

Excerpt

ORBITING MARS

A comedy

by

Peter Snoad

50 Dunster Road
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130
U.S.A.
(617) 522-4219
peter@petersnoad.com

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CHARACTERS

With doubling, the play can be performed by a minimum of 4 male and 4 female actors. The numbers in parentheses denote the roles to be played by the same actor. Even in a production where more than 8 actors are used, the actors who play characters in the “real life” drama should also play their equivalent in “Present Slaughter”, the play-within-the-play. (For example, the same actor should play both ARLENE KLEIN and ARLENA VIRGINIA.)

JONATHAN SINCLAIR, a nuclear weapons engineer and artistic director of Nirvana Community Players, late 30’s to 40’s; tightly wound, perfectionist; a lapsed Catholic with guilt in his DNA.

ANNE SINCLAIR, marketing executive, Jonathan’s wife, late 30’s to 40’s; tough, controlling, prioritizes family; desperate to stop her errant daughter from self-destructing.

HOPE SINCLAIR, their daughter, 16 (1); rebellious, very smart.

MARS (2); the Roman god of war; a magnetic presence.

ARLENE KLEIN, public relations executive, 30’s to 40’s (3); speedy, sensuous, neurotic, libidinous; hopelessly in love with Jonathan.

MAX KLEIN, military contractor, Arlene’s husband, 40’s to 50’s (4); a schlumpy mensch and a terrible actor who’s got the theatre bug.

GARDENIA HOGG, a member of the Nirvana Community Players, 50’s-plus (5); loud, flamboyant, eccentric, formidable.

STEFAN FORTUNATO, member of the Nirvana Community Players, 20’s to 30’s (6); sweet, snippy and insecure; finds Mars delectable.

JACK SALINGER, CEO of Praetorian International (4)

LEWIS, a government security agent (6)

JERRY PUTZ, a grief counselor (6)

LARRY LEE, a theatrical agent (6)

The cast of *Present Slaughter*:

CAESAR (2)

ARLENA VIRGINIA, a maiden (3)

FRUMPIA, a female servant (5)

SICKOFANTUS, a male servant (6)

HOPELESS, Caesar’s daughter (1)

MAXIMUS PROFITUS, an arms merchant (4)

TIME

The present

SETTING

The wealthy suburban community of Nirvana, California. Most of the play takes place in the living room of the Sinclairs’ home. There are also scenes (requiring only minimal representational sets) in the high school auditorium, a motel bedroom, a corporate office, and the patio of the country club.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

The Nirvana High School auditorium. Evening. A bare stage except for a folding chair center stage. JERRY PUTZ, an unremarkable man, stands with a copy of the script of Noel Coward's *Present Laughter* in his hand. He is nervous. He looks out at the audience, then at the script. He is reading for the part of Garry Essendine. He speaks in an almost inaudible monotone.

JERRY

"Listen to me, my dearest. You're not in love with me—the real me. You're in love with an illusion, the illusion that I gave you when you saw me on the stage."

From the back of the auditorium, JONATHAN SINCLAIR interrupts him. JONATHAN is clean-cut, professorial, and tightly wound. His patience is almost exhausted.

JONATHAN

(Approaching the stage)
Jerry, let me stop you there, okay?

JERRY

I'm sorry—

JONATHAN

No, no—

JERRY

It's my day job.

JONATHAN

What?

JERRY

I'm a grief counselor.

JONATHAN

I'm sorry...

JERRY

I have to speak softly. It's a habit.

JONATHAN

Right, right. But this guy, Gary Essendine, he's loud, he's vain, he's demonstrative—

JERRY

I know, I have to project—

JONATHAN

And charming. Okay? He oozes charm.

JERRY

I can't play that.

JONATHAN

What?

JERRY

Ooze. I can't play ooze. I need an objective.

JONATHAN

You want to get rid of the girl.

JERRY

Well, obviously, yeah—

JONATHAN

But you're an actor, you're performing, your whole life is performance. And you are loud and you are charming. Try it again.

JERRY

(Barely changing his low monotone)

"Listen to me, my dearest. You're not in love with me—the real me. You're in love with an illusion—"

JONATHAN

You know what, Jerry?—

JERRY

I knew it! I knew we'd met before.

JONATHAN

What?

JERRY

You work at Praetorian.

JONATHAN

Jerry—

JERRY

You're the chief engineer at Praetorian International. We met at the country club.

JONATHAN

I don't think so—

JERRY

At the tropical fiesta.

