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The Rehearsal

Joyce Carol Oates

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The Rehearsal

JOYCE CAROL OATES

CAST

WOMAN/ACTRESS, approximate age 25–30

MAN/ACTOR, several years older than ACTRESS

DIRECTOR (amplified voice), male, authoritarian

Center stage is a “stage set” of a living room; stage left, a space to be used by the actors for their break. This space contains a small table with a bottle of Evian water or coffee-making equipment on it; a few cups, napkins; the “script” for the play.

Obviously, this rehearsal is not realistic; yet, so far as most audiences could know, it should seem authentic. The invisible DIRECTOR is offstage, and might be imagined as sitting in the rear row of the theater.

LIGHTS UP, though not fully. We see a minimally furnished living room: sofa, a chair or two, lamp. A glass-topped coffee table scattered with magazines, newspapers. On one wall, a handsome framed Metropolitan Museum poster commemorating a Magritte exhibit.

Door opens. The WOMAN enters, accompanied by the MAN, who holds her upper arm (in affection? out of possessiveness? to steady her?); he releases her and she advances haltingly into the room, glancing about. She is a strikingly beautiful young woman with long straight sleek hair; dressed for a party, in a long skirt; she wears a fringed shawl over her shoulders. Conspicuous earrings, rings. WOMAN is cold; hugs herself.

The MAN shuts, locks, double-bolts the door with an air of finality. When he turns on the light switch the lamp comes on and LIGHTS UP fully.

The MAN is good-looking in a “charismatic” way. He wears a suede or leather jacket, a turtleneck sweater. He is intelligent but ironic; a man of only moderate, thus frustrating, success.

MAN (*rubbing hands together briskly, regarding WOMAN's back*): Well! That was a party! No doubt about it—that was a party. (*Whistles through his teeth*) The champagne!—the flowers!—the view of the river!—the jumbo shrimp, of which I devoured eleven! Those people really know how to get it on. (*Prodding, undercurrent of anger as he regards her*) Is that what you're thinking too, darling?

WOMAN (*slowly, hesitantly*): You know I—

MAN (*as if unhearing, bemused*): I've been living in New York since the age of nineteen but it's always new to me. Always surprises! Like this party where suddenly I'm shaking hands—kissing cheeks!—with the very rich. I'm their *equal*—we're all one another's *equal*—chatting about politics, the arts—all *equal*. (*Pause, then lightly to conceal bitterness*) While the party lasts.

MAN *waits for WOMAN's response, but she withdraws into herself.*

MAN: Great for the ego to see yourself perceived by the very rich as an *equal*—while the party lasts. 'You've done such wonders with that little theater of yours'—'We do so *admire* you all'—'Such dedication!' (*Executes a graceful softshoe, then in a crafty tone*) How casually then I let fall to Mrs. Sol Silverstein that our NEA grant for next year covers only 45% of our budget—those eyes of ferocity and beauty and patrician good taste flashed upon me—she seized my hand—(*demonstrates*)—and said, 'Call me Monday morning, we'll have lunch.' (*Pause*) Mmmm—most erotic words in the English language—(*Husky, seductive voice*) 'Call me Monday morning, we'll have lunch.'

MAN *pats jacket pocket, a surprised, sly expression on his face.*

MAN (*drawing a jumbo shrimp out of the pocket and holding it aloft*): Ooops!—one last shrimp. (*Eats it, sensuously*) Crustaceans are delicious once their antennae are removed. (*Pats the other pocket, discovers another shrimp*) Uh-oh: *this* is the last. (*Holds the shrimp out to the WOMAN, who shakes her head, no. He eats it, as before.*)

MAN *removes his jacket and tosses it onto the sofa. Approaches the WOMAN slowly and deliberately. She take a step or two backward. A tense moment—yet the MAN chooses to behave as if there is nothing wrong.*

MAN: You did want to come back— *(Pause, as if he's about to say "home")*—here with me, didn't you? Or did you have other plans?

WOMAN *(defiantly)*: I was ready to leave the party an hour ago. You know that.

The MAN removes the WOMAN's shawl from her shoulders; in so doing, he embraces her impulsively from behind and buries his face in her neck. The WOMAN shudders, pushes away. She has reacted instinctively.

MAN *(ironically)*: Well! Sorry.

WOMAN: No, no—I'm sorry. *(Hands through hair, nervously)* I don't know what's wrong with me.

The MAN crumples the shawl in his fists; after a beat or two he realizes what he's doing, and lays it carefully across the back of a chair. Smooths it with his fingers.

MAN *(meaning the shawl)*: Pretty.

WOMAN: I didn't even want to go to the party. You were the one.

MAN: But, once there, as always, in others' admiring eyes—you generated quite an aura.

WOMAN *(speaking precisely)*: Because, look, you wanted to go—I wanted to do what *you* wanted. But— *(Laughs at this absurdity)*—I didn't *want* to do it.

MAN: Like hell. You said you wanted to go. Right here— *(Checks watch)*—three hours and eight minutes ago.

WOMAN: Because you'd have been angry otherwise.

MAN: Angry? Me? Don't tell me my own fucking emotions.

WOMAN *(a sudden wild laugh)*: Why not? why not? You're always telling me mine.

MAN: Someone has to. You're so blind, yourself.

The WOMAN moves as if to leave the room, and the MAN seizes her arm to stop her.

WOMAN (*slapping at him, voice rising*): Don't! don't! don't! don't! leave me alone!

They struggle together; the MAN manages to fold the WOMAN in his embrace, as in a straitjacket. But the WOMAN reacts desperately, sobbing, hyperventilating—and the man releases her. The WOMAN loses her balance, falls to her hands and knees.

