

THE MURDER OF GONZAGO — A COMEDY

— a play in two acts

CHARACTERS: (4)

ANNABELLE POE, scattered, intelligent, neurotic, age range 25-40
CARLETON SCUDDER, sexy, macho, commercial, age range 28-45
DEREK CORLEY, gay, acidic, drama queen, age range 25-45
HEATHER FERNCHILD, liberal, sweet, overly motherly, age range 25-35

SETTING: At the rehearsals for three different productions the playwright characters are involved in when they are not writing.

(Lights up on CARLETON in mid-rehearsal)

CARLETON (to offstage partners in porn, very temperamental) No, I'm not ready! Don't rush me! I'll get there, but I've got to work through this! Hey, I can feel a breakthrough coming! Yes, this is a breakthrough! What's my motivation again? (Starts to remove some of his clothing) Never mind! I've got it! Ah, my motivation is coming back! (Removes another article of clothing) (impatiently) Are you ready? Be ready! I think this time I'm going to be there. I know I'm going to be there! (He unzips his fly, starts to reach inside) Wait! I've lost it. I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I can't concentrate with all of you staring at me that way! For god's sake, don't look so worried. I've done it before, and, by god, I'll do it again. How can people expect me to keep it up when we've been rehearsing this thing for hours! What do you think I am — a piece of meat? Where is that fluffer! How can they expect me to work when the goddamn fluffer doesn't even show up. Marvin, you promised me this was going to be a class act. And what do I get? It's cold in here, the script stinks, my co-star over there looks like she's infected, and now the goddamn fluffer doesn't show up! How in the world am I supposed to "act" in this goddamn film anyhow!

(Enter ANNABELLE)

ANNABELLE (cheery) Hi, Carleton! Can I see you for a minute?

CARLETON Oh, Annabelle, it's you.

ANNABELLE You busy?

CARLETON (annoyed) A little, yes.

ANNABELLE Can I help?

CARLETON Not just at the moment.

ANNABELLE I'd be happy to.

CARLETON You haven't ever been a fluffer, have you?

ANNABELLE A fluffer? Like in going around and doing pillows?

CARLETON (indulgently) Not quite. What is it you want, Annabelle? I'm very busy right now.

ANNABELLE I brought you that script.

CARLETON (distracted, still trying to motivate himself) What script?

ANNABELLE Remember I told you I want you to read a part for me at the writers' group tomorrow?

CARLETON (indifferent) You did?

ANNABELLE (trying to be ingratiating) Sure, you said you would be happy to. (Tries to hand him a script) My new one. The best one I've ever done in my entire career, and you know how many years I've been writing. This one's taken me nine months to finish. Nine months of headaches and nausea — it just wouldn't come out right, and then finally this week I managed to —

CARLETON (not taking the script) You'll have to excuse me, Annabelle. This is my living, after all. And I'm having a very bad day!

ANNABELLE What's wrong?

CARLETON My motivation! (to others offstage arrogantly) I'm taking a break! I don't care. I'm taking it. I'll be back when I'm back. (to ANNABELLE) Oh, these people, they're driving me crazy.

ANNABELLE Hard to work with, huh?

CARLETON You wouldn't believe. That asshole Marvin over there thinks I can just screw anything. (Slams one fist like a piston into the other) He doesn't seem to realize I'm an artist!

ANNABELLE I thought you did porn.

CARLETON (jumping allover her) I do! But my porn is not just anybody's porn! I think it through, I modulate, I embellish! How do you think I got where I am?

ANNABELLE Gee, Carleton, I didn't know it meant so much to you. Do you think you'll have time to look at !my script? (Offers it) It's about some of the other writers in our group — Heather, Derek.

CARLETON (not too interested) yeah? What could you possibly say that would be interesting about those two? (not taking it) And didn't you say you'd have it for me a few days ago?

ANNABELLE (Lights a cigarette) It got delayed. Got damaged. I'm real sorry I didn't get it to you.

CARLETON (still working on his motivation; perhaps removing his pants) Perhaps if I stopped thinking about it for a while, it'll come back to me. (to himself mostly) They don't seem to realize I'm very scared about this movie. It's my ass out there on the line. I have a reputation, I'm the star, but do they care!

ANNABELLE I dropped a cigarette on my scripts. (gets some ashes on the current script now, brushes them off frantically.) I guess I shouldn't smoke when I'm writing.

CARLETON (only half paying attention) You set fire to your own manuscript?

ANNABELLE (putting out the cigarette) I'm stopping! I'm stopping! This play's really good, Carleton. You're going to like the part, I betcha! (Offers the script again)

CARLETON (finally taking it, but not interested) If they think I'll work with this crew again, they've got another think coming! I had this absolutely perfect movement — near her breast when I disrobe her, but would they let me use it? No! You can't keep interrupting a Michelangelo and expect him to paint a masterpiece on the fucking ceiling!

ANNABELLE Are you okay, Carleton?

CARLETON Of course I'm okay.

ANNABELLE My script's going to be all right with you, won't it? It's very important. Paul's going to be there tomorrow, and it's the first time he's seen my work.

CARLETON (at last noticing the script, sniffing it) I hope I won't get secondary smoke inhalation from this!

ANNABELLE Oh, I re-did the whole thing. Took me all night.

CARLETON And what do you expect me to do with it?

ANNABELLE (biting her tongue — she needs him) Why don't you take it, take your time with it. No hurry. We've got till tomorrow. Don't push yourself.

CARLETON I won't. (flips through the script, not really looking)

ANNABELLE I really appreciate this, Carleton. I'll do you a favor someday.

CARLETON Somehow I doubt that, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE It's true! I really like your acting, did I ever tell you that?

CARLETON (flattered) You do?

ANNABELLE Oh, yeah, you're terrific.

CARLETON I am?

ANNABELLE And you're a good writer too.

CARLETON (doubtful of her sincerity) Uh-huh.

ANNABELLE No! I like to work with people I respect. You happen to be one of the most talented people in our group. Everybody says that.

CARLETON Yeah?

ANNABELLE Christy was just saying to me the other day on the phone how multi-cultural she thinks you are.

CARLETON Multi-cultural, huh? (He likes it) Multi-cultural?

