned inside out. So you never know---that Borges does all the time--you never know whether an event is very early or late in relation to the previous event. Did it come before or did it come after?

I don't know if I answered your question but . . .

Aging is a huge part of it. Certain faculties disappear; you begin to enjoy others.

satisfied and that gave me a certain calming-down which came into Harlot's Ghost. And what I began to realize all over again was the principle that a spy novel is an oxymoron. Every spy novel that's a true spy novel is a fraud. What I realized is that people who work in intelligence very often get into intelligence because they love spy novels, they love the life and the idea of the life. But, in fact they come in on chapters 5 and 6 and then they lose it because they're put on other jobs, or the thing doesn't evolve or it goes somewhere else. So in spy work, you're always moving from hypothesis that occasionally--very occasionally--is confirmed and usually it's denied--to another hypothesis and on to another, and plot is exactly the one thing you never get more than a tiny grasp on. Because most spy events do not occur as plots. They occur as intermittent exchanges between plot and tedium and new plot.

So the experience of writing those other two books, The Executioner's Song and Ancient Evenings, contributed to the sense I had in Harlot's Ghost of the only way we're ever going to get near the reality is recognizing that there's not a through-line in intelligence work. The spirit of interruption is as powerful as a sense of plot. And, always--what I began to realize also is that

Now, it's very complicated because at the same time . . . I interrupted one book to write *The Executioner's Song*, and the book I interrupted, *Ancient Evenings*, is the exact reverse. And I was certainly able to finish it. I wrote about half of it after I finished *The Executioner's Song*. So it's as if another half of me worked on that. Well, it was as if both sides of myself had been

more dramatic but less true. I learned is the way things work in life is not the way they work in my novels. Which is, my novels up to then. There always was an intensity of meeting. It would have been obscene to me to have a novel with two really fascinating characters who didn't come together and have a fascinating scene. Whereas what I discovered in The Executioner's Song was the characters I was most interested in hardly ever came together and when they did, the results were usually disappointing. But what would happen occasionally, after all the frustrations that got built into things not quite happening, was something else would happen that was larger than anything one could conceive of. (Like Gary's letter to Nicole that makes her fall wholly in love with him again.)

And I thought, yes, that is what life is like. We go through years of frustration and small events that we were hoping would be larger events and then—wham! Something big happens and it changes everything. Getting a sense of that put a certain modesty into my aesthetic, if you will.

It destroyed him. His vanity had become as powerful as his ego. That injured him seriously.

Working on The Executioner's Song accomplished a couple of things. I came to the realization that God's a better novelist than the novelist. Here was this incredible story. If I had conceived it, the work would have been

hard to write in the first person about someone who's stronger than yourself because it's a little vainglorious. And it's uncomfortable. But you have to be able to do it. Because if you keep every character down to your own level, or lower, you cannot take on large subjects. You need people more heroic than yourself, more enterprising, less timid, sexier, more romantic, more tragic. You've got to be able to take people greater than yourself and not be ashamed of the fact that the "I" that's being promoted is giving a false picture of yourself to all those readers who assume or half-assume that the first person they are encountering is the author.

So the later Hemingway always had to be the equal of whomever he was writing about. The early Hemingway by way of Jake Barnes, was bereft of a penis. Hemingway believed himself to be superior in every otherway. But later came Robert Jordan, the good warrior, and the old Cuban fisherman who never let go. Hemingway was immensely competitive. When it came to boxing--from what I heard about him—he had a heavy punch and he was clumsy. But he worked at it. He was always trying to prove to himself that he was as manly as the people he wrote about. Ditto for fishing. It got to the point when older and no longer that good physically at anything, it got to him.

Let me say one thing about vanity--why do we even bother with it?

Because when vanity is satisfying, it is such a sensual delight. If you have a writer who is all ego and no vanity, that writer is not necessarily attractive.

You take a writer for whom I have a great deal of respect, James T. Farrell, a truly worthy writer--I learned an awful lot from him. But he didn't have enough vanity. Maybe I'm wrong, but I always had the feeling he was absolutely without vanity. And as a result, he was not that interesting to be around.