The rehearsal sequence is abruptly terminated.

As if someone has snapped his fingers, the WOMAN becomes the ACTRESS and the MAN, the ACTOR.

DIRECTOR'S VOICE (*impatient, perplexed*): ("Mary"), what is it?—you've done the same damned thing again.

(The ACTRESS and the ACTOR should be addressed by the names, or the near-names, of the actual actress and actor who are performing the roles. If the exact name isn't desired, the name chosen should sound very like it: "Mary" for "Marie," "Jake" for "Jack," "Carol Ann" for "Carolyn," and so forth.)

ACTRESS, ACTOR look toward the DIRECTOR.

ACTRESS (*upset, apologetic*): I'm sorry! Let me try it again.

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: You're frightened of this man, ("Mary"), he's hurt you in the past and he will probably hurt you again. But you love him.

ACTRESS: I know!

ACTOR (*joking*): You adore me, I'm irresistible. It says so in the script.

ACTRESS laughs heartily, as if to demonstrate how she is not the WOMAN.

ACTRESS (*in an undertone*): I'm dying for a cigarette, that's what's wrong.

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: You love him, you're hypnotized by him. You don't *fight* him.

ACTRESS: I realize that. I got confused. With that, that later scene. I'm sorry.

The ACTRESS and the ACTOR recompose themselves. They shift into their respective roles again but, from this point onward, we are aware of them as actors.

ACTRESS (*a little too forcibly*): "Because, look, you wanted to go—" (*Pause*) No, sorry. Let me, uh—try again. (*Pause*) "Because, look, you wanted to go—I wanted to do what you wanted me to do. But—" (*Has forgotten lines*)

DIRECTOR'S VOICE (*exuding patience*): "Because, look, you wanted to go—I wanted to do what *you* wanted. But—"

ACTRESS (*quickly*): "—I didn't *want* to do it." O.K. (*Prepares to begin again, brushes hair out of face, composes herself*) "Because, look, you wanted to go—I wanted to do what *you* wanted. But—" (*Laughs, not convincingly; laughs again*) —I didn't *want* to do it."

ACTOR: "Like hell. You said you wanted to go. Right here— (*Checks watch*) —three hours and eight minutes ago."

ACTRESS: "Because you'd have been angry otherwise."

ACTOR: "Angry? Me? Don't tell me my own emotions." (*Correcting himself*) "—fucking emotions."

ACTRESS (*overlapping, with a nervous, wild laugh*): "Why not? why not? You're always telling me mine."

ACTOR: "Someone has to, you're so blind, yourself."

The ACTRESS misses her cue and begins to move belatedly. The ACTOR moves to seize her arm. The action is uncoordinated.

ACTRESS (*dissolving in laughter*): Oh! oh shit! This isn't my morning, is it!

ACTOR: ("Mary"), come on. It was terrific at the beginning.

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: Take a few deep breaths, and you're fine. C'mon.

ACTRESS, ACTOR take several deep restorative breaths. They visibly recompose themselves.

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: Let's go back to the beginning, all right? The pacing's a little slow anyway. Exit!

ACTRESS, ACTOR, snatching up their shawl and jacket, exit.

LIGHTS DOWN.

LIGHTS UP, dimly, as before. Door opens; ACTRESS enters; ACTOR close behind her, gripping her upper arm; ACTRESS advances into the room, as before. ACTOR locks door, flicks light switch. (A re-staging of the opening of this play. However it was played originally, it is now played differently. The pacing is certainly faster—though some of the pauses may be longer. Both the ACTRESS and the ACTOR are now self-conscious and trying too hard: we may be aware of their technique. This time through, the dramatic focus is not on the "story" but on the performers.)

ACTOR (rubbing hands together briskly, regarding ACTRESS's back): "Well! That was a party! No doubt about it—that was a party. (Whistles through his teeth) The champagne!—the flowers!—the view of the river!—the jumbo shrimp, of which I devoured eleven! Those people really know how to get it on. (Prodding, as before) Is that what you're thinking too, darling?"

ACTRESS (slowly, hesitantly): "You k-know I—"

ACTOR (cutting her off): I've been living in New York since the age of nineteen but it's always new to me. Always surprises. Like this party where suddenly I'm shaking hands—kissing cheeks!—with the very rich. I'm their equal—we're all one another's equal—chatting about politics, the arts—all equal. (Pause, then lightly, to conceal bitterness) While the party lasts."

ACTOR waits for ACTRESS's response, but she has turned away. Nervous mannerisms, brushes hair out of face, etc.

ACTOR: "Great for the ego to see yourself perceived by the very rich as an equal—while the party lasts. 'You've done such wonders with that little theater of yours'—'We do so admire you all'—'Such dedication!' (Executes a graceful softshoe, then in a crafty tone) How casually then I let

fall to Mrs. Sol Silverstein that our NEA grant for next year covers only 45% of our budget—those eyes of ferocity and beauty and patrician good taste flashed upon me—she seized my hand— (*demonstrates*) — and said, ‘Call me Monday morning, we’ll have lunch.’ (*Pause*) Mmmm— most erotic words in the English language— (*Husky, seductive voice*) ‘Call me Monday morning, we’ll have lunch.’”

ACTOR pats jacket pocket as before, sly expression on his face.