JONATHAN

It's possible—

JERRY

That was a wild night. You were dancing up a storm with that woman. The one with the dark hair and the bangles?

JONATHAN

Jerry—

JERRY

God, was she hot. What was her name?

JONATHAN

Jerry, I've got other people waiting.

JERRY

Arlene! That's it, Arlene. And she was not your wife. Oh no. I mean, it was obvious, to me at least. Don't worry, I won't breathe a word. Your secret is safe with me.

JONATHAN

Thanks for coming in.

JERRY

You know what your problem is?

JONATHAN

Jerry—

JERRY

You're blind. You don't know talent when it stares you in the face.

JONATHAN

It's not a question of talent—

JERRY

You think I suck.

JONATHAN

You're not right for the part.

JERRY

I could do this standing on my head!

JONATHAN

Look, we're doing "Oklahoma" in the fall—

JERRY

Fuck "Oklahoma"! This is my role. Noel Coward could have written it for me. Me! Jerry Putz.

JONATHAN

Jerry, we're done here.

JERRY

No, no, I'm done, I'm done with you. You had your chance but you blew it, boy, did you blow it, you have no idea.

He starts to exit, then turns.

I could make you famous. You know that? I could make the Nirvana Community Players a household name! You could all be on Celebrity Jeopardy, every single one of you. But you won't be. Never. Ever.

He exits. JONATHAN sighs in frustration. He wearily crosses to the chair in the center of the stage, sits down, and puts his head in his hands. His cell phone rings. He answers it. It's his wife, ANNE.

JONATHAN

Hi... I'm still at the high school.... I know, but it's been crazy...Five minutes, ten at the outside...Really. I will, I promise. Love you.

JONATHAN hangs up. MAX KLEIN enters. He is schlumpy and overweight and wears a loose Hawaiian shirt.

MAX
What did you do to him?

JONATHAN
Who?

MAX
The guy who just left. He's beating on some car with a baseball bat.

JONATHAN
He's trashing my car?

MAX
No, no, it's not yours. And he's screaming, "I'm a star!" Whack! "You wrote it for me, Noel!" Whack! "You wrote it for me!" Whack!

JONATHAN
He's a grief counselor.

MAX
Ah.

JONATHAN
He wasn't right.

MAX
No shit.

JONATHAN
What am I going to do, Max? I've had thirteen people read for Garry Essendine. Not one was even close.

MAX
Better than "The Sound of Music".

JONATHAN
Max, please—

MAX
Seventeen Mother Superiors and not one could satisfy you.

JONATHAN

I have standards—

MAX

Catholic slut.

JONATHAN

That guy, okay? He couldn't play a munchkin in the Wizard of Oz and make it real.

MAX

He's too tall.

JONATHAN

And his resume! Does he think I'm an idiot?

(Brandishing JERRY's resume)

He says he played Willy Loman and King Lear, in repertory, on a Greek cruise ship.

(He flings it away in disgust)

MAX

(Retrieving it)

You know there's big bucks in this.

JONATHAN

What?

MAX

Creative resumes for wannabes. There's this woman in Sausalito, a playwright, a bad playwright, anyway she started out small, tweaking resumes for friends, and word got around, and before you know it, she's swamped, can't keep up with the demand. Now she has a franchise.

JONATHAN

(Musing)

Alex was perfect.

MAX

(Examining the resume)

But this, this is amateur work.

JONATHAN

He *is* Garry Essendine. He's big, he's loud, he's got an ego the size of Mount Rushmore. He can even do a halfway decent British accent, for heaven's sakes.

MAX

Let it go.

JONATHAN

How do you get viral pneumonia in Aruba anyway?

MAX

They've got everything in Aruba.

JONATHAN

If we had Alex in that role—

MAX

Jonny—

JONATHAN

We would be a shoo-in.

MAX

You don't know that.

JONATHAN

We'd win, Max. We'd finally win.

MAX

There are other actors—

JONATHAN

“And this year's Shooting Star Award for Excellence in California Community Theatre goes to...the Nirvana Community Players.”

MAX

Jonny—

JONATHAN

Star quality, Max. That's what we need. A star.

MAX

Look no further.

JONATHAN

(Ignoring him)

I mean, we have this thing wired. Ginger Galloway's chairing the judges' panel, she worships Coward, *Present Laughter* is her all-time favorite show, and after last year...

