

ORBITING MARS

A comedy

by

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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);

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 minimal representational sets) in the high school auditorium, a motel bedroom, a corporate office, and the patio of a country club bar.

## 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

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

Really?

JERRY

I have to speak sotto voce—

JONATHAN

Of course—

JERRY

It's a habit, and, you know, it's hard to—

JONATHAN

Okay, but this guy, Gary Essendine, he's loud—

JERRY

Projection, I know, I know—

JONATHAN

And he's vain, he's demonstrative, and he's 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. 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. Was that a wild night or what! And you were dancing up a storm!

JONATHAN

Jerry—

JERRY

With that woman, the one with the dark hair and the bangles, God, is she hot. What's her name?

JONATHAN

Jerry, I've got other people waiting.

JERRY

Arlene! That's it, Arlene. And she was not your wife, ooh no, that was crystal clear. But don't worry, my lips are sealed.

JONATHAN

Thanks for coming in.

JERRY

You know what your problem is? You're blind. You don't know talent when it stares you in the face.

JONATHAN

It's not a question of—

JERRY

You think I suck.

JONATHAN

You're not right for the part.

JERRY

I could do this standing on my head!

JONATHAN

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

JERRY

Fuck “Oklahoma”! This is my role. Noel Coward wrote this 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. 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 no, you won’t be. Never. Ever!

He exits. JONATHAN sighs wearily. He screws up JERRY’s resume into a ball, and tosses it away in frustration. His cell phone rings. He answers it. It’s his wife, ANNE.

JONATHAN

Hi honey... 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

That guy. He’s banging his head on the wall and screaming like a banshee. “You wrote it for me, Noel, you wrote it for me!”

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 and not one was even close.

MAX

Better than "The Sound of Music".

JONATHAN

Max, please—

MAX

Seventeen Mother Superiors couldn't satisfy you. Seventeen!

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! He must think I'm an idiot. Take a look at this.

He picks up the ball of paper from the floor and hands it to MAX.

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

MAX

You know there's big bucks in this.

JONATHAN

What?

MAX

Creative resumes for wannabes. There's this woman in Sausalito—a playwright, terrible, just awful—she started out tweaking resumes for friends, and word got around, and before you know it, she's swamped, can't keep up with the demand. Started 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'd win, 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

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, I mean—

MAX

Jonny—

JONATHAN

People said our "Music Man" was the best they'd ever seen, better than Broadway, but oh no, the Bakersfield Drama Club was due. Politics! Well, not this year, no, no, no, this year justice will finally be done. 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 use that word, please—

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

What did they say?

JONATHAN

Max—

MAX

“Max Klein turned in a solid performance”.

JONATHAN

Stolid.

MAX

What?

JONATHAN

They said it was stolid.

MAX

No! Solid. A SOLID performance. It was complimentary is all I’m saying.

JONATHAN

Sure it was, absolutely—

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

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 guy 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—

MAX 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.

MAX lunges for the script. They tussle for it.

JONATHAN

(Overlapping)  
Max, please—

MAX

(Overlapping)  
Let me read and I'll show you—

JONATHAN

(Overlapping)  
There's no point—

MAX

(Overlapping)  
I can do this!—

JONATHAN

(Finally securing hold of the script)  
No, Max, NO! Look, it's nothing personal.

MAX

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

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

Let's go get a beer.

JONATHAN shakes his head.

MAX

You know what your problem is?

JONATHAN

I'm a perfectionist.

MAX

Okay, tell me this. Have I paid my dues with the Nirvana Community Players, have I?

JONATHAN

Max, please—

MAX

I have kept this place afloat for years. 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 – a lot of money. I have bailed you out more times than you've had hot dinners. Why? Because I believe in us, in the theatre, in you. And all I'm asking for now is this one part. Which I would nail. But, 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. Pause. 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.	
	JONATHAN
And you are...?	
	MARS
Mars.	
	JONATHAN
Mars....?	
	MARS
Just Mars.	
	JONATHAN
As in the planet.	
	MARS
No.	
	JONATHAN
Of course, the Roman god of, er...	

War.

MARS

Right. Great costume.

JONATHAN

This is not a costume.

MARS

No?

JONATHAN

No.

MARS

That's good, that's very good.