ACTOR (drawing an invisible shrimp out of his pocket): Ooops!—one last shrimp. (*Pretends to eat*) Crustaceans are delicious once their antennae are removed. (*Discovers the second shrimp in his pocket, etc.*) Uh-oh: this is the last one. (*Offers the invisible shrimp to ACTRESS, who, staring at him, fails to respond.*)

ACTOR removes jacket, tosses at the sofa; it slips to the floor. ACTOR approaches ACTRESS who moves awkwardly backward colliding with a chair.

ACTOR: “You *did* want to come back—here—with me—didn’t you? Or did you have other plans?”

ACTRESS (a little too emphatically): “I was ready to leave the party an hour ago. You know that.”

ACTOR comes to remove the shawl from ACTRESS’s shoulders; in so doing, he embraces her from behind, presses his mouth against her throat. The ACTRESS responds with a little cry, clutching at him.

This is not in the script. The ACTRESS immediately acknowledges it, with a snap of her fingers, a repentant gesture.

ACTRESS: No! Wrong. Sorry.

DIRECTOR’S VOICE (overlapping): Wrong move. You *shudder*, and—

ACTRESS (overlapping, quickly): Right! I know! I shudder and step away.

DIRECTOR’S VOICE (overbearing): The playwright says it’s like she has this sexual rush—this orgasm—when he touches her. Right?

ACTRESS, ACTOR exchange glances; roll eyes.

ACTRESS (*undertone*): “Orgasm”—what a lot of shit! (*To DIRECTOR*) Right! That’s right. I *know* that.

DIRECTOR’S VOICE: The playwright has the entire play choreographed. It’s like a ballet. It *is* a ballet. If it’s performed right, it will be beautiful.

ACTRESS, ACTOR (*animatedly*): That’s right! “Beautiful.”

ACTRESS, ACTOR *take several deep breaths to recompose themselves. They begin again, where they’d left off.*

ACTOR *removes the shawl from ACTRESS’S shoulders; embraces her from behind, presses his mouth against her throat. This time she shudders and pushes away. But the moment is spoiled by her sudden coughing.*

There is a pause while the ACTRESS searches for a tissue, to wipe her mouth and eyes; and, in a quick gesture, her throat, where the ACTOR has pressed his mouth. ACTOR waits patiently.

They resume the rehearsal.

ACTOR (*ironically, loudly*): “Well! Sorry.”

ACTRESS: “N-No, no—I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s—what’s wrong with me.”

ACTOR crumples the shawl in his fists but this time holds it against his torso for a beat or two; then, realizing what he’s doing, he smooths it across the back of a chair.

ACTOR: “Pretty.”

ACTRESS (*wavering, speaking sharply*): “I didn’t even want to go to the party! You were the one.”

ACTOR: “But, once there, as always, in others’ admiring eyes—you generated quite an aura.”

ACTRESS (*determined not to stumble, enunciating words*): “Because, look, you wanted to go—I wanted to do what you wanted. But— (*a peal of wild laughter*) —I didn’t *want* to do it.

ACTOR laughs, too. As if about to lose control.

ACTOR: "Like hell! You said you, you wanted to go. Right here— (*a gesture meaning the space about them*) —three hours and eight minutes ago."

ACTRESS: "Because you'd have been angry otherwise."

ACTOR: "Angry? Me? Don't tell me my own fucking emotions!"

ACTRESS (*angry laughter*): "Why not? why not? You're always telling me mine!"

ACTRESS has forgotten to move, to leave the room, ACTOR advances upon her.

ACTOR (*reaching for her arm*): "Someone has to. You're so blind, yourself."

This time they struggle together, and the ACTOR folds the ACTRESS in his tight embrace, the ACTRESS goes limp and does not resist.

A beat or two.

ACTOR: "The first glimpse I had of you, seeing how others, not just men but women, too, were watching you, I thought, 'A woman like that is blind. She is seen, but cannot see.'"

ACTRESS sinks to the floor beside ACTOR, placatingly; clutching at his hands, his knees.

ACTRESS (*desperate, yet "feminine," seductive*): "Don't be angry with me. I *am* blind without you—I see, but I don't understand what I see. Please forgive me . . ."

ACTOR (*as if barely retaining control*): "You did lie, then? About tonight?—the party? And last week—being with your mother, those nights?—was that a lie, too?"

ACTRESS: "No. No."

ACTOR (*shuts his fist in ACTRESS's hair, draws her head back painfully*): "Tonight, the party, you *did* want to go, yes you wanted to go, didn't you?"

ACTRESS: "Yes."

ACTOR: "Because I wanted you to, or because you wanted to—?"

ACTRESS: "Because, because—what you want me to do, *I* want to do—"

ACTOR (*still gripping her hair*): "And what happened?—since I saw, you might as well tell the truth."

ACTRESS: "I—I—"

ACTOR (*overlapping*): "Who was it, what did he say to you?—don't lie."

ACTRESS: "—nothing—"

ACTOR (*overlapping*): "Don't lie."

ACTOR continues to grip ACTRESS's hair, twisting her head back; she tries to defend herself, but ineffectually, using no force of her own.

ACTOR (*baring teeth*): "I saw him, the big man, Silverstein, was it?—or one of his friends?—I saw, I didn't need to hear, I got the picture—I wasn't going to interrupt."

ACTRESS: "No, it wasn't— Don't hurt me—"

ACTOR: "Where'd you go with him? Where'd he take you? I looked around, and you were gone."

ACTRESS: "I wasn't gone, I—"

ACTOR (*overlapping*): "I looked around, there were maybe one hundred people in that fucking living room but not you, not you and not him, where'd he take you?—you think *I'm* blind?"