Then I think of Henry Miller, one of the very few people who could take vanity and mix it with ego, and you get this literally intoxicating mixture.

Hemingway suffered from the honorable need to be the equal of his characters, particularly since he usually wrote in the first person. It's very

someone who did not wish to meet with us, "You must be interviewed by Norman Mailer! He is the American Tolstoy!" And that worked. When all else failed, that would get them.

One time there was a very nice middle-class woman, a teacher, being interviewed. And when two interrogators are doing an interview, and each has a strong mind, and Schiller and I do differ often in our approaches, then each can get infuriated because he thinks the other is taking the interview right off the track. We'd interrupt each other at critical moments, even come close to blows. While this woman was there, we started arguing and before long were screaming at one another: "You're full of shit!" "You can go fuck yourself!" And so forth. The poor woman who hardly understood any English unquestionably was sitting there saying to herself, "This is the American Tolstoy?"

speak of--I wouldn't use the word reverence, it's too heavy--but I if there's any writer I would seek to emulate it would be Tolstoy.

I have a story to attach to that, Larry Schiller who is famous for getting his way despite all obstacles, was with me in Russia when I was doing the book on Lee Harvey Oswald. We spent quite a bit of time in Minsk because there were about thirty people who had known Oswald well. You couldn't get anyone in the KGB to say a word about Oswald after the assassination because the first reaction of the KGB was that President Kennedy had been killed and Oswald had been framed. The secret reason was for the U.S. to start a war with Russia. Oswald had been in there from 1959 to 1962, and had gone over as a self-declared Communist. So the KGB spread the word through Minsk: Don't say a word about Oswald. And for thirty years no one had, no one had spoken. We were there in '92, '93. And the Russians who had known him made wonderful witnesses to what Oswald had been like---not having spoken to anybody for thirty, he was minted in their minds.

But the point I'm working toward is that Schiller would have trouble occasionally getting an interview. And he would pull out all the stops. He's capable of getting an interview when no one else can. He would say to

stuffed with manipulation and little else. Filled with all sorts of catchy ingredients for the sole purpose of leading people astray.

Now how Tolstoy could possibly compare Chekhov to Shakespeare is another question. I don't know that I'm prepared to answer that one.

If there is a reason, I expect it was for different faults. Tolstoy may have felt that Chekhov was a prelude to something yet to arrive, someone like Beckett. Chekhov's people were simply not doing what they ought to be doing. What had to irritate Tolstoy immensely was that they sat in their own spiritual excrement and moaned and made vapid sweet speeches and sighed and groaned and never got out of the situation they were in. To Tolstoy, that was the worst sin. One should not live with the given when it is vapid and vaguely immoral. This was one of Tolstoy's most basic notions. You may have to live with the given as a discipline but you do not accept such a given as eternal, as the meaning of life. He could not permit that. Could not accept how Chekhov made so much of the essential inanition of the Russian middle class.

I have been asked whether my judgment against Beckett can be seen as similar to Tolstoy's against Chekhov, and the answer, all proportions kept, is yes for I do feel a true kinship. Tolstoy is one of the few writers I could

It's a fine story but I wondered: why did Tolstoy dislike Shakespeare so much? I expect the answer is that Tolstoy was always searching for subtle but precise moral judgment. That required an intimate and detailed sense of the sequence of events which produced a dramatic or tragic event. You had to know how to assess the blame and for that you needed to know exactly when and why things happened.

But there was Shakespeare, the first great movie writer who ever existed, not interested in making such connections at all. Shakespeare was looking to get his most dynamic characters together under any circumstances he could find, no matter how wacky or contrived, (King Lear can be the first example) in order to have superb exchanges of dialogue and fantastic moments. Shakespeare exists for the vertiginous possibilities of the English language. Tolstoy lived for sobriety of moral judgment. So he considered Shakespeare a monster. Shakespeare paid so little attention to causality. His people did incredible things, fell in love and/or murdered, usually with a minimum of preparation—Hamlet—and then had exceptional speeches that seared his audience's consciousness. To Tolstoy, this must have been equal to the way some of us look these days on advertising campaigns that are

succeeded so completely in balancing--and I've said this before--severity of judgment on moral matters, with compassion. So that while he was profoundly compassionate, he is never sentimental. That is an amazing quality. I've said in other places also that when I was writing The Naked and the Dead, I used to read a little Tolstoy every day in order to get into the proper mood of compassion and severity. It helped with the book, I must say.