JONATHAN

What do you want me to read?

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

JONATHAN

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

MARS

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

JONATHAN

Did he?

MARS

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

JONATHAN

Mister Mars—

MARS

Mars. Just Mars.

JONATHAN

This is not a good idea.

MARS

Oh, it is 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

Thank you.

MARS

Do you want me to—?

JONATHAN

No, no, that's fine.

MARS

I thought maybe his scene with—

JONATHAN

I'm all set.

MARS

Okay. So...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 and production dates.

JONATHAN

Of course. The thing is Mister....Mars. You don't have the part yet.

MARS

Sure I do.

JONATHAN

No, you don't. This is a process, I have other people to consider before we, er...Oh my God, look at the time! We better get out of here or we'll be locked in for the night. Mister Parsons, the school janitor, he's merciless.



Like Jupiter.

MARS

Yes.

JONATHAN

I gotta say, I am really looking forward to working with you.

MARS

We need to go.

JONATHAN

We need to talk about Operation Broken Wind.

MARS

Excuse me?

JONATHAN

Operation Broken Wind.

MARS

I have no idea what you're talking about.

JONATHAN

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

MARS

Who are you?

JONATHAN

Your best hope and your worst nightmare.

MARS

Who are you?

JONATHAN

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

MARS

Okay. What do you want?

JONATHAN

MARS

I want to be in your show. I want to play Garry Essendine. I want to be the vain, preening, self-absorbed actor, the celebrity with stars in his eyes and the world at his feet. And I will kill for the part.

(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—

MARS

Breach of national security.

JONATHAN

—Does not mess around.

MARS

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

JONATHAN

He'll call the police. Good night.

MARS

And then you'll go to jail.

JONATHAN ignores him and heads for the exit.

I also know about you and Arlene.

JONATHAN stops and looks at MARS. Beat.

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

The lights fade.

ACT ONE  
SCENE TWO

The living room of the Sinclairs' suburban McMansion. The following evening. The room has a rigidly clean, almost antiseptic feel. Visible upstage are the first few steps of a flight of stairs leading to the second floor. ANNE SINCLAIR enters from the direction of the kitchen and dining room off left. She's dressed like the corporate executive she is. She carries a glass of white wine. She is just back from her office at the end of a long day.

ANNE

(Calling up the stairs)

Hope!

(Beat. Louder)

Honey? Are you there?

No response. ANNE goes to the couch, sits down kicks of her shoes, and takes a sip of wine. After a moment, HOPE comes running down the stairs. Her dress is thrift-store chic. She sports a tattoo or two and several piercings.

Hey there. How was school?

HOPE

I'm going to Lesley's.

ANNE

How's the homework situation?

HOPE

Have you seen my I-Pod? It was here.

HOPE starts searching between the pillows of the couch. ANNE stands up to get out of her way.

ANNE

What do you have?

HOPE

Did you move it?

ANNE

You have that history quiz to prepare for, right?

HOPE

Test, Mom, it's a test. Where the fuck is it? You're always cleaning up.

ANNE

It's probably in your room, sweetie. What else besides history?

JONATHAN enters. He wears a business suit and carries a briefcase. He is also returning from the office.

JONATHAN

Hi. How was school?

HOPE ignores him, and hurls down a pillow in frustration.

HOPE

Jesus!

JONATHAN

Language, please. How was school?

No response. HOPE continues searching.

How was school?

HOPE

I had a wonderful day. How about you, Dad? Design any nice new shiny missiles?

She heads for the stairs to go to her room.

ANNE

You're studying with Lesley, right?

HOPE ignores her and exits.

ANNE (CONT.)

(Calling after her)

Have some dinner before you go. I've got turkey burgers!

Sound of a door slamming.

She's mad at you.

JONATHAN

She's a teenager.

ANNE

She never sees you, you're never home.

JONATHAN

Not now, please—

ANNE

I mean, seriously, between work and the church and your theatre thing—

JONATHAN

I am chair of the Faith in Action Committee. And my theatre “thing” –

ANNE

Keeps you sane. Yes, we know.

JONATHAN

Why is it always my fault? Why am I always the bad guy?

ANNE

Jonathan, listen to yourself. You talk about Hope being immature?