ACTRESS (*overlapping*): "No, don't, please—"

ACTOR (*as he jerks ACTRESS's head rhythmically*): "Out on the fucking balcony to see the East River by moonlight?—into the fucking hothouse to see the tropical flowers?—into the fucking 'master' bedroom to see the Van Gogh over the bed?" (*ACTRESS sobs, ACTOR releases her and pushes her away, as if in disgust, yet with an air of bemusement too*) "No, you'll tell

me, like the last time: you didn't mean for any of it to happen, it just happened."

ACTRESS is sobbing. Hides her face. ACTOR crouches over her, an arm slung across her shoulders, against her breasts; he peers over her head, toward the audience.

ACTOR: "Not that I want to control you. Not that I will cease to love you. There is only you and me. None of our friends— (a gesture as if to include the audience) —knows, or can guess, how it is between us. (Gripping her tight, in a voice of strange, tender anguish) How. It. Is. Between. Us."

A pause.

DIRECTOR'S VOICE (loud, jarring): O.K. Not bad. Not terrific, but not bad. Let's go back to where he takes hold of her hair. (As ACTRESS, ACTOR rise, reposition themselves) ("Jack"), a little more force this time, passion, not like you're afraid to hurt her, hurting her's the bond, she loves it, right? ("Mary"), I don't want to push but I'm frankly not one hundred percent convinced you're in this role yet.

ACTRESS (defensive, nervous): I have to move at my own pace.

ACTOR (to DIRECTOR): Why don't we do the lines, and smooth out the physical stuff later?

DIRECTOR'S VOICE (pedantic): "In theater of such visceral intensity, language and action, voice and body, are one."

ACTRESS (rubbing her neck, a wry tone): That figures!

DIRECTOR'S VOICE (a bit sharply): You've got a question of interpretation, ("Mary")?

ACTRESS (a sharp reply, disguised by a smile): Oh no, no!—you do the interpretation for me.

ACTOR (to DIRECTOR): Where do we start, her on the floor and me, "You did lie, then?" or—

DIRECTOR: "The first glimpse I had of you."

ACTOR embraces ACTRESS, awkwardly; taking a beat or two to get into position. (Whispering to each other, "Like this—?" "Where was my hand?" "No, like this—" "Like this," etc.)

However the scene was previously played, it is played differently this time.

ACTOR: "The first glimpse I had of you . . . seeing how others, not just men but women, too, were watching you . . . I thought, 'A woman like that is blind. She is *seen*, but cannot *see*.'"

On "blind," ACTRESS sinks to her knees beside ACTOR, clutching placatingly at him.

ACTRESS: "Don't be angry with me. I—I *am b-blind*—"

ACTRESS seems to panic; loses control; wrenches herself away from ACTOR; hides her face in hands.

A startled beat or two of silence.

DIRECTOR'S VOICE (exuding patience): O.K., ("Mary")—we'll break now.

ACTRESS gets to her feet breathless, apologetic; tears in her eyes. She seems to have been pushed to the limit of her endurance but is unwilling to accept the fact, or even to comprehend it.

ACTOR, however, understands: his expression is hurt, guilty, resolved.

ACTRESS: God, I'm so sorry! I don't know what's wrong with me. It's like I'm not myself. (*Appealing*) I love this play, it means so much to me to be in it—

DIRECTOR'S VOICE (*dryly*): So you've said. (*Pause*) O.K., ("Mary"), ("Jack"), we'll resume at 11:15 prompt.

ACTRESS (*calling after DIRECTOR*): I'm crazy about this playwright's work, it's a profound challenge, like nothing I've ever done before— (*As DIRECTOR passes out of earshot; with increasing frustration, fury*)—also I need work.

ACTOR (*starting after DIRECTOR*): I need to talk to him.

ACTRESS (*pulling at ACTOR's arm, stopping him*): No, ("Jack"), you don't. Stay here.

ACTOR: ("Mary"), this isn't fair to you. I can't do this to you.

ACTRESS: What the hell are you saying?

ACTOR: You know.

ACTRESS: I don't! I don't know. It's my nerves, it's *my* problem.

ACTOR (*looks at her searchingly*): ("Mary"), come on. You're scared to death of me. It's in your eyes right now. You can't help it, it *is*.

ACTRESS (*frightened*): What is? What is? What's in my eyes I can't help?

ACTOR: I shouldn't have accepted the role. I shouldn't be working.

ACTRESS (*forefinger to lips*): Not so loud!

ACTOR: It isn't fair to you.

ACTRESS (*taking his hand, appealing*): ("Jack"), we talked it over, I made my decision. I want to work with you. My God, I'm honored to work with you. You're a hero to me—now more than ever.

ACTOR: There's too much—physical contact in this goddamned play. I don't like hurting you, and I sure as hell don't like scaring you.

ACTRESS: Look, I'm a professional. I've been acting since the age of sixteen. I'm pretty good—usually. I've just got to get into this. It isn't you, ("Jack"), it's me.

ACTOR (*dubiously*): Your eyes say something different.

ACTRESS: Oh, the hell with my eyes! It's my contact lenses you see.

ACTOR: You're scared. Of me. (*Pause*) I don't blame you, ("Mary"), I'm scared of me.

A pause.

ACTRESS (*fumbling for cigarettes in bag*): I'm not scared of you, ("Jack"), I'm scared for you. There's a difference. (*Offering him a cigarette*)

ACTOR (*declining*): Are you kidding? Never again!

ACTRESS (*embarrassed*): Oh! of course. The medication—

ACTOR (*gently correcting*): What the medication's for.