Anyway, there's Chekhov visiting. He takes the train to the nearest station--in range of Yasnya Polyana--I don't know if it was 6 versts or 20 versts--let's say it was about 10 miles. And it's winter time. He rents a sled and horses and drives out through the snow to Yasnya Polyana--Tolstoy's pretty old by now, big, strong, severe, of course, but sits him down and they talk. They drink tea and talk. Tolstoy says: "Chekhov, you are a very good writer. You are excellent. Some of your short stories are so good I would have been pleased to have written them myself. But, Chekhov, I must talk to you: You are a terrible playwright! You are awful! You are even worse than Shakespeare!"

So Chekhov drove back to the railroad station through the snow. In his journal he would write: "I whipped the horses. To the moon I shouted, 'I am even worse than Shakespeare!'"

about my own world. In that sense, you know, when we speak of the use of the third person in the novel, that 19th century third person where you enter everyone's mind--which is now used almost entirely in best sellers and nowhere else because it's very hard for the modern consciousness to assert it has the power to enter everyone's mind--

I remember when I was doing The Executioner's Song, I had just that problem and had to keep reminding myself of the interviews which had been done which gave me a kind of sanction to enter this mind and that. I think one of the reasons The Executioner's Song was so agreeable to so many people was because it had a 19th century quality to it. You were being given all the inner dialogues. Yet all the great novels of the 19th century, and that was the time for great novels, have that quality; the writer enters everyone's mind at will.

Somewhere around the turn of the century, Chekhov was invited to visit Yasnya Polyana. And it was a great event for Chekhov, of course, because Tolstoy was, by that point, looked upon by Russians as a near-god. They probably had a greater love for their novelists and poets than any nation I can think of. They elevated, with considerable justice, Tolstoy to the highest peak and I think one reason was he is the only novelist I know who

reason there are very few men or women who can remain writers for many years. Some of the most talented writers have a book or two and then stop. Why? Because this business of the daily dealing with nothingness violates you, vitiates you. Writers who have been working for a long time do not have an exciting inner life any more. They remain professional enough to take what is potentially exciting in their inner life and put it on a piece of paper. But the inner life gets flatter over the years. That may be because of our violation of the desire of the unconscious to be left alone on those occasions when we insist on working it. Our ambition is the handmaiden of the nothingness that so often besets us.

It seems to me that the novelist and the priest are antithetical. The priest, after all, serves a body of dogma. There are any number of personal exceptions but generally, when we speak of a priest, we think of someone who expatiates upon dogma yet does not try to change it. Whereas a good novelist looks to avoid situations that have been done before. In the most minor sense, you could say that the novelist looked to be godlike. He's trying to create a universe that has its own logic. In truth, for me, the only great novels are the ones where I feel as if I've entered a new world, at the least a new social world. It's not my world but when I'm done, I will know more

The extreme, acute form of this, of course, is writer's block but in a sense there's a touch of writer's block in almost every working day. It's part of the experience of writing. At a certain point we're going well for maybe a page or two, or four on very happy days, we're writing as if it's being given to us, a gift, we have almost nothing to do with it. You're there to transcribe what's coming up, it's so nice, so rich, so agreeable. And often we can feel the moment when our ambition wants us to keep going: "I'm three pages away from the end of the chapter, let me keep going on with this marvelous streak." Then I can feel the sentences getting less good and feel, no, I've got to stop—dammit, dammit—I'm going to lose all of tomorrow morning getting to the end of this chapter, but, no, don't do it now, you're going to wreck it. That's what you learn over the years. Because in the early days of writing, you do force it, and what happens, of course, is the blowback of the unconscious. It's done its job, and it's damned if it's going to give you any more right now. If you insist, flatness of affect will be your reward.