JONATHAN

Oh thanks, that's great, that's just... You know what? I work my butt off for this family twenty-four-seven. Could we maybe focus on that for a change?

ANNE

No. Right now we need to focus on Hope and her needs. If that's okay with you.

JONATHAN is silent.

We have to do something.

JONATHAN

What does her therapist say?

ANNE

We – you and I – have to figure this out.

JONATHAN

So what he's doing for his two hundred dollars an hour?

ANNE

She. Her therapist is a woman. The point is Hope is in danger of flunking, C's and D's across the board, she has no interest in anything but her music—

JONATHAN

And her friends. She has some terrific friends.

ANNE

Who are druggies.

JONATHAN

Oh please!

ANNE

You've never met them!

JONATHAN

Hope is too smart to be doing drugs.

ANNE

You don't have a fucking clue, do you? I'm seeing her school counselor again tomorrow, and her therapist.

JONATHAN

I'll come with you. I will.

ANNE

We're close to losing her, Jonathan. She is about to fall off a cliff.

(Beat.)

You want some wine?

JONATHAN

Sure.

ANNE exits to the kitchen.

ANNE

(Offstage)

Arlene called for you. Something about a Roman god being in your play. I thought she'd been drinking, but it was early, even for her.

ANNE enters, hands him a glass of wine.

JONATHAN  
Thanks. How was your day?

ANNE  
I went to the beach.

JONATHAN  
No, really, how was it?

ANNE  
Jack Salinger came to see me.

JONATHAN  
Jack Salinger came to your office?

ANNE  
I think he's been to charm school for CEOs.

JONATHAN  
What did he want?

ANNE  
I assumed it was about the Hercules five-sixty contract with the Saudis. It is such a mess. But no, he wanted to talk about you.

JONATHAN  
About me?

ANNE  
He asked me how you were doing.

JONATHAN  
Really?

ANNE  
What's going on?

Blackout.



ACT ONE  
SCENE THREE

Lights up immediately on the office of JACK SALINGER at Praetorian International. It is one week earlier. JONATHAN, SALINGER and LEWIS are in conversation.

JONATHAN

You're not serious?

(Beat. They do not respond.)

Jack, that's like asking me to....Wow. I, er...I don't know what to say.

SALINGER

Jonny, we're counting on you.

JONATHAN

But it would be unethical, not to mention illegal. And potentially, I mean...Look, you know me, team player is my middle name, but this, this is, er....Why me?

(To LEWIS)

You must have people who specialize in this kind of thing.

SALINGER

It has to be foolproof.

LEWIS

Tight as a camel's ass in a sandstorm.

SALINGER

(To LEWIS)

No broken wind.

SALINGER and LEWIS laugh.

JONATHAN

Oh no, I don't believe this. You guys! I got to admit, you had me going. You are good, you are very good, you are so good, it's scary!

(He laughs. They are impassive. Slight pause.)

I'm an engineer.

LEWIS

You designed the system. You know it better than anyone.

JONATHAN

Well, yes, but—

SALINGER

Jonny, when it comes to matters of national security, we all have to play our part. It's what we do at Praetorian. It's what we've always done.

JONATHAN

But this is way beyond, I mean... This is a whole different ballgame.

SALINGER

We are guardians of a sacred trust. To keep Americans safe and free.

JONATHAN

Yes, absolutely, but I mean... I mean, what if—?

SALINGER

It's strictly classified and the Agency has our back.

He glances at LEWIS, who gives a confirming nod.  
Beat.

The thing is, Jonny—

JONATHAN

Fine. I'll do it.

SALINGER

Good.

LEWIS

We need it by the nineteenth.

JONATHAN

What?! That's impossible. Have you any idea—?

SALINGER

Do it.

Lights fade.

ACT ONE  
SCENE FOUR

The Sinclairs' living room. Lights up on ANNE and JONATHAN as they resume their earlier conversation.

ANNE

Well?

JONATHAN

I don't know. Maybe Salinger thinks...

ANNE

What?

JONATHAN

Maybe he's concerned about my health. I mean, I have been working like a dog lately, and it's not like I'm easy to replace.

ANNE looks at him, unconvinced. The doorbell rings. She exits to answer it.

ARLENE

(Off stage)

Where is he? I'm sorry, honey, this is an emergency.

