

(Zap sound. Blackout. Lights come up on RICHARD III, act 1, scene 1. GLOUCESTER, hunchbacked, stands alone. The actor portraying him delivers his lines with great pride in Shakespearean oratory.)

GLOUCESTER. Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
And all the clouds that lowr'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
Now are our brows—

(Zap sound. GLOUCESTER appears stunned. Blackout. Lights come up on the PERFORMANCE ART MONOLOGUE. The time is the present. MARSHA, twenty-two, is dressed in black, from her motorcycle boots to her lipstick. She wears a bandanna on her head. She stumbles onstage

in slight confusion and flops onto the couch. She addresses the audience directly throughout.)

MARSHA. Whoa. This is too weird. Totally. I can't believe we're really doing this. And that I'm in it. That we all are. And with barely rehearsing, so we could hurry up and open and bring in some money. Talk about opening-night jitters. You should see it backstage. Bunch of chickens with their freaking heads cut off. And the director—totally ballistic. Not that that's exactly a change of pace. And Ron Throckmorton, the guy who runs the company, he's like oozing around telling everybody, "It's just for a little while, to help balance the books." Except we're always short of cash, even with none of us getting paid. And we're always about to lose our lease on the building, like right now, which is always gonna be the way it is in theater as long as people can sit at home and watch three million freaking cable channels with the zapper in one hand and a bowl of bubble gum fudge swirl in the other. But you gotta compete. Which is how Ron thought up putting on seven plays at once, something for everybody, including my performance art piece, and giving you guys zappers. High art meets short attention span. Naturally, I came down with a cold two days before we open, but who cares, you know? Acting's not actually my thing. Telling the truth is my thing. The whole truth. Nothing but the truth. The truth shall make you free! Somebody famous said that. *(She snuffles loudly and wipes her nose on her sleeve.)* The truth shall gross you out! I said that. *(She displays her sleeve to the audience.)* 'Cause I'm going to

tell you about my repulsive family and my amazingly disgusting hometown and how I discovered theater and dared to tell the truth and how for the past five years I wouldn't stop telling the truth no matter what anybody—

(Zap sound. Blackout. Lights come up on the RUSSIAN PLAY. The time is 1870, a morning in spring. The place is a Russian country estate, home to the Volnikov family. NIKOLAI, thirty-five, rushes in and looks about in rapture. Actors use Russian accents.)

NIKOLAI. The sofa . . . Great-grandfather's books . . . the view of the birches! *(Calling offstage.)* Irina! We're here! *(To himself.)* Everything just as I recall it from my boyhood! Exactly! *(IRINA enters, thirty and beautiful, sulkily surveying the room's furnishings.)* Darling Irina! Can you believe it? Never again the noise of St. Petersburg, the crowding, the greed and moneygrubbing, the filthy air, the coarseness of spirit. Here in the country we shall both be reborn!

IRINA. *(Trailing a finger on the furniture and staring at her dusty fingertip.)* If that filthy ogre who brought our bags is our midwife, I believe I'd prefer a St. Petersburg specialist.

NIKOLAI. Dearest—you'll come to adore Gregor. Believe me.

IRINA. And frankly, Nikolai, I must confess that I feel no great need to be reborn. I leave that to the Hindus of India.

NIKOLAI. Come now, Irina. We've already decided. (*He takes her arm.*) And here is the house I've described to you so often!

(*He tries to land a kiss, but IRINA pulls away.*)

IRINA. With its awful curtains.

NIKOLAI. Irina, darling. It's a house filled with tradition!

IRINA. A tradition of tasteless furnishings.

NIKOLAI. Here I shall learn to farm as my ancestors did. Here we shall live on honest toil, eat from our own fields, make merry with the local inhabitants at harvest time.

IRINA. If I don't perish of boredom first. How far is it to the nearest ballet?

NIKOLAI. Hmmmm. I'm not certain, exactly. Probably only a moderate distance. Perhaps six hundred and fifty versts.

IRINA. And just how far is a verst, anyway? I'm always forgetting.

NIKOLAI. A verst? (*He thinks.*) Isn't it three point two leagues? (*IRINA raises her arms in a how-should-I-know gesture.*) Gregor will know. And if not, here in the house you have the country branch of my family, happy to instruct you

in such practical matters and to entertain you with droll family stories. They should be here shortly. Let's review. *(His delivery speeds up.)* First, there is my great-grandfather, Konstantin Alekseyevich Volnikov. My aunt, Olga Andreyevna Barkakovich, nicknamed Nika. My cousin, Pavel Sergeyeovich Spivetsky, nicknamed Spavil—

(Zap sound. Blackout. Lights come up on the COMEDY. IRV is on the phone.)