ANNABELLE And G. G. thinks you're one of the most outstanding people he's ever worked with.

CARLETON G. G. said that?

ANNABELLE He certainly did. He's coming to my reading tomorrow. You ask him.

CARLETON (falsely modest) Oh, I wouldn't want to ask him. That would be like asking for a compliment or something.

ANNABELLE True. I guess you wouldn't want to force a compliment out of anybody.

CARLETON It's got to come from the person's heart or I don't want it.

ANNABELLE I know just how you feel. Lanny loves your work, too.

CARLETON Lanny does? I thought he thought I was superficial.

ANNABELLE Superficial? You? Where'd you ever get that idea? Everybody respects you tremendously.

CARLETON Come on, you're pulling my leg.

ANNABELLE As I live and breathe, Carleton!

CARLETON You're not just saying all this so I'll read your script?

ANNABELLE I never lie, Carleton. It doesn't pay. People find you out, and there you are with your . . . your whatever hanging out.

(CARLETON notices his whatever hanging out)

CARLETON Oops, sorry. You caught me at a bad moment. (Adjusts his clothing) I'm only doing this line of work, you realize, because I want to support my writing career.

ANNABELLE We all do what we have to do, Carleton. I just wish somebody would think I was attractive enough to be in porn movies like you.

CARLETON You serious? We could probably squeeze you in one of the crowd scenes. Want me to ask Marvin? (Starts to ask) Hey, Marv —

ANNABELLE Oh, I'm really not good enough for this kind of business! I'm just an old playwright. You know — words, semi-colons. (to herself) Periods.

CARLETON You're not so bad, Annabelle. Maybe you underestimate yourself. (Makes a sexy lip noise) You think?

ANNABELLE I'm flattered all to hell, Carleton, but I'm really in a rush today. I've got to get this other script to Heather.

CARLETON You sure you have to go? See my leading lady over there? Does she look healthy to you? Now you look. healthy.

ANNABELLE (looking into audience for the leading lady) Healthy? Oh, she looks fine. Handsome woman.

CARLETON She fakes it a lot. Fakes arousal. But can a man fake it? Not on your fine pitootee!

ANNABELLE Fine pitootee? Is that some term! don't know?

CARLETON You're really quite sweet, Annabelle, aren't you?

ANNABELLE Gee, I feel like a cigarette. (Starts to light one)

CARLETON Annabelle, you're killing yourself with those things! (Takes it out of her mouth and throws it away) Here!

ANNABELLE (going after the cigarette) That was my last one. (seeing it on the floor)
But thanks. I do need to stop.

CARLETON You're not fixated, I hope? (He does hope.) If you are, I can always help
fix an oral fixation.

ANNABELLE (changing the subject) If there's anything about the script, you don't
understand, any typos of anything, just let me know. You have my
number, don't you?'

CARLETON I've got it somewhere. I've actually been thinking about calling you,
Annabelle.

ANNABELLE Calling me?

CARLETON What would you think about that?

ANNABELLE You mean like across a valley?

CARLETON No, like across a crowded room. Like a date. You do date, don't you?

ANNABELLE (hating his guts but having to pretend) Oh, sure. (too perky) I date!

CARLETON What do you like? Hand holding? A little smackeroo after a couple of
months? I bet underneath that ambitious career woman there's an old
fashioned lady, what do you want to bet? And under that there's a little
vixen, am I right?

ANNABELLE You never know!

(Makes little vixen sound)

CARLETON You know what I like to do on the first date, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE I couldn't guess. Fox hunt?

CARLETON I'm sort of an old-fashioned guy myself, when you get to know me. Most

people just go for my – you know – *size*. But I've got layers.

ANNABELLE You've got layers?

CARLETON I like nothing better than to order up some beer and some nachos and put some old porn videos I made a few years ago on the VCR and cuddle up, or cuddle down, with some gal who likes the same sort of thing. How does that sound to you?

ANNABELLE (stalling) . . . different.

CARLETON I bet I could show you a thing or two about . . . a thing or two.

ANNABELLE (almost gagging but hiding it) I bet you could, you rascal you.

CARLETON This is a side of you I never suspected, Annabelle. I thought maybe you kind of didn't like me – my type, you know.

ANNABELLE I don't like to type people. We're all individuals, with our own individual quirks.

CARLETON (smiling) And what kind of quirks !have you got, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE Me? No, I don't have any quirks. No quirks.

CARLETON No? You look like there might be a whole side of you nobody knows about, even you. It probably takes the right kind of quirk-finder to explore your depths, Annabelle. Or do you like to be called Annie? Or maybe Belle? Or something you've never told anybody before? (He's almost breathing right on her.) Babylegs? Pussyface?

ANNABELLE Pussyface? (pointing, trying to think of a clever way out) I think they want you over there.

CARLETON Oh, damn! (calling) I'm not ready, Marvin, so just hold your horses! (to ANNABELLE) Now where were we?

ANNABELLE I was just about to leave.

CARLETON (hurt) Really? You're going to leave old Carleton all alone?

ANNABELLE Just till tomorrow, when we read my play. I'll see you then.

CARLETON (wheedling) Is that a promise?

ANNABELLE We'll talk about it tomorrow, okay?

CARLETON Hey, I heard that! You want to make that definite?

ANNABELLE We can have a drink or something, after the reading .

CARLETON I want your word on that now, Annabelle. Come on, make an X on my forehead.

ANNABELLE A what?

CARLETON Let's pretend we're illiterate and it's your signature. (points to his forehead) Come on!

ANNABELLE You're not serious?

CARLETON Afraid?

ANNABELLE Of you? Don't be silly, Carleton.

CARLETON (as lover boy) That's me. I'm an old silly. Come on, sign my old silly-willy forehead. Come on.

ANNABELLE (draws herself up) Okay, here goes nothin'. (She signs a big X in the middle of his forehead) How's that?

CARLETON (hot) Felt great. What hands. In fact, it felt so great that I think my motivation is coming back. (Feels his trousers front) Hey, I'm not kidding. You did it, Annabelle. I'm ready to shoot, in every sense of the word, if you catch my drift.

ANNABELLE (smiling, pretending) Do I have to catch it?