ANNE

(Off stage)

No, no, it's fine, come in.

ARLENE enters followed by ANNE.

ARLENE

(To JONATHAN)

What the hell is going on?

JONATHAN

What do you mean?

ANNE

(To ARLENE)

Red?

ARLENE

Please.

ANNE exits.

Max said you've given the part to some guy who thinks he's Jupiter.

JONATHAN

Mars.

ARLENE

Oh, Mars.

JONATHAN

He was just wearing the costume.

ARLENE

To audition for a Noel Coward play?

JONATHAN

Look—

ARLENE

That is weird, that is truly weird.

JONATHAN

I haven't cast him.

ARLENE

Max said you had.

JONATHAN

I'm thinking about it.

ARLENE

What's there to think about? You want to work with some crazy person off the street?

JONATHAN

He can act.

ARLENE

So could the Marquis De Sade. Who is he?

JONATHAN

Who is he?

ARLENE  
What's his name?

JONATHAN  
You mean, his real name?

ARLENE  
Yes, his real name.

JONATHAN  
I don't know.

ARLENE  
You don't know?

JONATHAN  
He's local.

ARLENE  
Like this galaxy?

JONATHAN  
Arlene, he is so right for the part.

ARLENE  
Right? How could he be right? What does he do?

ANNE enters with a glass of red wine and hands it to ARLENE.

JONATHAN  
I don't know, he's an artist or something. He's physically right, he moves well, he has this stentorian voice.

ARLENE  
Stentorian?

JONATHAN  
And there's something about him—a presence, he has this commanding presence, it's, it's....magnetic.

ARLENE  
Like Charles Manson.

ANNE

I'm going to start dinner.  
(To ARLENE)  
You want to stay? It's just turkey burgers.

ARLENE

No thanks, I'm starving.

ANNE looks bemused.

Starvation diet. I'm cleansing.  
(Indicating her wine)  
This is a natural diuretic.

ANNE exits.

JONATHAN

He read very well.

ARLENE

In Martian?

JONATHAN

We need a Garry Essendine.

ARLENE

What's he done?

JONATHAN

Done?

ARLENE

What is this, a language lab? Shows, what shows has he performed in? Aside from "Roman Mars Superstar" and "A Stupid Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum."

JONATHAN

I don't know.

ARLENE

Boy, are you a wealth of information. What does it say on his resume?

JONATHAN

Resumes don't mean anything these days.

ARLENE

They're a clue.

JONATHAN

I'm telling you, he looks good, he sounds good—

ARLENE

And he smells to high heaven. This is a nightmare!

JONATHAN

If you'd heard him read, you'd know why I'm doing this.

ARLENE

So you have made up your mind. You've cast this freak.

JONATHAN

And he is going to be terrific. He will blow you away.

ARLENE

Just so I'm clear about this. We have a real shot at winning the top prize for community theatre in the state of California for the very first time. Which some of us in Nirvana have dreamed of for years. And you have cast as our leading man a guy you hadn't met before yesterday, whose name you don't know, who has no confirmed acting experience, and who walks around pretending he's a Roman god?

JONATHAN

Instinct.

ARLENE

What?

JONATHAN

You've always said I have great artistic instincts, and that's what I'm doing. Trusting my instincts.

ARLENE

You have never been so sure of anything in your life.

JONATHAN

Exactly!

ARLENE

Clichés! That's when I know we're in trouble.

JONATHAN

I need you to convince the others.

ARLENE

Of what?

JONATHAN

That Mars will a great Gary Essendine.

ARLENE

Honey, you need to see someone.

JONATHAN

No!

ARLENE

I can't believe I didn't see this coming. You are so stressed—

JONATHAN

I'm fine.

ARLENE

I'll get you're a referral. Nancy Achtenberg is wonderful, no, no, Cindy Gross—  
Cindy would be great for you. Acupuncture and power meditation and Chinese  
herbs – your chi is obviously way out of balance. I'm going to call her right  
now—

She reaches for her cell phone. JONATHAN grasps  
her wrist and pulls her to him.

JONATHAN

I want you. Now.

ARLENE

(Breathless with desire)

Oh God.