ACTRESS, ACTOR *have their break on the set. Evian water, or coffee; ACTOR may take some pills, eat a quick lunch from a deli container; or may do aerobic movements intermittently. ACTRESS smokes, may remove her high-heeled shoes, refashions her hair, paces nervously about.*

ACTOR (*disapproving*): That, too—smoking. You'd stopped for, how long?—two, three years? Now you've started again.

ACTRESS: But not because of you! Christ, you're paranoid.

ACTOR (*quickly*): Don't say that.

ACTRESS (*placating*): I just meant, no, it has nothing to do with you, ("Jack").

ACTOR: All right. So why say it—"paranoid."

ACTRESS: It's just a, an expression—"paranoid." It doesn't mean—

ACTOR: Because I really don't think I'm—like that. I really think I'm handling it O.K.

ACTRESS: Everybody's paranoid these days. (*Realizes this, too, is a mistake to say, too late*) Oh, am I crazy! (*Emphatically stubbing out cigarette*)

(*ACTRESS may light up another cigarette later in this scene, and again fairly quickly stub it out.*)

ACTRESS (*quickly*): The main thing is, ("Jack"), you're a—well person. You look terrific. You've never looked better. I mean really. (*Pause*) No one would know.

ACTOR (*not wanting to seem too hopeful*): D'you really think so?

ACTRESS: Yes. Definitely. *(Pause)* This play, working with you, it's a, an honor for me, y'know?—I mean, we've worked together before, but this is special. Only two roles. And *this* playwright—Mr. Macho-‘Sensitive.’ Oh I want so badly to do well! I'm *not* afraid of you.

ACTOR: Then what?

ACTRESS: Of—well—maybe—failure.

ACTOR *(shrugs)*: Well! *(Meaning, ‘That’s the case with us all.’)*

ACTRESS *(quickly)*: So much—for me—is riding on this— It's my—I guess you could say—‘big chance.’ I'm like *her*—an actress who's been ‘promising’ for too long. *(Pause)* I'm *not* afraid of—you.

ACTOR: Sure you are. I mean—after all. Friendship can only go so far, self-survival's got to be a stronger instinct. *(Tentative air)*

ACTRESS: No! *(Pause)* How many people . . . know?

ACTOR *(counting on fingers)*: —Six, seven— No, he died. Six.

ACTRESS *(with dread)*: Who was that?

ACTOR *makes a gesture meaning, ‘Please don’t ask.’*

ACTRESS: Well, please don't tell *him*— *(a gesture to indicate the DIRECTOR)* That'd be a mistake, to tell *him*.

ACTOR: I've considered—maybe it's a matter of conscience.

ACTRESS: Whose conscience?

ACTOR: Mine, of course.

ACTRESS *(incensed)*: What about other people's consciences!

ACTOR: You think he'd fire me?

ACTRESS: He can't fire you—can he?

ACTOR: I've always sort of wondered, is he homophobic. The way he goes on about his 'gay' friends.

ACTRESS: Oh, I don't think so, I think he means well . . . Christ, I don't know. *(Pause)* He's misogynous, that's for damned sure.

ACTOR *(laughing)*: So what's new?—every heterosexual male above the age of twelve is misogynous. Goes with the territory.

ACTRESS: Oh, no!

ACTOR: Well, maybe just the ones I know.

ACTRESS *(mimicking DIRECTOR, an undercurrent of anger)*: "The PLAY-WRIGHT says—it's like she has this SEXUAL RUSH—this OR-GASM—when he TOUCHES her." Oh, wow.

ACTOR *(falling in zestfully)*: "Hurting her's the bond, she *loves* it." *(Pause)* "It's a BALLET. It's BEAUTIFUL."

ACTRESS: The sons of bitches! *(Pause, then suddenly)* I hate this play!

ACTOR *(shocked)*: Not so loud, ("Mary")!

ACTRESS: I hate it! I hate *her*, and I hate *him*, I hate this sick sado-macho crap! And I hate *me* in it, trying so hard! Every day I read in the paper about the famine in Africa, I see these starving children on television, there's the homeless right outside the theater here on the street, there's drugs, poverty—*(slight hesitation)*—AIDS. A universe of true, profound suffering and we're trapped in this fevered little world, it's just a, a—*set. (Looking wildly around) A set.* I'm living out my adult life on a *set*.

ACTOR *(cautioning)*: He's going to hear you.

ACTRESS *(voice rising recklessly)*: Let him! I hate *him*! Nothing I do is ever good enough for him! The last time I worked with him, he reduced me to a quivering mass of hysteria, I am *not* a quivering mass of hysteria—*(excitedly, "quivering")*—I am a human being, an adult woman. The last time, I vowed it would be the last time, he broke me down to *this*, and just watched me, and d'you know what the bastard said?

ACTOR: Sure. He said, “Now put that emotion into your role, and you’ll be terrific.”

ACTRESS (*a bit crestfallen*): How did you know?

ACTOR: He did the same thing with me, the first time we worked together.

ACTRESS: *You?*

ACTOR: Me.

ACTRESS (*after a pause*): I did put the emotion into the role, and I *was* terrific. People said. (*Pause*) Actually, (“Jack”), this play isn’t too far from, from my own life, that’s one of the reasons I’m having trouble. Some of this sick-hypnosis stuff, him saying how their friends could never guess the way it is between them—

ACTOR (*mock-passionate*): “*How. It. Is. Between. Us.*”

ACTRESS: —and she doesn’t exist without him—I’ve been there. I know.

ACTOR (*with delicacy*): You and—Alec?