CARLETON Marvin, get the crew back in here! I'm ready for my close-up! Thanks to Miss Poe here. By the way, I've always meant to ask you — any relation to Edgar Allan?

ANNABELLE Distant. Very distant.

CARLETON I knew you had to come by all that literary talent honestly.

ANNABELLE You're full of . . . insight, Carleton.

CARLETON You bet your boots I am. You think I don't know you're jerking me around right now?

ANNABELLE What?

CARLETON You suppose I don't know you hate my guts? Annabelle, I'm surprised at you. All men aren't stupid. I know you find that hard to believe, but it's

true. Or at least one in a zillion can tell when he's being used.

ANNABELLE But — but . . .

CARLETON You want someone for your new script so you can get it put on. Glad to be exploited. Only don't think you can manipulate me and I don't even notice. Ah, I thank God I am not like the rest of mankind!

ANNABELLE I — I don't know what to say.

CARLETON It's okay. We men put up with it because you gals seem to like it. (to MARVIN) I'm coming! Don't sweat it! Excuse me, Annabelle, I must get back to work. (starts to leave) Love ya!

ANNABELLE Carleton, I didn't mean to —

CARLETON It's okay, it's okay. Really. I'll get to your script, pussyface. And I'll give it the very best reading you'll ever get from it. Word of honor.

ANNABELLE You will?

CARLETON Believe it or not, I've always thought highly of you.

ANNABELLE (Not sure if she's being put on) Highly?

CARLETON You're one of a kind, pussyface. Okay, Marvin, okay! Is my co-star ready? I don't see the walking diseased one anywhere! Nice talking to you, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE Nice talking to you too, Carleton.

CARLETON People in the theater need to make alliances.

ANNABELLE Indeed.

CARLETON Alone at our word processors. Alone as we mail those scripts off. Alone as we wait for that special actor who will touch our paltry words with magic. We all need each other, Annabelle, in this desperate little world of theater. (He gestures grandly toward the porn people waiting for him.) I am just so humble that I'm a small part of it all.

(CARLETON goes off, exaggeratedly humble.)

ANNABELLE (uncertain of herself) So long! See you tomorrow?

(A sexual grunt or noise comes back as he gets back to work.)

(ANNABELLE watches for a moment, then grimaces at what she hears, then backs off, waving uncertainly) See ya, Carleton! (to herself, making a fist) Okay, that's *one* son of a bitch on my side! (Runs off)

CARLETON (coming back, rolling up her script) We'll just see what kind of a reading you get from me tomorrow, little Miss Ambition. You're not aceing *my* scripts out, pussyface!

(ANNABELLE hurries to another part of the stage and finds a wall telephone. She pushes the button.)

ANNABELLE (anxious) Hi. Paul? This is Annabelle. How you doing? Really? That's great. Say, Paul, I just called to remind you about my reading tomorrow. My new play. The one I've been working on for nine months. You said you might possibly be able to make it. Is that still so . . . You're not sure? It's very interesting. It's about all the people in the playwrights group — Heather, Derek, even Carleton.. No, they'll love the way I've written them up! It's pretty revealing, I have to admit, but they'll be flattered that I bothered to write about them at all. Will you be there? . . . Oh, that's fabulous! I really appreciate it, Paul. Oh, sure. Sure. I realize you can't make any commitments about next season. But you'll come? That's all I can ask. You got to go? Oh, fine. That's all I wanted to say. Bye-bye. I mean just "bye." "Bye-bye" sounds so baby-like, don't you think? .(nods once, twice to what he's saying) Yes . . . Right . . . Okay . . . Bye-bye! (Winces when she realizes she said the word again. Hangs up, irritated with herself) Oh, Annabelle, you! But that's *one and a half* sons of bitches! Look out, world, here I come!

(Lights down, then immediately up as HEATHER with a light cue sheet enters, also at a rehearsal)

HEATHER (to offstage children) Kathy, don't pick at your antennae, dear! Don't pick! (Starts to go toward them but stops) Don't be scared. Mommy's right here. You'll be starting in a minute. Billy! Billy honey, don't pull on your whiskers. You're going to ruin them before you even start!

ANNABELLE (entering to HEATHER) Heather, thank God! There you are!

HEATHER Thank God? I've been here all day.

ANNABELLE They wouldn't let me in at first. Because I'm not one of the parents.

HEATHER Sorry about that, Annabelle, but we can't be too careful. There was some man with his face covered hanging around out there.

ANNABELLE Do I look like a man? My hormones may be shot, but —

HEATHER You know the kind of man I mean. He was after the kids. Billy! Don't crinkle Kathy's antennae! Billy, leave Kathy's wings alone! What did you want, Annabelle? As you can see, I'm very busy. (to offstage child) Peaseblossom, don't do that! What is her name? Peaseblossom! Peaseblossom, no, no! That's right — no, no!

ANNABELLE I brought my script — for tomorrow.

(Offers it to HEATHER)

HEATHER Oh, right. I guess I'll find time somehow.

ANNABELLE Oh, thank you, Heather, thank you I appreciate it. It's very good. I feel like I've been in labor with this play for ages. Paul's said he's coming, and I think G. G. might be interested in it for his festival.

HEATHER I never find time to write anymore. I'm going to be here for hours. It's final tech dress.

ANNABELLE (trying to please HEATHER) Oh? What is it you're doing this summer?

HEATHER *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

ANNABELLE What fun. Are those your kids?

HEATHER Haven't you ever met little Kathy and little Billy? The two by the trapeze?

ANNABELLE Oh, sure. They just look different with whiskers.

HEATHER Aren't they adorable? And I'm not saying that just because they're my kids. We're doing all the fairies as animals this year.

ANNABELLE Must be quite a challenge.

HEATHER It is! I made all the costumes. Took me forever. I even put off my new monologue to do it, but you don't mind when you're doing it for your children. (Looks dotingly at them) (condescendingly) But then you don't have children, do you, Annabelle? I'm sorry, I keep forgetting that. You really should have at least one to broaden yourself.

ANNABELLE (biting her tongue) Maybe I could! baby-sit for you some time, Heather. You've been so thoughtful about my script. (Tries to hand it to her, playing humble) It's nothing compared to a family, of course, but it's all that I have, I'm afraid.