JONATHAN

They listen to you and Max. If you say Mars is right for this—

ARLENE

But I can't, I—

JONATHAN pulls her to him and gives her a  
passionate kiss on the mouth. She melts and  
responds.



ARLENE (CONT.)

You don't really mean this, you're not yourself—

(He kisses her again)

Okay, okay. I'll do it. On one condition.

JONATHAN

What?

ARLENE

That you fuck me stupid every Wednesday afternoon.

JONATHAN

What?!

ARLENE

You don't want to?

JONATHAN

No, no, it's just...I can't always do Wednesdays.

ARLENE

I want it in writing. A contract.

JONATHAN

Honey, that's—

ARLENE

No contract, no Mars.

(Beat.)

JONATHAN

Deal.

ARLENE

And.

JONATHAN

Arlene!

ARLENE

You know me.

(Reaching for his crotch)

I always drive a hard bargain.

He swats her hand away, nervously glancing towards the kitchen.

JONATHAN

What? What do you want?

ARLENE

Tell me why you're doing this.

The doorbell rings.

Tell me!

HOPE flies down the stairs. ARLENE and JONATHAN spring apart. HOPE exits to answer the front door.

Well?

JONATHAN

I told you. He's perfect for the part.

HOPE re-enters.

HOPE

(To JONATHAN)

There's a guy outside in a gladiator suit. He says he knows you.

ARLENE

Oh my God he's here, what's he doing here?

JONATHAN

(To HOPE)

It's Mars.

HOPE

He's not a fucking candy bar.

JONATHAN

No, he's the Roman god of war. Tell him to come in. And watch your language. Please.

HOPE exits. MARS enters. He is wearing his usual Roman god regalia and a sheathed sword. He is followed by HOPE.

MARS

Jonathan! Good to see you again.

HOPE goes back upstairs.

She's a lovely young woman, you must be very proud.

JONATHAN

This is a surprise.

MARS

Pardon the intrusion. I just had to drop by and thank you in person.

JONATHAN

Thank me?

MARS

For giving me the part.

JONATHAN

But I haven't, I told you—

MARS

We are going to be a great team.

(To ARLENE)

You must be Anne.

ARLENE

Arlene.

MARS

Oh, I'm sorry, Arlene. I'm Mars.

ARLENE

Pleased to meet you.

MARS

The pleasure is all mine.

(He kisses her hand.)

You're Max's wife.

ARLENE

Yes.

MARS

And you're an actress.

ARLENE

Now and then, here and there.

JONATHAN

She's terrific.

MARS

I bet she is. And we'll be working together, right?

JONATHAN

If you get the part.

ARLENE

(To JONATHAN)

But he has, you just told me.

JONATHAN

Yes, well I—

MARS

Good news travels fast.

ARLENE

I'm playing Joanna.

MARS

My femme fatale. This is going to be such fun.

ARLENE

I've never acted with a god before.

MARS

No? I thought the American theatre was full of them.

They all laugh.

ARLENE

Can you promise me the experience will be simply divine?

JONATHAN

I'm sure that—

MARS

(Overlapping, as Gary Essendine)  
Heavenly, darling. Absolutely heavenly.

ARLENE

It better be, because we're counting on you to help us win the Shooting Star this year. Did Jonathan tell you?

MARS

This is the play, this is the year.

ARLENE

You seem very confident.

MARS

Gods usually are.

JONATHAN

Yes, well the mere mortals among us get quite exhausted at the end of a long day—

ANNE enters, wearing a kitchen apron and carrying a spatula.

ANNE

Who wants a turkey burger—?

The sight of MARS stops ANNE in mid-sentence.

JONATHAN

Darling, this is Mars.

(To MARS)

My wife, Anne.

MARS

You have her eyes.

ANNE

Excuse me?

MARS

And don't tell me, you play the cello.

ANNE

Not since college.

MARS

The resemblance is remarkable.

ANNE

Resemblance?

MARS

Minerva. Patron goddess of musicians, craftsmen, and doctors. Are you a doctor, too?

ANNE

I have a Masters in international business.

MARS

Minerva is also a warrior-goddess.

ANNE

Really? Mister Mars—

JONATHAN

Mars. It's just Mars.

ANNE

Well, Mars, we're about to sit down to dinner—

(To JONATHAN)

Darling, will you call Hope?