ACTRESS (*in a rush of confiding*): I can hardly believe it now, the way I depended upon him, needed him—even when I was working, and working well, getting good reviews, I was desperate I’d lose him, and there wouldn’t be any point to my work, no one to share it with, just—nothing. Then I got pregnant, a purposeful accident Alec said, and, well— (*A gesture as if to say, “You know the story.”*)

ACTOR (*sympathetically, tactfully*): That was a while back, wasn’t it?

ACTRESS (*quickly*): Oh, I’m not like that, now: I’m much stronger now. (*Pause*) It’s just I remember, my God, on my knees, too, like her, my actual knees, on bare floorboards! in this loft! on Varick! and I’m begging a man not to stop loving me—

ACTOR: You! That’s hard to believe...

ACTRESS: I'd never tell anyone—except you. It's like you and your private life—not telling your family, even—about your, your condition—you *can't*.

ACTOR: “Once said, never unsaid.” My Irish grandmother was always warning me. Like she knew I'd be the one who'd have secrets and disgrace the family—

ACTRESS: (“Jack”), come on! Your family must be damned proud of you.

ACTOR: Must they? (*A pause*) (“Mary”), you said that the “main thing” is I'm a well person right now, I look “terrific”—but you know, and I know, that isn't true. The “main thing” is I'm HIV-positive, I'm a carrier and I'm infectious and what's wrong with me is invisible and potentially fatal—and no known cure. That's the “main thing.”

ACTRESS (*rattled*): But they, they could find a cure—we could pick up the *Times* tomorrow, and—a big front-page headline—

ACTOR (*laughs*): I've actually dreamt that headline, I've seen it. Then I tried to read the story, and the newsprint was too small. (*Pause*) My sister's husband, he's a high school principal in Carbondale, not a bad guy at all—one Christmas a few years ago I'm back home, it's a family gathering, he tells this joke—“A ‘gay’ calls home and announces to his parents, ‘I have some news for you: bad news, and good news.’ And they ask, ‘What is it, son?’ and the son says, ‘The bad news is, I'm queer; the good news is, ‘I've got AIDS.’ ”

A pause.

ACTRESS: I can't believe that. You're making that up.

ACTOR: My sister'd never gotten around to telling her husband she had—has—a gay younger brother.

ACTRESS: It's just so . . . hard to believe.

ACTOR: Honey, no: nothing's hard to believe.

ACTRESS *stares blankly at ACTOR; succumbs to a quick spasm of sobbing; immediately checks herself.*

ACTRESS: You're so... courageous. In your place, I... Oh God, I'm not—handling this right.

ACTOR (*as if to comfort her*): (“Mary”), look: it isn't what they call a life-threatening condition, at least not now. And it might never be. I just tested—“positive.” But no symptoms. No— (*pause*) —symptoms.

ACTRESS (*rattled*): No symptoms. Yes. No. I can s-see that.

ACTOR (*flexing muscles*): Actually, I've gained a little. I've been working out...

ACTRESS: This medication—it helps?

ACTOR (*regarding her closely*): You know, (“Mary”), I think I'd better... don't you?

ACTRESS: Better—what?

ACTOR: Talk to him. Explain.

ACTRESS: Explain—?

ACTOR: Why you're having such a hard time, and why I'm going to drop out.

ACTRESS: My God, no! You can't. I mean, you *can't*.

ACTOR: You're stressed out: look at you. I've never seen you like this.

ACTRESS: I had a bad night last night, that's all—

ACTOR: I could feel you trembling when I held you, like your heartbeat was everywhere in your body. I can't put you through it.

ACTRESS: God damn it, I'm a professional. Since the age of sixteen. The day after my miscarriage I got out of bed and worked. You *know* me.

ACTOR: This is something else.

ACTRESS: No. I can control it. I promise.

ACTOR: If you keep blowing it the way you've been, he'll have to, you know, talk to you—

ACTRESS (*overlapping*): —Fire me—

ACTOR (*overlapping*): I won't let that happen.

ACTRESS: I won't let that happen. (*Pause*) I know I wasn't his first choice for this role, I was at least his third—yes? (*ACTOR makes a gesture of innocence, as if not knowing*) Well, I wouldn't have auditioned at all, I figured I didn't have a chance, they'd want some bigger name, like you, but—he called me.

ACTOR (*protesting*): Hey look, ("Mary"), he thinks you're terrific. He called me up, he said, 'You won't believe who I've cast for the play.'

ACTRESS (*pathetically hopeful*): He—did?

ACTOR: He did.

ACTRESS: I still don't trust him. If you talked to him, if you—explained—you'd never get work again. I just know.

ACTOR (*irritated*): That's a lot of shit. I don't buy that.

ACTRESS (*backing down*): Well, maybe—it depends.

ACTOR: There's a network of sympathetic people in the theatre, for God's sake. I trust them, they're my friends.

ACTRESS: That—that's right.

ACTOR: It's not like Hollywood, Hollywood's pure shit. There's a rumor about you, you're dead meat.

ACTRESS: I—I've heard that. I don't know.

ACTOR: Here, you can rely on your friends.

ACTRESS: You said you told—six people?

ACTOR: Yes, counting you.

ACTRESS: But, with those six people, it's a secret. It's better to keep it—secret. As long as you can.

ACTOR (*pacing about, exasperated*): Oh for Christ's sake—we'll give it another try. Through today's rehearsal. If, y'know, you keep blowing it—I'll tell him I'm out.

ACTRESS: Who can he cast, so late? Who's as good as you?

ACTOR (*resolved*): I'm out.

ACTRESS: *I'm out*. Why should you be sacrificed?