HEATHER Billy, leave Mustardseed alone! Billy! I'm going to come over there! Excuse me, Annabelle. (HEATHER hurries to the back of the theater behind the real audience, to reprimand the unseen children as ANNABELLE watches) Billy, put that back! Billy, you're making me very angry. Kathy! Kathy, leave Billy alone. Let Mommy handle this. I'm going to take you both out of the play if you don't behave! Mustardseed, you stand over there. And, Billy, you leave his tail alone!

(HEATHER comes back to ANNABELLE)

Oh, they are something, aren't they!

ANNABELLE Maybe it would be easier if you didn't use kids.

HEATHER Not use kids? For A Midsummer Night's Dream? They're precious.

ANNABELLE But can they act?

HEATHER I hope you're not becoming one of those bitter people, are you, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE I'm trying not to be.

HEATHER They may lack technical skills, but they more than make up for it in innocent grace. Just look at them! You can't buy that. (to offstage characters) Okay, okay! Get ready, everybody! We're going to run through it with the lights this time. Watch this, Annabelle. You're going to love it. They've got the cutest bits this year.

ANNABELLE (resigned) I really can't stay now because —

HEATHER Shh! We're starting. (to off-stage characters) Kathy, lift up your stinger, honey! Go ahead, lift it all the way. Don't get it stepped on again. It'll come off like before.

ANNABELLE (whispering) Heather —

HEATHER (ignoring her) Cobweb! That isn't nice, sweetheart. No, Cobweb, you don't do that in public! Where is your mother, dear? Is Cobweb's mother not here? Excuse me, Annabelle. (Starts to go through audience again) Oh, there she is! There's your mother, Cobweb. Don't cry. There she is. That's right. (Seeing them reunited) Oh, isn't that sweet! (Coming back to ANNABELLE, gesturing at the kids) I just love all this!

ANNABELLE (whispering) I don't see too many parents around.

HEATHER Most of them are upstairs being fitted.

ANNABELLE So most of these kids do belong to the cast. (to herself) How did I somehow know that?

HEATHER Makes it so convenient. Keeps the kids busy during the summer. Keeps the parents happy knowing their kids are involved in some real art. Okay, here we go, everybody!

ANNABELLE Maybe I can just leave my script here, and you'll get it later? It's about Derek and Carleton. And it's got some surprise characters in it too.

(ANNABELLE starts to put it down)

HEATHER (rather incensed) You don't want to watch? We've worked very hard on this production.

ANNABELLE Oh, sure, I want to watch. Boy, do I want to watch! (She watches, overly intent)

HEATHER You don't have to, Annabelle. Nobody is twisting your arm. Billy, stop twisting Moth's arm! Just let go of it. Do I have to come over there? That's right, Moth. You stand over by Cobweb. (to ANNABELLE) Did you hear what I said? (to the kids) Moth should stand over by Cobweb. Only don't get too close, Moth! Moth — Cobweb! (She laughs at her own joke) Okay, everybody! We're starting! Come back! Come back. Get in line. We're starting! Watch this, Annabelle. Okay, light cue #147. Enter fairies! (She follows every move, directing from afar) That's right. Sprightly, kids! Sprightly! Remember, you're fairies! (Sounds of galumphing children from the back) Get up, Kathy! He didn't mean to step on your stinger. Just get out there on the stage. Now, come on now! Don't be that way. Everybody else is out there. Come on, honey. We can't see you over there. Don't be shy. Mommy's here! Come out and do it for Mommy. Find your spot, dear. Great! You all look great. All right, light cue #148. I mean light *cue*. Fairies, soar through the air! (Sounds of clodhopping children) Perfect! That was perfect, everybody! You guys are wonderful! Did you ever see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* this good, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE (Not sincere) Never.

HEATHER Now, everybody, twirl, the way we practiced. Come on, Billy, twirl! (She gestures) Don't be like that. Look, everybody else is twirling. Aren't they, Annabelle?! Remember, Auntie Annabelle, Billy? Twirl for her, Billy. (to ANNABELLE) Encourage him.

ANNABELLE Me?

HEATHER You could help, you know!

ANNABELLE All right. Twirl, Billy! Twirl!

HEATHER Oh, he's doing it! He's doing it.. (Applauds) Excellent, Billy! You have a way with kids, Annabelle. You should do this more often.

ANNABELLE (hating it) I should, shouldn't I?

HEATHER Would you mind taking over for a few minutes? I'm dying to go to the bathroom.

ANNABELLE Take over?

HEATHER You're a godsend, Annabelle. Okay, everybody, Auntie Annabelle is in charge while I'm gone. I'll be right back. (exits)

ANNABELLE (to kids, uncomfortable) Hi! You're great. Just stay where you are. Mommy will be right back — I mean Heather. I mean Mrs. Fernchild. You're all great . . . No, Billy, don't do that. Don't do that. Come on now, don't do that! (laughs, a rotten disciplinarian) I'll get Kathy after you. With her big stinger. I will! (to herself) Jesus! (looking over her shoulder at the light booth) Aren't there some light cues we could run?

VOICE FROM LIGHT BOOTH We have to wait for Mrs. Fernchild.

ANNABELLE (to kids) Okay, I guess it's a break then. Just don't go anywhere. Stay on the stage. I've got something to do for a few seconds. I didn't have the pages of my script in exactly the right order. (She tries to re-arrange the pages, drops a few, bends down to retrieve them, gets distracted) Heather, where are you? (When she looks back at the stage, she sees a strange man now on stage with the kids.) Who's that? (Looks back to the light booth, but it's empty now) Who's I that man up there? Hello? Is he part of the cast? (Shades her eyes to see better) Is that Oberon? Hey, Mister! Are you supposed to be up there? Mister! Kathy, do you know that man who's pulling your stinger? (The man runs off) Hey, you! Hey! Hey! (Goes toward the man)

HEATHER (returning) Sorry I took so long. Is everything all right?

ANNABELLE I'm not sure. There was some man up there dressed like a wolf. His face, I mean.

HEATHER A wolf?

ANNABELLE He ran off when I called to him.