When it comes to writing, nothingness is always the co-pilot of being. One of the most painful elements of the act is that you have to live so much with nothingness. People often say, "How wonderful to be a writer--raptures coming out of your head and being put on paper, how divine!" But that is one

example, I could say, for instance, in writing a novel like Harlot's Ghost, I was trying to understand how an intelligence operation works in a complex society. It may be that I was tapping into how my own information system works, how my unconscious works through error as well as sensible judgment. Because I don't think the unconscious is all-powerful. The unconscious is merely doing the best it can do. While I do work on the premise that the unconscious is much richer, much more of a kingdom than our conscious mind, and has many more resources and avenues to follow, still it may be that my unconscious, being more profoundly interested in the nature of intelligence and how it's gathered, finds my desires to be enriched with its notion of intelligence, seriously annoying to itself. Suppose the relation of the unconscious to the conscious is that of a cultivated Greek slave to an overbearing Roman master. The Greek slave is vastly more cultured than the Roman, but nonetheless has to serve in a number of ways the slave doesn't particularly like. I think if we use that as a working analogy for our relation to the unconscious, we can have some idea of the unconscious. Just like that Greek slave, it is full of the trickiest forms of resistance. One form it may take is to emit nothingness, flatness of affect, the dull, edgy resentment of being forced to plumb into issues the unconscious is not ready to present.

do. Because I think as we go through life, we observe everyone. You can see someone out of the corner of your eye in a restaurant who represents some subtle inspiration or menace or possibility, human possibility, potentially a friend or a foe--and the unconscious works on that. It needs very little evidence to put together a comprehensive portrait because the unconscious is working all the time. In coarse terms, it's as if the unconscious is a huge computer which needs very little new material in order to fashion a portrait since there's so much material there already that's analogous, waiting for a signal, so to speak.

On the other hand, as we write, the unconscious can very often feel violated. Perhaps it has gotten a great deal of this material together for its own purposes. Let us just suppose that the unconscious has a root in the hereafter, has deeper notions about death than we do, not only deeper notions but a deeper relation to death, in other words, if the unconscious has the feeling that the soul is going to continue after death and the unconscious is on very close, you might say, almost familial, terms with the soul, it can feel violated by the push of the novelist to obtain certain information.

It's very hard to be specific. I'd have to make up something that probably wouldn't be accurate, but let me try. If I look at my own work for an

minutes, that might be restorative. It wouldn't be nothingness, but an attempt to fight nothingness.

Yes. I think that's a good way to put it. One problem for a lot of young writers, I expect, and for writers in general, is that in the course of writing creatively, fashioning a character who begins to take on a life, digging into what one has perceived of his existence, and collaterally, of his society, his world, there comes a point where a fell recognition sets in. One doesn't really know enough about that character. At such times, I always go on the assumption that my unconscious knows much more about that person than I

All right, slightly demented, as was all of Dostoyevsky, but not wholly impossible. He had one chance in a hundred, one real chance in a hundred. That's all a genius ever looks for, one live chance in that hundred. Don't forget, geniuses are people who take on these hundred-to-one shots because they see the luminescence in the one chance.

When we talk, however, about television commercials, they are nothingness. They are filled with material, usually noisy, their colors are vivid, they pay almost no attention to the product they would sell as if the general consensus is that if you entertain your audience, if you pay them, in effect, for your interruption by giving them a laugh, maybe a fraction of that audience will remember the name of the product--that's all you need. Far better than to have someone speak of the sterling virtues of the product. No, never get into that. Work to overcome the onus of nothingness that they are contributing to.

If, for instance, the television networks were to have a half-minute of silence, or two minutes of silence, (provided they could overcome that subtle buzzing of the screen which is one of the subtle negative aspects of television), if they could just have complete silence for a minute every fifteen

fashion. The finest example I go back to over and over again is Dostoyevsky dying in despair because he couldn't write the novel about the great saint that he envisioned.