ACTOR (*bluntly*): I *am* a carrier. (*Pause*)

ACTRESS (*quickly*): Yes, but that—doesn't mean—it isn't like, like T.B., that new strain of T.B., that's—really lethal.

ACTOR (*wonderingly*): It's a mystery . . . so, so strange: to be lethal, yet not sick yourself; to carry death in your loins, where you believe there's love. It's a . . . metaphysical paradox. To wake up one day, and learn you're a "carrier." Like, what are you carrying? (*Pause*) Who *are* you? (*ACTOR has been moving restlessly about; now pauses, recites in a sonorous, contemplative tone*)

Whereto answering, the sea,
 Delaying not, hurrying not,
 Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly
 before daybreak,
 Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word *death*,
 And again *death, death, death, death* . . .

A pause.

ACTRESS (*spooked, backing off*): Oh God! What is that?

ACTOR: Walt Whitman, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking."

ACTRESS: The *cradle*?

ACTOR: Well. That's how I feel sometimes. (*Pause*) Much of the time.
 (*Pause*) All of the time.

ACTRESS: God, ("Jack"), I wish I could . . . help you.

ACTOR: Nah, I'm fine, really: me, my "self," the one you see, and know, I'm fine. As long as I'm working, I'm—transcendent.

ACTRESS: But, ("Jack")—

ACTOR: My only problem with this play is, I wish I liked shrimp better. I have to eat two damned shrimp each performance, and I think I'm allergic to shellfish.

ACTRESS (*blankly at first*): Maybe it could be changed to—cocktail sausage?

ACTOR: I asked. It's got to be fucking "jumbo shrimp."

ACTRESS: You mean the playwright insists? It's got to be *shrimp*?

ACTOR: Jumbo shrimp.

ACTRESS: Is that petty! (*Picks up script, leafs through it*) It's funny how, when you're in it, a role's your life, almost—realer than real. Afterward, you forget.

ACTOR: You have to forget. You couldn't be all those people at once.

ACTRESS: But they're still there, inside. Like past lives. Buried selves. But where's the actual core? When he says to her— (*She indicates lines in the script*) —"You know you can't do—"

ACTOR (*taking over, reciting, most convincingly*): "You know you can't do 'life,' you can only do scripts. Without your technique you're nothing."

ACTRESS (*shivering*): —It just goes through me like a knife blade. This woman, this actress, like me, with a career like mine—he's got her down cold. That's really how it is. Without a script, I get scared. Like now. Anything can happen. (*Glancing around*) Doesn't it scare you, too?

ACTOR (*shrugs*): I try not to think about it. I think about my work.

ACTRESS: I almost can't remember what it's like, without "technique" between myself and other people. I suppose, when I was a little girl, I must have been real.

ACTOR (*laughing*): (“Mary”), c’mon, you’re real right now.

ACTRESS (*as if baffled*): Am I? My body maybe... my clothes. (*Looking down at herself*) When I was pregnant, that part of me was real... I think.

ACTOR (*a confession*): I feel I’m always acting, it’s just a matter of degree. How badly I’m trying for applause.

ACTRESS: With me it’s “good” acting and “not-so-good” acting. But it’s *acting*.

ACTOR: When you’re... making love?

ACTRESS: Are you kidding? *Especially* when I’m making love.

ACTOR: Me, too. I mean—when I did. (*Pause*) Except, right now, talking with you, I’m actually not acting.

ACTRESS: I guess I’m not... actually... acting... either. (*Pause; a shiver*) It’s like the outermost layer of my skin’s been peeled away, just the air hurts.

A pause.

ACTOR: This, uh, what we’ve been saying—what I said about being a “carrier”—I haven’t talked like that to anybody much, in fact nobody, so I’d appreciate it if—

ACTRESS (*quickly, understanding*): Of course!—

ACTOR (*earnestly*): —you didn’t say anything to anybody, because if it got back to Jeff—if he knew how I felt—

ACTRESS: —No, no, of course— (*Pause*) How is—?

ACTOR (*a bit stiffly*): Jeff is fine.

ACTRESS: I guess I haven’t seen him in a—

ACTOR: We don’t go out of the apartment much anymore.

ACTRESS (*awkwardly*): Well—I miss him. (*A pause; ACTRESS returns to an easier subject, the play, lifting the script in her hand*) (“Jack”), I wanted to ask you, why do you think there’s this business in the play about her mother?—her father’s death, and the fact he’d been an astronomer? (*Locates the lines in the script, but recites rather than reads them*) “I did go to Mother’s. I have to go when she calls me. Since Daddy died she can’t sleep... she hears him calling her name... at night... he’s in the night sky... his voice is disembodied... everywhere.” (*Pause*) “But what I hear is... silence. The night sky doesn’t talk to me.”

ACTOR (*reciting, in a jocular tone*): “The night sky sure as hell doesn’t talk to me.”

ACTRESS: What’s it mean?

ACTOR: Means what it says. “The night sky sure as hell doesn’t talk to us.”

ACTRESS: I kept hoping, when I first read the script, her mother would show up, though I saw the cast is just two people. (*A sudden rising of ACTRESS’s voice*) She misses her mother! Her mother could save her from *him*.

ACTOR: But she doesn’t want to be saved. That’s why, when the phone rings, she won’t answer it.

ACTRESS: *I’d* answer it.

ACTOR (*playful threat*): Not if I forbade you to.

ACTRESS: The producer was saying, when it was workshopped at Long Wharf, it had a different ending. Wonder what it was!

ACTOR: He strangles her. With her “pretty” shawl.

ACTRESS: No!

ACTOR: Just joking.