HEATHER (hysterical) Oh, my god! It was that child molester! (Runs to the children) Are

you all right? Did he get you? Did he bother you? Annabelle, can't I even leave them for a minute without you neglecting them?

ANNABELLE But — But — I —

HEATHER Oh, my babies! My babies! Are you all okay? (She has gathered them around her)

ANNABELLE Should I call the police?

HEATHER (to kids) Oh, you were all so brave!

ANNABELLE Heather?

HEATHER (to KATHY) What, honey? (in baby voice) You got the big man with your stinger? I bet you did! (rushing back) And that isn't all he's going to get! Where's that phone? I'm going to get that slimy sicko! (Finds the telephone, pushes buttons) Hello, this is Mrs. Fernchild at Ashbury Elementary. I'm reporting a child molester. When last seen he was wearing a bear costume, the bastard!

ANNABELLE (correcting) Wolf!

HEATHER (on telephone) Excuse me. (to ANNABELLE) What?

ANNABELLE A wolf. Big muzzle. I couldn't see his real face.

HEATHER (on telephone) Make that a wolf! . . . Yes, we have an adult witness. (looks at ANNABELLE)

ANNABELLE God, I just wanted to deliver my script!

HEATHER Yes, she'll be happy to testify. Just get someone out here before that monster gets away! Ashbury Elementary — the gymnasium. (Hangs up) They'll be right here. But he's probably gone by now. I wish you could have stopped him, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE How? I left my wolf trap at home.

HEATHER These children are going to be traumatized from this.

ANNABELLE Luckily I don't think he had much time to do anything. Just pulled the stinger a little bit —

HEATHER (hysterical again) The wolf pulled Kathy's stinger! Oh, my god! I knew I shouldn't have gone to the bathroom! I knew it! Ka thy! Ka thy! Kathy, baby! (Runs to children again) (more hysterical) What did he do to you? Come on,

tell Mommy! Tell Mommy!

ANNABELLE Heather! Heather, calm down!

HEATHER (in rear) Did the big bad wolf get you? Oh, can you ever forgive Mommy for going to the bathroom!! (calling to ANNABELLE) Not being a mother, you wouldn't understand, Annabelle!

ANNABELLE I think you're getting the kids riled up.

HEATHER (rushing back) Could you give us a ride, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE A ride?

HEATHER To the police station.

ANNABELLE Aren't they coming here?

HEATHER By the time they get here, the kid will be in extreme shock. Billy, don't do that! See, already! They're under stress. You can see that! I'd drive them myself, but I had a little accident coming here today, and I don't feel secure driving that old car right now. Would you mind taking us?

ANNABELLE All of them?

HEATHER There are only eight, plus you and me.

ANNABELLE If you really want to, Heather. But it seems to me you'd be better off waiting for the cops here.

HEATHER You don't want to stop child molesters?

ANNABELLE Sure, I want to stop child molesters. Only –

HEATHER (seeing the man again, at the back) Oh, my god! There he is! Isn't that him? Isn't that him?

ANNABELLE I think so! Oh, yes!

HEATHER That's the same one who was lurking outside when we came in. Hey, you! (She runs after him) Hey, you pervert!

ANNABELLE Be careful, Heather! He may be armed.

HEATHER (at the rear of the theater) Kathy! Kathy, come here. Come see Mommy. Come here, dear.

ANNABELLE Heather, I don't see him anymore. :He's getting away! Wait! I've got a gun. Oh, god, I forgot it!

HEATHER (returning with Kathy's oversized stinger) I'll use this on the bastard! Where'd he go? Where'd he go? (Runs into the wings) There you are, you bastard! (Sounds of HEATHER trashing the offstage child molester with the stinger) Take that, you goddamn son of a bitch! And that! (Thumps and crashes) This is the last kiddy show you're going to bother, you goddamn filthy pervert!

(More thumps, then sound of body falling. After a moment, HEATHER comes back into view. The stinger is now bent all to hell.)

ANNABELLE Heather, are you okay?

HEATHER I guess I settled his hash. He's out cold.

ANNABELLE You were magnificent.

HEATHER Fortunately I put a curtain rod in Kathy's stinger. Help me tie him up, will you? (to kids) Never mind, guys! There's nobody back there. No, no, Peaseblossom, you stay right there! All of you, stay right where you are!

ANNABELLE (near the wings, looking at the knocked-out child molester, who is of course out of sight) You got him good, Heather.

HEATHER (standing next to ANNABELLE, looking) I did, didn't I? When it comes to my kids, I just see red!

ANNABELLE You still want to tie him up?

HEATHER (looking more closely) You know, he looks familiar.

ANNABELLE He does?

HEATHER Sort of resembles my first husband. (Goes nearer) He sure does.

ANNABELLE He does?

HEATHER Would you mind going over and removing his wolf mask?

ANNABELLE Touch him?

HEATHER I'm too nervous. But if you don't want to, I'll understand.

ANNABELLE I'll do it! (aside) There's nothing I won't do for this play. (Goes off into the wings, comes back carrying the wolf mask with two fingers, drops it close to HEATHER) Well?

HEATHER It's him. Fred.

ANNABELLE What's he doing here?

HEATHER We've been having a custody fight over Kathy. He was of course trying to kidnap her.

ANNABELLE So he's not a child molester?

HEATHER Probably not. Although I wouldn't put anything past him.

ANNABELLE (fingering it) And her stinger?

HEATHER He'll say he was just trying to pick her up.

ANNABELLE Why is he doing this?

HEATHER He claims it's his turn to have her for the summer, but I think she should stay here and be in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It's very good for her!

ANNABELLE You're such a good mother, Heather.

HEATHER I am, aren't I?

ANNABELLE You amaze me sometimes.

HEATHER You don't think I went overboard?:

ANNABELLE Of course not. How were you to know?

HEATHER You don't think I've scarred them for life, do you?

ANNABELLE No, kids are strong little animals. Especially yours.

HEATHER He shouldn't have worn that wolf mask! Will you testify for me, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE Testify? Certainly. We writers need to make alliances. Somebody was just telling me that.

HEATHER Oh, Annabelle, you're so understanding! (Hugs her)

ANNABELLE I try.

HEATHER (looking offstage) What are we going to do with Fred?