MAX

Jonny—

JONATHAN

Our “Music Man” was the best they’d ever seen, that’s what people said. Better than Broadway. But oh no, the Bakersfield Drama Club was *due*. Politics! Well, this year it’s our turn. Justice will be done. Oh, and the icing on the cake, get this, I didn’t tell you this: Ginger Galloway has the hots for me. I swear, she was all over me at the critics’ symposium, it was actually quite embarrassing. We are golden, Max, golden, we can’t lose! Unless, of course, we can’t find our precious leading man.

MAX

I’m right here.

JONATHAN

Max, please, I’m not in the mood.

MAX

Fuck you!

JONATHAN

Don’t say that—

MAX

What am I, chopped liver? I could do Garry Essendine standing on my head.

JONATHAN

You, too, huh?

MAX

What did the Nirvana Bugle say about me in “Showboat”?

JONATHAN

It’s not a question of—

MAX

“Max Klein turned in a solid performance”.

JONATHAN

Stolid.

MAX

What?

JONATHAN

Stolid was the word. A stolid performance.

MAX

No, they said solid! SOLID.

(JONATHAN gives a conciliatory gesture)

It was complimentary, that's all I'm saying.

JONATHAN

And well deserved—

MAX

I've got the chops for this, Jonny boy. You know I do. I will make you proud, and I will make us a winner.

JONATHAN

Max, you're not right for it.

MAX

Why?

JONATHAN

Why?

MAX

Why am I not right for it?

JONATHAN

Because.

MAX

Because I'm not tall, I'm not dark, I'm not handsome.

JONATHAN

It's not about your looks.

MAX

Cast against type! Look at me. No, no, look at me. A chubby little Jewish man plays the debonair English matinee idol. We'll kill them, we'll have them rolling in the aisles! The judges love original. Ginger Galloway loves original. This is original. Al Pacino plays Shylock, only the reverse. Here, let me show you—

He tries to take the script from
JONATHAN, who pulls away.

JONATHAN

Max!

MAX

You're not going to let me read?

JONATHAN

It wouldn't work.

MAX

Give me the goddam script!

They tussle over the script.

JONATHAN

There's no point.

MAX

(Overlapping)
I'll show you.

JONATHAN

(Overlapping)
No, Max, no—

MAX

(Overlapping)
What is the matter with you?

JONATHAN

(As he finally secures hold of the script)
It's nothing personal.

MAX

Of course, it's personal. You and me, it's personal.

(Beat.)
You've never had any faith in me as an actor.

JONATHAN

That's absurd, I—

MAX

Let me tell you something, okay? Let me remind you of something. They said John Wayne couldn't act.

JONATHAN

It has to be right, Max.

MAX

How many movies did he make? Huh? How many?

JONATHAN

(With sudden intensity)

If we're going to win, it has to be right.

(Beat.)

MAX

What's going on?

JONATHAN

I'm not waiting another year.

MAX

You don't need to.

JONATHAN

THIS IS THE PLAY, THIS IS THE YEAR!

(Slight pause.)

MAX

You wanna get a beer?

JONATHAN holds up his hand, shakes his head.

Jonny, listen to me. I may be your back-up quarterback, but I can take you to the Superbowl. Look at Tom Brady.

JONATHAN

You don't have the talent, Max.

MAX

No, no, I'm good, I'm just not perfect.

JONATHAN

Max—

MAX

Like your hamburger. Ten years, and I still can't grill a goddam hamburger to your satisfaction. In my own backyard! Perfection is your

MAX (CONT.)

cancer. You know that? You will die from it as sure as any guy on three packs a day.

JONATHAN

I will not compromise my standards.

MAX

Tell me this. Have I paid my dues with the Nirvana Community Players?

JONATHAN

Max, please—

MAX

Have I kept this place afloat for years? Have I?

JONATHAN

You have been amazing, you have—

MAX

I've painted sets, I've hauled chairs, I've sold tickets, I've played shit parts no one else wanted, I've given money, I've raised money. Lots of money. Why? Because I believe in us, in the theatre, in you. And all I'm asking for is this one part. Which I would nail. But oh no, you won't even let me read. Because dear old faithful Max is not perfect. Well, Jonny boy, you keep looking. You keep hunting far and wide for your perfect Garry Essendine. And when you still can't find him and we have to cancel the show, don't come crying on my shoulder.

MAX exits. A pause. JONATHAN sits on the chair again, puts his head in his hands. After a moment, MARS enters. He is a muscular and imposing figure dressed in the full regalia of the Roman god of war. He carries a copy of the *Present Laughter* script.