To us, now, it seems, "Oh, well--so what? Look at the great books he did write." But from Dostoyevsky's point of view, he sensed with his incredible intuitions that Russia was heading toward some sort of prodigious catastrophe that he could not quite name. But he felt he could help avert this oncoming disaster if he could create in his pages a saint who would be believable to the Russian people.

That is not as ridiculous a mission as it seems today because novelists were revered like gods at that point---well, not gods, but Tolstoy was certainly looked upon as a saint, a major, virile, powerful saint. In turn, Dostoyevsky may have been looked upon as a mad genius but absolutely a genius. It was taken for granted that you could learn more about life reading their novels than anything in your own life. The Russians paid attention to their novelists in incredible fashion. From Dostoyevsky's point of view, if he could make that marvelous saint in his mind come to life in a book, then he could save Russia.

Well, I find that same thing present in totally different fashion in Beckett. He never put himself into a situation where any of his people might want to break out of whatever trap they were in. They could be sitting in garbage cans. They could be talking to a tape recorder, which, speaking of traps, is a wonderful example. Or whatever. But they never get out of it. In the plays I saw, they never got out of anything. Of course, one could also say that Beckett dared to do something no one else had ever done. One could argue that he was reaffirming being in that sense. But we are not able to live with the daring in his character. We imbibe the depressing news he's giving us about the endless possibilities of nothingness. He wouldn't let go of nothingness. It's been argued well that with all the objections I pose to television commercials and corporate mentality, yet the essence of that mentality is that it cannot tolerate nothingness. It's always pouring its choice of form into our minds. There is, after all, no silence on television. To which I would reply that filling essentially empty forms like commercials is a species of nothingness. I would argue that whenever you do not fulfill the aesthetic you set yourself, you are, in a sense, purveying a subtle species of nothingness. Even in the finest novels, there are elements that are not satisfactory. Very few novels have ever changed peoples' lives in serious

and goes out one day in his dinghy, works his oars, and hooks into the biggest fish he's ever had. Then he hangs on. The contest goes on for hour after hour after hour after hour after hour, but he wears the fish out and gaffs him. Then the sharks come and eat his catch. He's left with nothing.

Hemingway called it a novel of affirmation because the man never gave up. My critique is that there never came a moment in the telling where the man said to himself, "It isn't worth it. I'm going to cut the rope." Because if he had weakened for one moment, then Hemingway would have had to have a real affirmation. Which is why doesn't he cut the rope? What all the critics saw immediately, that this was Hemingway's view of the literary world, destroying his beautiful work. And it was self-pitying and it was self-satisfying and it was not affirmative. Because if he had thought once of cutting the rope, of saying it's not worth it, the fisherman would have entered nothingness. And then Hemingway would have had to build the case for being. He would have had to find a reason for the fisherman to say "I won't cut the rope." Why? That's the tough question to answer. But Hemingway hadn't created enough of a character to find something in the fisherman to answer the question. He just had him as a stubborn old Cuban who wasn't gonna cut no rope.

being into nothingness, even though the commercial may be lively, noisy, even, on occasion, amusing. But your concentration has been broken when you weren't prepared for that.

My negative reaction to Beckett was instinctive. Philosophically, his attitude seemed to be, "Nothingness is at least half of existence, so let's study it, let's enjoy it." I think it was the enjoyment of nothingness that irritated me. If fiction depends on the moves in life from being to nothingness and back again, Beckett stays only in nothingness. He's Mozartian in the variations he can play upon that theme. So I have to admire his work; I will even say the genius of his mind. He is one of the very few writers of the 20th century you can call a genius. He took a road no one else did, and went very far with it. What he's done is exceptional. But it's an exceptionalism that distresses me. He never entered the dialectic between nothingness and being. But let me try to exemplify what I'm saying.

Take The Old Man and the Sea. I always felt it was one of Hemingway's failures. Because he wanted to write a short novel about a fine man who worked with his hands, worked as a fisherman. He wanted to write a novel of affirmation about that man. And so he had him go out--we all know the story but for those few who don't--he's had very bad days fishing

Marriage is filled with Beckettian situations and Beckettian states. Which is the rigmarole and the routine of marriage, the dreadful repetitions, the way the husband and wife press each other's buttons, knowing exactly what the effect will be, knowing that pressing this button will produce a non-productive irritation on the other side, and then your mate will press one of your buttons. Nothingness pitted against nothingness.