ANNABELLE Won't the police take care of him?

HEATHER I'm getting worried now. After all, it *was* his turn to have Kathy. The judge might say I'm an unfit mother. (looks away at offstage body)

ANNABELLE (picking up the wolf mask, putting it on) We'll show the judge how it looked. He'll understand once he sees this.

HEATHER (turning back, seeing somebody in a wolf's head, screams) Oh, my god, there's another one. There's another one!

ANNABELLE (taking the wolf mask off, but having trouble) It's me! It's me, Heather!

HEATHER Oh, my god, you scared the daylights out of me.

ANNABELLE I'm sorry. But see the judge will believe you if you bring this.

HEATHER Annabelle, you've saved my life today.

ANNABELLE Oh, it was nothing.

HEATHER Billy, behave! We've had a crisis here, and we don't need you making it any worse. (looking off-stage) Oh, my god, there goes Fred! There he goes. (Sounds of offstage running)

ANNABELLE (reluctantly) You want me to chase him?

HEATHER Would you mind? I have to stay here with the kids.

ANNABELLE Would you hold my script?

HEATHER Of course, Annabelle. Anything for you. (Takes the script)

ANNABELLE What do I do with him when I catch him?

HEATHER We'll think of that later.

ANNABELLE Here I go!

(Starts to run after FRED.)

HEATHER (stopping her) Wait! Never mind! (ANNABELLE stops at once) I'll call him later. Maybe we can settle this out of court.

ANNABELLE You're sure? I don't mind.

HEATHER I'm sure.

ANNABELLE What about the police?

HEATHER I'll take care of it when they come. Why don't you run along, Annabelle?
Weren't you in a hurry?

ANNABELLE Derek did ask me to come and fill in for one of his actors. I could ask him to play your part in my script. He's a wonderful person, but I don't really like his acting as well as I like yours. I just don't know how to tell him.

HEATHER I promise to get to your script. I'll practically have it memorized.

ANNABELLE It is sort of important. Paul and G. G. are both coming.

HEATHER You have my word as a mother.

ANNABELLE Thank you, Heather. It's turning out to be quite a day.

HEATHER Okay, kids, we're going to continue! Get ready for light cue #149!
Mustardseed, Cobweb, are you ready? Billy? Never mind about the stinger,
Kathy. We'll get you another one!

ANNABELLE (to herself mostly) I'll just slip out quietly. (Exits)

HEATHER (waving slightly to ANNABELLE, forgetting her already, busy) Are we ready
in the light booth?

VOICE IN LIGHT BOOTH Ready, Mrs. Fernchild.

HEATHER Okay, boys and girls, we've had a very trying day today. But what do we remember? That's right — the I show must go on! (to the absent ANNABELLE) But as for you, Annabelle dear, I have the distinct feeling Paul and G.G. aren't going to like your script all that much, not the way I read it tomorrow. You know how I pity your sad, malfunctioning little hormones, But pity never got *my* plays put on! Why should it yours?

(Lights down on HEATHER.)

(ANNABELLE hurries to a wall phone, pushes buttons)

ANNABELLE (anxiously) Hello, G.G? It's Annabelle. . . . Did you get my script for your contest? . . . You're not sure? The one we're reading tomorrow. You are planning to come, aren't you? . . . You're not sure? . . . I was hoping you'd come, G.G. I value your insights — always . . . You'll try? I guess that's all I can ask. So nice talking to you, G.G. — G.G., are you there?(Hangs up, unsure if he heard her) (looks at! her watch) Oh, my god, Derek is going to kill me! But that's two and a half sons of bitches in my pocket! . . . I think.

(Lights out, then immediately up on DEREK at his rehearsal)

DEREK (roughly, to offstage performers) What am I running here? I thought this was a professional company? Do you call that projection! (fed up with them) Do you call that acting!

ANNABELLE (sneaking in, then so quietly he can't hear her) Derek.

DEREK (to offstage performers) I guess we'll have to continue this some other day. The woman I asked to fill in obviously isn't coming. Not that I care! She's a lousy actress anyway!

ANNABELLE Derek?

DEREK Oh, there you are! Running a bit late as usual, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE I'm sorry. I got tied up. I can explain it all if you want me –

DEREK It won't be necessary. We've managed quite well without you. What's that stuff in your eyes?

ANNABELLE Stuff? (Touches her eyes)

DEREK Around the edges. Looks like sleep. Didn't you have time to wash your face? Did you sleep in? Ah, the raveled sleeve of care! On the other hand, I've been having terrible trouble sleeping. Maybe you can advise me. What do you do, rub it in the corners of your eyes? Perhaps you could market it for insomniacs! I'll mention it in my newspaper column. Tell me!

ANNABELLE I'm really sorry I'm late, Derek. Is there anything I can still do?

DEREK (snappishly to performers) We still have fifteen minutes left, so don't be getting out of your sweatpants just yet. Ms. Sarah Bernhardt has finally consented to show up. (Thrusts a script into ANNABELLE'S hands) Here!

ANNABELLE I can't tell you how exciting all your new projects sound, Derek.

DEREK Really? I thought they were a secret.

ANNABELLE You didn't tell me all that much, just that you were –

DEREK Give me that! (Grabs the script back) If too much word gets out, somebody will steal my ideas, and where will that leave me? It's happened before.

ANNABELLE Can't I know a little bit, so I can do your script justice? By the way, you are coming to hear my script tomorrow, aren't you? It's got a little dirt about Heather and Carleton, and it's very funny. They're going to laugh and laugh at themselves. And so will you.

DEREK I said I'll be there, I'll be there! As for the script I am holding in my very competent hands — it just happens to be the finest piece of playwriting to come my way in over two years of running this company..

ANNABELLE That good, huh?

DEREK And despite the backbiters and the scoffers, I'm not putting it on just because I wrote it. I'd put it on no matter who submitted it. It's that fine..

ANNABELLE Really.

DEREK In fact, I have several new plays of mine with which we are going to open our season — in repertory. Theatrical history right in this room!

ANNABELLE Wow. Can I see them?

DEREK Maybe I shouldn't have shown that to anybody. (Looks suspiciously at the offstage performers) Thieves everywhere!