MARS

Are you ready for me?

JONATHAN

Excuse me?

MARS

To read.

And you are...? JONATHAN

Mars. MARS

Mars....? JONATHAN

Just Mars. MARS

As in the planet? JONATHAN

No. MARS

Of course, the Roman god of..er... JONATHAN

War. MARS

Right. Great costume. JONATHAN

It's not a costume. MARS

No? JONATHAN

No. MARS

(Laughing)
That's good, that's very good. JONATHAN

What scene am I reading? MARS

I'm sorry, who are you exactly? JONATHAN

I just told you. MARS

Do you have a resume? JONATHAN

You didn't learn about me in school?
(Beat.) MARS

The thing is, we're actually done auditioning. JONATHAN

But you've haven't cast the lead. MARS

I have someone in mind. JONATHAN

That's not what Max told me. MARS

I don't care what...What did Max tell you? Exactly? JONATHAN

He said you were still looking, and I'd be perfect for the part. MARS

Did he? JONATHAN

How about Gary's speech to Daphne on page ten? MARS

Mister Mars— JONATHAN

Mars. Just Mars. MARS

This is not a good idea. JONATHAN

MARS

(With a hint of threat)
Oh, it is. It's a very good idea.
(Beat.)

JONATHAN

Fine. Whenever you're ready.

MARS opens the script and reads the same
Garry Essendine speech. He's good.

MARS

"Listen to me, my dearest. You're not in love with me—the real me.
You're in love with an illusion, the illusion that I gave you when you saw
me on the stage. Last night I ran the risk of breaking that dear young
illusion for ever"—

JONATHAN

(Interrupting)
Thank you.

MARS

You want me to—?

JONATHAN

No, no, that's fine.

MARS

I mean, I could—

JONATHAN

I'm all set.

MARS

That's it?

JONATHAN

For now.

MARS

Great. Oh, and I have no conflicts.

JONATHAN chuckles in spite of himself.

Did I say something funny?

JONATHAN

No, no, it's nothing.

MARS

Please, do share.

JONATHAN

The god of war has no conflicts.

They laugh.

MARS

I meant in terms of rehearsals.

JONATHAN

Mister....Mars. You don't have the part yet.

MARS

Sure I do.

JONATHAN

No, you see, it's a process, I have other people to see before I...Oh my God, look at the time!

(Folding up the chair)

We better get out of here or we'll be locked in for the night. Mister Parsons, the school janitor, he's merciless.

MARS

Like Jupiter.

JONATHAN

Yes.

MARS

I'm looking forward to working with you. I hear you're a great director. A perfectionist, but I like that. Makes for a quality show.

JONATHAN

(Starting to exit)

We need to go.

MARS

We need to talk about Operation Broken Wind.

JONATHAN stops and turns.

JONATHAN

Excuse me?

MARS

Operation Broken Wind.

JONATHAN

I have no idea what you're talking about.

MARS

Now that is disappointing. Cliché is the bane of the theatre. Don't you think?

JONATHAN

Who are you?

MARS

Your best hope and your worst nightmare.

JONATHAN

Who are you?

MARS

No, no, your next line is: What do you want?

JONATHAN

Okay. What do you want?

MARS

I want to be in your show. I want to play Garry Essendine. I want to be the preening, self-centered, self-absorbed actor. The celebrity with stars in his eyes and the world at his feet. Oh, and I will kill for the part. As the saying goes.

(Beat.)

JONATHAN

You know, you are quite convincing.

MARS

I try to be.

JONATHAN

No, no, I mean it. You have a commanding presence, good timing, intelligent delivery.

MARS

Thank you.

JONATHAN

You're just not right for the part.

MARS

You want the whole world to know about you and Broken Wind?

JONATHAN

My intestinal problems are hardly a secret.

MARS

A word of advice. Don't tell them about me or they'll think you're the leak.

JONATHAN

Mister Parsons does not mess around.

MARS

Breach of national security.

JONATHAN

He'll call the police—

MARS

You'll be fired faster than one of your Haymaker missiles—

JONATHAN

Good night.

MARS

And then you'd go to jail.

JONATHAN

(Heading for the exit)

Good night.

MARS

I also know about you and Arlene.

JONATHAN stops and turns. Beat.

MARS (CONT.)

You could lose your job, your family, your lover, and your freedom. And for what?

The lights fade.