JONATHAN

I thought she was going to Lesley's.

ANNE

(To MARS)

I'd love for you to join us, but unfortunately—

JONATHAN

(Calling up the stairs)

Hope! Dinner!

ANNE

—We only have three turkey burgers.

MARS

That is too bad.

ANNE

Another time.

MARS

Methinks I hear the sound of broken wind.

ANNE

Excuse me?

JONATHAN

(To ANNE)

Honey, we can't send Mars away, he just got here.

(To MARS)

Stay for dinner. Please.

ANNE

We don't have enough food.

JONATHAN

He can have my turkey burger, I'll have a salad or something—

ANNE

We're out of salad.

JONATHAN

I'll have a yogurt.

ARLENE

Maybe I'll stick around, too, since I don't eat.

ANNE

Fine.

(To MARS)

Can I take your sword?

MARS

That's very kind of you.

He unbuckles his sword and hands it to ANNE. She staggers under its weight.

Oh, I'm sorry. Are you okay?

ANNE

Yeah, I'm fine.

Good.

MARS

ARLENE

(To MARS)

Let me get you a glass of wine.

She takes his arm and leads him towards the kitchen.

You do drink wine, right?

MARS

Bacchus has the best.

ARLENE

Of course, I forgot.

They exit to the kitchen. ANNE drops the sword and grabs the cordless phone.

JONATHAN

What are you doing?

ANNE

What do you think I'm doing? I'm calling the police.

JONATHAN

(Grabbing her arm)

Don't make a fool of yourself.

ANNE

He's a terrorist!

JONATHAN

Dressed like that?

ANNE

Fine, he's a homicidal maniac.

JONATHAN

That's absurd—

ANNE

He thinks he's the god of war and he's wearing a sword!



JONATHAN

(Wrestling the phone from her, eluding her)

He is a guest in our house.

ANNE

Give me the phone.

JONATHAN

No.

HOPE enters, descending the stairs. She stands and watches the altercation. Her parents are unaware of her presence.

ANNE

What is the matter with you?! The guy is nuts!

JONATHAN

Mars is staying for dinner.

ANNE

“Methinks I hear the sound of broken wind.”

ANNE lunges at JONATHAN. They fall over the couch and onto the floor, as ANNE tries vainly to yank the phone away from JONATHAN.

JONATHAN

Stop it! What is the matter with you?

ANNE

(Overlapping)

Give it to me!

JONATHAN scrambles to his feet, still holding the phone, and moves away from ANNE. ANNE grabs the sword and advances towards JONATHAN.

Give it to me.

JONATHAN

Never!

ANNE

(Jabbing the sword)  
Give. Me. The. Fucking. Phone.

He retreats until he is backed against the wall and ANNE has the tip of the sword on his neck.

HOPE  
(To ANNE, matter-of-factly)  
Mom. Use your cell phone. Duh.

ANNE  
(Putting down the sword, adjusting her clothing)  
Of course. I don't know why I didn't think of that.

JONATHAN  
(To HOPE)  
It's okay, sweetie, really, we were just, you know, fooling around, in a manner of speaking—

HOPE says nothing.

ANNE  
(To HOPE)  
You want a turkey burger?

JONATHAN  
Food, yes, that's a great idea. Let's eat.

ARLENE and MARS, conversing intimately, enter carrying glasses of wine.

ARLENE  
Really? That many in one night?

MARS  
Well, her name is Voluptia.

ARLENE  
Oh hi, Hope, how you doing, honey? How's school?

MARS  
(To HOPE, in Latin)  
Dic ei ludum sugere. (Tell her school sucks.)

HOPE

Dulce! (Cool!)  
(To ARLENE)  
Ludus magis sugit. (School really sucks.)

ARLENE, ANNE and JONATHAN are  
dumbfounded.

ANNE  
You speak Latin.

HOPE  
Cantonese.

MARS  
(To HOPE)  
Nunc illa difficillima lingua est. (Now that's a tough language.)

HOPE  
Nihil excrementi! (No shit!)

They laugh.

JONATHAN  
What was that? What did you just say?

ANNE  
Honey, why didn't you tell us? This is wonderful.

ARLENE  
Amazing.