ANNABELLE Well, your actors need to look at it sometime, don't they?

DEREK That's the trouble with theater! You have to use actors. If only I could use robots. The day is coming, believe me! The day is coming.

ANNABELLE But until that day — (Holds out her hand for the script)

DEREK No, I'm not going to give it to you. (to offstage performers) Give me those scripts!

(He runs to the rear of the theater and retrieves them)

ANNABELLE Derek! Derek!

DEREK (returning with the scripts, to the performers) But don't you leave yet! We'll get this right if it kills some of us. Only it won't be me who gets killed!

ANNABELLE What is it you're trying to protect, Derek?

DEREK Do you swear a solemn oath not to reveal a word if I tell you?

ANNABELLE (weakly) I swear.

DEREK Swear!

ANNABELLE On my father's grave!

DEREK Do you know how many new theaters I've started?

ANNABELLE Not exactly.

DEREK Twenty-seven. And do you know how old I am?

ANNABELLE Not really.

DEREK (Gives his real age) Twenty-seven new theaters in _____ years. I've tried to give the public something fresh! Something they haven't had before. But do they want it? Do they?

ANNABELLE I don't know. Do they?

DEREK They won't come. They hate originality. But this time I've outwitted them. This time they'll come.

ANNABELLE Yeah?

DEREK What do they want to see? *The Sound of Music*, *Plaza Suite*, *Time Out for Ginger!* Well, my new season will consist of plays the goddamn public thinks it want to see. Yes, they'll line up and fork over their greasy dollar bills to see *The Sound of Music*, *Plaza Suite*, and fucking *Time Out for Ginger!* But! But! What they'll actually be seeing will be brand new plays with brand new content. Only the names will be the same old ones! (Laughs triumphantly)

ANNABELLE Won't that make them mad? Won't they ask for their money back?

DEREK Once I have them in the theater, I've got them! They'll love what I've done. But you've got to get the fuckers in here first!

ANNABELLE Why don't we try it. Come on, give me a script. God, I want a cigarette.

DEREK Have one then!

ANNABELLE No, I've stopped smoking. Carleton taught me how.

DEREK (erotically interested) How is that stud?

ANNABELLE About the same.

DEREK Have you ever "enjoyed" him, as they say?

ANNABELLE Carleton? (laughs) No way.

DEREK Different strokes for different folks. But that's another matter. (to performers) What are you actors hanging around for? I told you to go. Go! Go!

ANNABELLE Want me to go too? (starts to leave)

DEREK Come back here. I think I can trust you, Annabelle. As a fellow artist. Can't I?

ANNABELLE Believe me, Derek, I won't steal your ideas.

DEREK Look at this script. (Shows her some pages) Look at those lines. (reading one)
"My darling, I knew it could be like this!" They kiss, hold, slow fade. What do you think?

ANNABELLE Lovely.

DEREK And do you know what it's about?

ANNABELLE Love?

DEREK But not just any love. Albino love!

ANNABELLE Albino love?

DEREK People of non-color. I'm calling lit *Time Out for Ginger*, but it's really about loss of pigmentation in modern life..

ANNABELLE Oh.

DEREK Don't you see? It's a metaphor.

ANNABELLE Are your actors albino?

DEREK That's what was wrong with them! They aren't real ones! I've looked everywhere. But they're hard to find. Listen to this from the final speech. (reads)
"My life as an albino hasn't been easy. People staring at me. People calling me names. Even the sun conspiring to beat upon my blistered skin! But I have survived, alive, undaunted, and proud, so proud, to be albino!"

ANNABELLE It sounds very uplifting.

DEREK It's so sad and yet beautiful (weeps) I'm just a little worried that some of it might be too negative, the early part, I mean. I could take some lines out. I wouldn't want to offend the albino community.

ANNABELLE What did you say about them?

DEREK I don't want stereotypes. But some of my albinos have white skin.

ANNABELLE Albinos have white skin.

DEREK Not all of them have the same kind of white skin!

ANNABELLE But you have to call them as you see them, Derek.

DEREK You're right! Oh, I'm so glad I asked you to come, Annabelle. I'm treading on dangerous ground in this play.

ANNABELLE Can I make a suggestion?

DEREK Anything.

ANNABELLE Your play isn't going to play it safe, is it? Albino theater doesn't have to be white bread. (testing his reaction) If I wrote about people, you know, other playwrights like Heather or Carleton, or you, I wouldn't want to be bland, would I?

DEREK I just don't want to insult anybody. They can get that in non-albino theaters. How many albinos do you see on television or hear on radio? My heart bleeds for these people (to performers) And where the hell have they gone to? (yelling) Do you people ever want to work in this goddamn theater again?

ANNABELLE You sent them away.

DEREK I did?

ANNABELLE You look like you've been working very hard, Derek. Maybe you need a break.

DEREK But I've got to help oppressed albinos!

ANNABELLE I think I had a distant cousin who was an albino.

DEREK How exciting! God, I wish I could! say that. I wish I'd known you were albino before, Annabelle. I would have consulted with you before I wrote the script..

ANNABELLE Oh, I haven't kept that close to my roots. So I couldn't –

DEREK You're so good and so helpful, Annabelle. It's your energy that holds our little playwrights group together.

ANNABELLE (modestly) Oh, I don't do much.

DEREK I think I can trust you. With the secret work that I've shown to absolutely nobody in the entire world!

ANNABELLE I was sort of hoping to get home. I have a few revisions on my –

DEREK (getting the script, reverentially) Here it is! The one that's going to take me to the top once and for all! I haven't even heard it read myself. Would you consent so I

can hear how it sounds? (Thrusts the script into her hands)

ANNABELLE (giving in) Sure. Why not.

DEREK Read with feeling, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE Can you give me a little background, what's it about?

DEREK It's the first play in the history of theater about excrement.

ANNABELLE I beg your pardon?

DEREK The cutting edge. A trilogy. The first part is about the passing of wind. I'm calling it *The Sound of Music*.

ANNABELLE What am I playing?

DEREK A passed wind.

ANNABELLE A what?

DEREK Take your time. I want to savor the words.

ANNABELLE Alrighty! (reads) speak to them." Derek, no! "Why is it no one speaks of me?"