Put a marriage onstage: Put two people on opposite sides of the stage; hardly a word is said but occasionally one of them will press a button, a light will go on, and the other person will stand up in a rage. It would be fun to do something like that for a skit. Just call it "Marriage." Well, Beckett added to that an acute sense of despair. It had dimension, resonance, vibrancy. His despair was both sinister and joyful. It was almost as if he was saying, "Once you feel this despair, nothing will ever be bad again." Never as bad again.

There was, therefore, this remarkable quality to Beckett. At the same time, I was still totally opposed to him. Why? Because, he was putting the emphasis on nothingness. My feeling was: Being is in terrible trouble. We don't even sense what being is anymore. Perhaps it is the product of the misuse of being. As one example, every time you become interested in a narrative on television and a commercial comes on, you're being brought from

departments choose. They invariably pick an absurd play. For a very simple reason: you cannot judge it. Professors of drama at these schools don't really want to be measured. It's unfailing how often they chose absurd plays: Lorca, Ionesco, we can go through them--Artaud--name 20 very difficult, very talented playwrights of the absurd and you'll have college kids trying to do something with it. They can't win and they can't lose. Can't lose because they're going to get laughs. Whenever an audience can't follow a non sequitur, there's an automatic laugh from an audience. If you have an actor say, "boborigymous," at a given moment—as in, let's say—"The situation is getting boborigymous," you'll get a laugh. Why? Because the audience doesn't know what it means. They laugh, slightly in embarrassment, slightly in pleasure, slightly because they're tickled and slightly because it's easier to laugh than just to sit there hanging on.

There a dozen dirty little tricks available in the art of the absurd when you have mediocre directors and unskilled actors. I saw that generating about the time Beckett arrived and in advance, I said, "he's going to be the worst of all." Well, then I had to go and see the play, and realized, "No. There's something profound going on here. I still don't like it. It isn't for me in any way at all, but I have to admit I've had states of existence like that."

But in ways you can't name. It's as if in boredom you come to the wrong kind of rest, a pause that does not restore you. Rather, it's as if you had better get out of that boredom or you are going to come apart, bit by bit, more and more. It's as if your finest faculties are subtly corroding. There's never the reassurance that accompanies a real rest—the marvelous feeling that you're going to come out of it refreshed and strong and ready to go again. To the contrary, there is this uneasy feeling that you can sink lower and lower into more and more nothingness. Into degeneration.

But there is Beckett, lively and witty and daring as he goes into these subtly fetid caves of existence where the bad smell isn't even remarkable enough to get you going. You can't even react in horror. It's only slightly stale, slightly used up. The thing is just off-edge a little.

I always saw such states as the price you pay in order to command a grasp of being. So my initial reaction to Beckett was disapproval. I was bothered by how people seemed to be getting less and less interested in things that were vital and were looking more for the art of the absurd.

To this day, I detest the art of the absurd. When I go to see a college play for instance, (and since I've had nine kids who went to college, mind you, I've seen my share of college plays), I loathe what college dramatic

Larry Shainberg Interview

I've never felt close to Beckett and I know next to nothing about his novels. People tell me that more than half of his literary substance is there. However, I am familiar with Waiting for Godot and Krapp's Last Tape and End Game, and I've always been as fascinated with him as if he were a Martian. He has done something, after all, that no one ever did before. When it comes to being or nothingness (with apologies to Sartre) writers are almost without exception more interested in being. But it was Beckett who said in effect, "Nothing is half of life and it's the half I know about. And I am going to dwell on that." And he has done marvelous things with that premise.

Nothingness is, after all, anathema to most writers. We take it for granted that we have to spend a good part of our lives accepting nothing as a price to pay in order to feel being. I go through dull slogs, through days where my mind is not working, through hours where boredom can be somewhat terrifying. And why? Because boredom is a state that gives you almost no sensual affect. And at the same time is seen as vaguely sinister.