JONATHAN  
She's always had A's or B's in Latin.

ANNE  
Well, yes, but—

HOPE  
(To MARS)  
Atque D's in ceteris omnibus! (And D's in everything else!)

HOPE and MARS laugh.

JONATHAN  
What, what?

HOPE

I said I get D's in everything else.

ANNE

That's not true, honey—

MARS

(To JONATHAN and ANNE)

You know how many fluent Latin speakers there are in America? In the world?  
Your daughter is a gem, a rare and precious gem.

(To HOPE)

Hope, you are music to my ears.

HOPE

Et illi vocant eam linguam mortam esse! (And they call it a dead language!)

They laugh again.

Do you speak Greek, too? Classical Greek?

MARS

Sure.

HOPE

Oh man!

ANNE

Really?

MARS

I'm functional. You have to be in Rome.

JONATHAN

Like Spanish in Miami.

HOPE

(To JONATHAN, as if he's an idiot)

No.

(To MARS)

Can you teach me?

MARS

I could.

HOPE

Can we start right now?

ANNE  
Honey, I don't think—

HOPE  
Carpe diem.

ANNE  
It's dinner time.

HOPE  
I hate fucking turkey burgers.

JONATHAN  
(To HOPE)  
Go to your room.

HOPE  
What?!

JONATHAN  
I will not tolerate profanities in this house.

MARS  
I'm sorry, it's my fault, I'm a terrible role model. We Romans are such potty mouths, and Latin brings out the worst in us. Please forgive me.

(To HOPE)  
You know what, Hope? I'd love to teach you Greek, but unfortunately, I can't.

HOPE  
Why not?

MARS  
Your Mom thinks I'm nuts.

ANNE  
I do not.

MARS  
I don't blame you. Guy shows up on your doorstep and says he's the Roman  
god of war. Believe me, I'd be calling nine-one-one, too.

ANNE  
In Latin?

MARS

Or Greek.

ANNE

Do you like turkey burgers?

MARS

Never had them, but I'm game.

JONATHAN

He's game! How about that? Game, right? As in hunting?—

HOPE

Yeah, Dad, we get it.

(To MARS)

Asinus est. (He is such an asshole.)

She takes MARS by the arm and leads  
him towards the kitchen/dining room exit.

What's the Greek for ketchup?

MARS

I'll have to think about that.

They exit. ANNE follows.

JONATHAN

(To ARLENE)

Did you see that? He was brilliant. He owned that scene! Totally owned it. I'm  
telling you, we have got ourselves a winner.

ARLENE

I hope so.

They exit as the lights fade.

ACT ONE

SCENE FIVE

A motel room. On a Wednesday. ARLENE and JONATHAN are in bed.

ARLENE

(Caressing him hungrily)

God, I want more and more and more of you...

JONATHAN

I can't, not again.

ARLENE

Short-hitter. I bet Mars could.

JONATHAN

Yeah, well, he's a god. Oh God, what am I doing? I mean, this is a date, we're having a date in a motel room. This is just...

ARLENE

Do you think he wears that helmet when he fucks? Screws.

JONATHAN

What?

ARLENE

Well, he wears it all the time. And that big sword.

JONATHAN

Honey, listen to me—

ARLENE

You were right about him. He is magnetic.

JONATHAN

Yes. Yes, he is.

ARLENE

Anne had the same reaction.

JONATHAN

You discussed Mars with my wife?

ARLENE

She happens to have excellent taste in men. I don't know what it is exactly, but he just...He gives you this feeling of security, of safety. Nothing bad can possibly happen, and if it does, no problem, he'll take care of it. It's so primitive. And so sexy.

JONATHAN

It's just a costume.

ARLENE

Oh my God.

JONATHAN

What?

ARLENE

He'll want to wear it in the play. The costume.

JONATHAN

Oh sure.

ARLENE

No, no, it's him, it's his identity.

JONATHAN

He's not that crazy.

ARLENE

How do you know?

JONATHAN

He's eccentric. He has a Mars fetish. We all have our little quirks.

ARLENE

Yes, but dressing like that all the time? In this weather? And why us? He could have picked any theatre anywhere. And why this play? Sweetie, you've got to admit, the whole thing is very bizarre. And we still don't know anything about him, not even his real name.

