

ORBITING MARS

By Peter Snoad

Synopsis

The wealthy suburb of Nirvana, California is home to a nuclear weapons production plant as well as the Nirvana Community Players. The local thespians have long dreamed of winning the annual award for the state's best community theatre production. And this year artistic director Jonathan Sinclair—whose day job is designing missiles—is certain they will finally triumph with Noel Coward's *Present Laughter*. The one problem is the lead role. After auditioning 13 hopefuls, Jonathan still hasn't found his Garry Essendine, the matinee idol at the center of Coward's classic comedy.

Enter a man dressed as Mars, the Roman god of war. He wants to read for the part but won't give his real name. And he blackmails Jonathan into casting him as Essendine, threatening to expose him for cheating on his wife and for participating in Operation Broken Wind, a secret CIA project aimed at provoking America's next war. Desperate to save his career and his marriage—and to stay out of jail—Jonathan tries to convince the other core members of the theatre company that Mars, always in full regalia and answering to no other name, is perfect for the lead role in *Present Laughter*. Naturally, it's a tough sell. Is Mars crazy? A terrorist? Or just a harmless eccentric with identity issues?

But Mars' charm and personal magnetism are persuasive. He's soon a local celebrity, inspiring high school students with classes and skits on Roman mythology. The clincher is a movie deal: a major studio has apparently decided to film the Nirvana Community Players' production of *Present Laughter*, with Mars in the leading role, as "reality theatre". The actors are thrilled—they could be stars! Never mind that they'll be performing a new play, written by Mars and bearing little resemblance to the original. Jonathan hates the new "adaptation", entitled *Present Slaughter*, and vows to quit. But fear of exposure by Mars compels him to continue as director.

With movie and TV cameras on hand, *Present Slaughter* opens to a packed house at the Nirvana High School. Set in Roman times, the play features Mars as a vain and sexually impotent Caesar obsessed with fighting imperial wars. In the first scene, his daughter questions the social costs of his endless warmongering, and an angry Caesar stabs her to death. The "murder" is only too real, and it appears that Jonathan's teenage daughter, Hope, who played the part, is actually dead. Pandemonium ensues. Waving a bloody dagger, Mars reveals that Jonathan is complicit in an imminent and much greater slaughter of innocents: Operation Broken Wind. Mars is about to identify those who have authorized the project at the highest levels of government. But before he can name names, he is shot dead by a CIA agent who has entered the hall.

The final scene finds Jonathan at home, awaking from a bad dream. Hope tells him there's a man outside to see him. He's dressed in, like, a gladiator suit....

CHARACTERS: (Requires a minimum of 4 women and 4 men. The numbers in parentheses denote the roles to be played by the same actor.)

JONATHAN SINCLAIR, a nuclear weapons engineer and artistic director of Nirvana Community Players, late 30's to 40's.

ANNE SINCLAIR, marketing executive, Jonathan's wife, late 30's to 40's

HOPE SINCLAIR, their daughter, 16 (1)

MARS (2)

ARLENE KLEIN, public relations executive, 30's to 40's (3)

MAX KLEIN, military contractor, Arlene's husband, 40's to 50's (4)

GARDENIA HOGG, a member of the Nirvana Community Players, 50's-plus (5)

STEFAN FORTUNATO, member of the Nirvana Community Players, 20's to 30's (6)

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)

Note: 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" (e.g. the same actor should play both ARLENE KLEIN and ARLENA VIRGINIA.)

SET: A single set: Most of the play takes place in the living room of the Sinclairs' shome. 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.