ACTRESS: I’ve never been killed yet. Unless you count Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie—but that’s offstage.

ACTOR: I've been killed, but only on TV. That doesn't count, somehow.

ACTRESS: Right on screen?

ACTOR: Yes. But the screen's so *small*. You can't take it seriously.

ACTRESS (*dubiously*): D'you think the ending here is going to work?—looping back on itself?

ACTOR: I think it's a great ending. Given this hell they're in together, it's the perfect ending.

ACTRESS: But a lot has changed. She's changed. You get the idea she's maybe going to leave him—"survive" him. There's that hope.

ACTOR (*dubiously*): That's how you interpret it...?

ACTRESS: And that part, too, I love, this Silverstein character she did go off with— (*Reciting, defiantly*) "All right God damn you yes he did, we did, and it isn't a Van Gogh over the bed it's only a Warhol." Revenge! (*Laughs*)

ACTOR (*objecting*): Revenge? That's what *he* wants, it's his fantasy.

ACTRESS (*incensed*): His? Like hell, ("Jack")! It's hers, but it isn't fantasy.

ACTOR: Yes, he's willing her to confess. There isn't any "Silverstein" really.

ACTRESS: What? Are you kidding? If there's a "Mrs. Silverstein" why isn't there a "Mr.?"

ACTOR: But the man is *his* agent. He possesses her by way of "Silverstein"—and other men she's had one-shot affairs with. He's a voyeur, he's Prospero. He's the playwright—see?

ACTRESS: But the painting over the bed—she saw it.

ACTOR: Maybe.

ACTRESS: I SAW IT! (*Trying to remain calm*) These people, these rich

patrons of the arts—they can buy artists—us—like consumer goods—some of us, at least—but they don't know true art, they can't recognize it. "It isn't a Van Gogh"—a surpassingly great artist—"it's only a Warhol"—a flat-out spiritually bankrupt late 20th-century phony. That cinches it, for me. *I love it.*

ACTOR (*entering into the spirit of it, speaking as his character in the play, pitying, derisive, "hypnotic"*): No, no! What a fantasy! "Did you think you could exist without me?—imagine yourself for a single hour, without me? You poor—"

ACTRESS (*interrupting*): —Don't say it, God damn you!

ACTOR: "—cunt." (*Since he's been interrupted, he repeats, cruelly*) "You poor cunt."

ACTRESS (*a cry*): I told you *don't!*

ACTRESS *slaps* ACTOR *as a child might; flailing out; dropping her cigarette, spilling some of the contents of his cup onto him.*

ACTRESS (*immediately appalled, contrite*): Oh Christ—I'm sorry.

ACTOR (*annoyed but laughing*): I'm sorry.

Both ACTRESS *and* ACTOR *brush at his clothes.*

ACTRESS (*apologetic yet still aggressive, even defiant*): I just can't tolerate that—epithet.

ACTOR (*making light of it*): ("Mary"), it's O.K. Forget it.

ACTRESS: Every play by a male playwright I've been in for the past five years—except "A Christmas Carol"—I get called a cunt. I just freaked.

ACTOR: O.K., I don't blame you. I get freaked, too, when I'm called a cunt.

ACTRESS (*earnestly*): It's like men hate women so much, and women don't know why. I mean, *why?* Why do they hate us?

ACTOR: Don't ask *me.*

ACTRESS: Is it because we're—just—different—from men? Our bodies are—soft? Or—we can have babies? And *they're* the babies, and resent it?

ACTOR: Honey, how would *I* know? I'm just a bystander.

ACTRESS (*in her sudden emotion, speaking unpremeditatedly*): I love you.

A stunned pause. ACTOR may fumble something he's holding.

ACTOR: Well, I—love you.

ACTRESS (*quickly*): Oh no, no—you don't have to. (*Laughs girlishly*) The first time I ever saw you—you were Solyony, at the Yale Rep—remember? In your uniform, so handsome! God, I was in love with you, I didn't know it was hopeless.

ACTOR: Solyony! That long ago! But it's like yesterday... (*To deflect his embarrassment he clowns a bit, making hand-washing motions*) Poor Solyony!—can't get his hands to smell like anything but a corpse—

ACTRESS (*simply*): Now it isn't that I'm *in* love with you, I just... love you.

ACTOR: Eight, nine years ago... Like yesterday.

ACTRESS is about to speak when DIRECTOR's VOICE interrupts. Both ACTRESS and ACTOR are startled.

DIRECTOR's VOICE (*jarring, brisk*): ("Mary"), ("Jack"), ready to begin?

ACTRESS, ACTOR (*staring out, like frightened children*): Yes... ready...

DIRECTOR's VOICE: You're O.K., ("Mary")? Back on keel?

ACTRESS (*with resolution*): Yes.

DIRECTOR's VOICE: ("Jack")?

ACTOR has been staring out at DIRECTOR, eyes intense.

ACTOR (*with resolution*): Sure thing.

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: Back to the beginning. Only three more rehearsals before the first preview.

ACTRESS, ACTOR return to set. As LIGHTS DIM.

LIGHTS UP. Door opens, ACTRESS appears, wearing her shawl, ACTOR close behind her. Action as before.

ACTOR (as he'd opened the play originally): "Well! That was a party! No doubt about it—that was a party. (Whistles through his teeth) The champagne!—the flowers!—the view of the river!—the jumbo shrimp, of which I devoured eleven! Those people really know how to get it on. (Pause) Is that what you're thinking too, darling?"

ACTRESS stands erect, defiantly smiling.

During ACTOR's speech LIGHTS DIM SLOWLY.

LIGHTS OUT