JONATHAN

He's the right choice.

ARLENE

How can you say that, really, I mean—?



JONATHAN

I need you to be with me on this.

ARLENE

Or what, you're gonna dump me?

(Beat. He says nothing. She pulls his hand onto her body.)

You mortal sinner you, you are going to hell for me. What more could a woman ask?

JONATHAN

Don't mock my faith.

ARLENE

I wasn't, honey, really—

JONATHAN

I am a moral person. I am. Fundamentally. I mean, we all struggle with our contradictions.

ARLENE

Of course, you're only human.

JONATHAN

Yes, but look at me, here, with you, in this godforsaken dump.

ARLENE

You don't like it?

JONATHAN

I love it, that's the point!

ARLENE

Faith in action.

(He glares at her)

Sorry.

(Slight pause. She caresses him consolingly)

What is it, baby? What's going on?

JONATHAN

I want you to find out about him.

ARLENE

What do you mean?

JONATHAN

Everything. Real name, family, friends, employment history, political affiliation, the works.

ARLENE

You're kidding, right?

JONATHAN

No, I am not kidding.

ARLENE

Jonny—

JONATHAN

You do public relations for one of the largest defense corporations in the world. You could find a pin in the desert if you had to.

ARLENE

Why?

JONATHAN

Why?! To protect our investment. We've got to know who we're dealing with. Like you said, it's bizarre that we don't.

ARLENE

There's something you're not telling me.

JONATHAN

A name. At the very least we need a name. We can't keep calling him Mars, people will think we're from another planet! Imagine picking up the program on opening night and seeing that Garry Essendine is being played by "Mars".

ARLENE

You cast this guy, and now you want to know all about him?

JONATHAN

I didn't want to lose him. Look—

ARLENE

He's got something on you.

JONATHAN

What?

ARLENE

I knew it, I knew it.

JONATHAN

Sweetie—

ARLENE

You can tell me, okay? Whatever it is, you can tell me.

JONATHAN

Tell you what? That the Roman god of war is blackmailing me?

ARLENE

Is he?

JONATHAN

Of course, I did a secret arms deal with the Carthaginians. Honey, there's a lot at stake here—

ARLENE

I understand that.

JONATHAN

So we need to know about this guy. I'm not saying he's a dope dealer or an ax murderer—

ARLENE

You think he could be?

JONATHAN

No, no, nothing like that, I'm sure he's quite harmless. But whatever skeletons he has in his closet, we need to know about them.

(Beat.)

ARLENE

Methinks I hear the sound of broken wind.

JONATHAN

(Laughing)

It must be you, it wasn't me.

ARLENE

What did he mean by that?

JONATHAN

It's a fart joke. You heard him. The Romans were potty mouths.

ARLENE  
And the gods, too?

JONATHAN  
Minds like sewers.

ARLENE  
He didn't say it to be funny.

JONATHAN  
Of course he did.

ARLENE  
No, he didn't.  
(A slight pause.)

JONATHAN  
Do you ever see yourself doing something else?

ARLENE  
What?

JONATHAN  
You know, with your life?

ARLENE  
You're not thinking of leaving Praetorian?

JONATHAN  
Not right this minute.

ARLENE  
Not ever. You can't, baby, I mean, it's you, it's your thing. Remember what you said to me? God has a plan for each and every one of us. He made you a designer of great big beautiful missiles for a reason. And he made you fall in love with me. For a reason.

JONATHAN  
I'd like to work in an animal shelter.

ARLENE  
You're allergic to my goldfish. Oh baby, you are so—

JONATHAN  
Promise me.

ARLENE

What?

JONATHAN

Promise me that you will find out everything you can about Mars.

ARLENE

Sure.

JONATHAN

Say it!

ARLENE

Okay, okay. Jesus!

He looks at her disapprovingly.

I promise, as the Lord is my witness, that I will investigate Mister Mars with all due diligence and speed. Okay?

JONATHAN

And you'll convince the others that Mars is our man. As per our contract.

ARLENE

Honey—

JONATHAN

And starting with Max, because if we get Max on board—

ARLENE

Shhhh, sweetie, sweetie, sweetie, I'll take care of it. Come here. Come to Mama....

She envelops him hungrily, as the lights fade.