IRV. I dunno, Sammy. About my age, I think. . . . Yeah, part-time as his secretary and part-time interior decorator, the last I heard. . . . Audrey. Audrey McPherson. . . . Hmmm. Let me think. . . .

(Zap sound. Blackout. Lights come up on the AVANT-GARDE PLAY. The time is the 1950s. The place is a hotel room. A MAN sits in one of the chairs, reading a brochure. A WOMAN, seen in a different posture on the couch in each scene, reclines there, staring at a crossword puzzle. Both wear white terry-cloth robes. On the floor in front of the couch, face-down, lies a dummy of a dead man, dressed in a dark business suit. The actors speak with robotic dispassion, their lines separated by longer-than-usual silences. There is a long silence before the MAN speaks.)

MAN. Apparently, this hotel is quite well appointed.

WOMAN. I need a three-letter word for “despair.”

MAN. There’s parking across the street for motoring guests. And all rooms are equipped with radios and telephones. *(Pause.)* “Artichoke.” *(The WOMAN smiles and writes the word in her crossword.)* There’s a restaurant on the second floor. . . . A concierge can be found next to the bellman’s desk. . . . The staff welcomes the chance to serve us.

WOMAN. How long have we been here now?

MAN. Hmmm. Six. Or seven. Or fourteen. Or thirty-one.

WOMAN. And yet, they’ve still not brought up our luggage.

MAN. No doubt they’re busy with other travelers.

WOMAN. And the robes from the closet are really quite comfortable. *(Pause.)*

MAN. I’ve read through all the hotel information, but nowhere does it say what to do in the case of a dead body in the room.

WOMAN. *(She looks down at the corpse, then pokes him experimentally with her toe.)* He seems to have been here for quite some time. Perhaps he was left by one of the other guests. *(She returns her gaze to her crossword.)* A four-letter word for “pertaining to brass family instruments.”

MAN. You dial three for the front desk. Four for room service. Eight for housekeeping. *(Pause.)* “Bathtub.”

WOMAN. *(She smiles and writes the word in.)* But no number given for the morgue?

MAN. *(He turns the brochure over and scans it in bafflement.)*
No.

(Long pause, during which nothing happens. Zap sound. Black-out. Lights come up on the ENGLISH MYSTERY, as before. Immediately, there is a peal of thunder and the lights flicker off. When they come up again a moment later CLIFFORD GRAY, thirty, is in the room, in uniform and with his right arm in a sling. His manner is troubled and distant.)

EMMALINE. Clifford! You’re here! Oh, darling! *(She embraces him, then gently touches his right arm.)* But what happened?

CLIFFORD. We had a visit in my trench—from one of the Kaiser’s shells. Hello, Colonel, Marjorie, Reverend, Lady . . . *(He stares at LADY DENSLOW but can’t think of her name.)*

LADY DENSLOW. Denslow. Vanessa. How could you forget?

CLIFFORD. *(Slightly dazed.)* Vanessa—of course. *(To the others.)* Don’t let me interrupt.

EMMALINE. Interrupt? But, darling—you're the guest of honor.

CLIFFORD. Am I? I do pity you all. (*To INSPECTOR SWIFT.*) I don't believe we've met.

INSPECTOR SWIFT. Actually, we have. Roderick Swift. We dined together last May, in Cambridge.

EMMALINE. You remember, darling. The celebrated detective.

COL. HARDWICKE. The most famous in all England.

CLIFFORD. Memory hasn't been the same since that German shell. Sorry.

EMMALINE. You must be famished. Come, let's go into the dining room. (*CLIFFORD heads in one direction; all the rest exit in the opposite direction, except for EMMALINE, who spots CLIFFORD's mistake and rescues him.*) Oh, Clifford. This way. Don't you remember?

(*Sobbing, she leads CLIFFORD off. Zap sound. Blackout. Lights come up on the SOUTHERN PLAY. The place is an antebellum mansion in Mississippi, home to the Puckett family. The time is 1934. AARON PUCKETT, twenty-five and fiery, is in the midst of a shouting match with his*

father, REGINALD, who's pouring himself a whiskey from the bottle. Actors use southern accents.)

REGINALD. And what's the disgrace in living in Catfish Crossing, Mississippi?

AARON. My God, don't you have eyes? People . . . here . . . are narrow!

REGINALD. Narrow? (*Considers.*) Miz Cornford down the road—

AARON. Narrow-minded! Backward! Intolerant! Provincial! I can't breathe here, Pappy. Don't you understand? People here can't see past their crops and account books—and neither can you. No one here has time for art, or patience for anybody who does. Not *one* of the world's great watercolorists has come from Pinkham County. *That's* why I've got to go.

(Sound of train whistle. REGINALD drains his glass with one swallow.)