DEREK Go on. Oh, they'll call me adolescent, they'll call it bathroom humor, but I won't be deterred. This is a subject that truly remains unexplored. The first part is the lightest — the different kinds of winds people produce. The second part is deeper — the rumblings within, those unavoidable necessities that afflict us all. The third and final part is about the tragedy of constipation and how it has affected the history of civilization.

ANNABELLE I don't think the world is ready for this play, Derek.

DEREK They never are! But somebody has to have the daring, the guts to blow the lid, so to speak, off the greatest taboo of all.

ANNABELLE Derek, can I speak honestly with you?

DEREK Of course.

ANNABELLE I think you should put this one away and sleep on it.

DEREK You too, Annabelle? A coward? Oh, I should have known. I should have known. Even you don't understand!

ANNABELLE I understand. I just think you should wait a little while.

DEREK Did Copernicus wait? Did Einstein wait? Did Andy Warhol?

ANNABELLE No, but —

DEREK Are you going to be one of the little people, Annabelle? The dreadful little ordinary souls who fill up this world with their ordinariness? Here I am trying to open their vistas, trying to show them something important about themselves, and even you don't want the truth to get out! .

ANNABELLE It's not that —

DEREK You don't know how depressed this makes me, Annabelle. (exaggeratedly depressed) Even you want to stomp all over my artistic integrity.

ANNABELLE Now, Derek, don't —

DEREK Maybe it's best you left me now.

ANNABELLE Come on, Derek, don't be that way.

DEREK What way? Honest? Ahead of my time? (Slumps down)

ANNABELLE Come on, get up.

DEREK No, I'll just slit my wrists here.

ANNABELLE Derek!

DEREK No, not while the world refuses to listen.

ANNABELLE I'm not the world. Maybe they'll love it.

DEREK Do you think so?

ANNABELLE The public changes.

DEREK Oh, I know I've put on plays before that audiences didn't like — that they actually hated. But this is different. I really believe in this one!

ANNABELLE I'm sure you do, Derek.

DEREK (hopeful) It could be controversial. People like that. Oh god, it's so difficult being an artist!

ANNABELLE I know, dear. I know.

(She touches him, comforts him.)

DEREK So you don't think I should put it on?

ANNABELLE That's up to you, Derek.

DEREK Don't you really think it's time for a play about the inside of people, instead of all this external, trivial falseness?

ANNABELLE Maybe so, maybe so.

DEREK Oh, Annabelle, you give me such hope!

ANNABELLE If you really want to do this piece, Derek, then you do it, and don't let anybody talk you out of it. That's how I feel about my new play. If we artists don't stick together, then who will?

DEREK That's what I think too. May I kiss you, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE Of course.

(He kisses her on the cheek.)

DEREK Oh, I know I seem together and in charge, but I have to confess something to you, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE No, you don't.

DEREK I do. I do.

ANNABELLE No, you don't have to. Really.

DEREK But I want to, Annabelle. I so rarely get to open up to anyone. I have moments of uncertainty. I don't usually let people know, but I'm very vulnerable inside.

ANNABELLE (biting her tongue) You hide it well, Derek.

DEREK I suppose I seem hard to some people, but deep down inside I'm a nice person.

ANNABELLE I'm sure you are.

DEREK (getting maudlin) You're a nice person too, Annabelle. I can tell that.

ANNABELLE Oh, not me.

DEREK Yes, you are.

ANNABELLE No, I'm not.

DEREK Oh, yes you are.

ANNABELLE I don't think so.

DEREK (sharply) Are you contradicting me? I have great insight into people!

ANNABELLE Sorry. You must be right.

DEREK Well, I should hope so!

ANNABELLE Is there anything else I can do for you today, Derek, before I leave?

DEREK You're going to leave me when I'm feeling vulnerable and nice?

ANNABELLE No, it was just a momentary lapse on my part. I must be getting tired. It's been a busy day.

DEREK You know what you are, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE No. Tell me.

DEREK You're my very best friend in the whole world.

ANNABELLE I hardly know you.

DEREK Isn't that just the way the world operates? You're my best friend, and you don't even know it. (Mopes)

ANNABELLE You must have friends. A lover.

DEREK Nobody. I've devoted myself to my art. And what have I gotten for it? Loneliness!

ANNABELLE It's never too late. You can give up art. Look for friends, someone to love.

DEREK Give up art? Give up art? Annabelle, are you mad! Give up all this? (Gesturing at his theater)

ANNABELLE You're right, Derek. Who can live: without this?

DEREK Oh, Annabelle, Annabelle, you are one perfect, giving, loving, warm, honest, unmatchable individual. And you do it all without even suspecting how good you are.

ANNABELLE Aw, shucks.

DEREK How do you do it, Annabelle, manage to be such a super human being?

ANNABELLE I couldn't do it alone. That's what they mean when they say the theater is a collaborative process. See you at my reading tomorrow, Derek? I'm counting on you; it's very experimental.

DEREK You can count on me, Annabelle, ol' buddy. I'll be rooting for you. (He blows her a kiss.)

ANNABELLE (blowing kisses back to DEREK as she moves away) (to herself)
I did it! I did it! That's all of them! Oh, what we have to do in this profession. But the play's — the play's the thing. I'll have them eating out of my hand by this time tomorrow. I may be sterile, but by god you've got to hand it to me — I'm damned clever! (Exits)

DEREK (re-entering) I should have asked to see that script. She wouldn't write about me, would she? After the way I opened myself up to her?

HEATHER (re-entering separately) She wouldn't write about me, would she? After the way I let her feel useful with the kids today?

CARLETON (re-entering separately) She wouldn't write about me, would she? After the way I made her feel sexy about herself?

DEREK / HEATHER / CARLETON (as one) Why that self-serving bitch!

CARLETON She —

HEATHER Wouldn't —

DEREK Dare!

BLACKOUT

(End of Act I)

INTERMISSION

ACT II

(a play within a play within a play)

SET: The backstage of The Downtown Theater, with chairs, perhaps a couch, incidental furniture, leftover props, etc., as it would look when not in use for a production or between rehearsals.

DEREK (on stage alone, looking at two messages on a bulletin board near the telephone, checking his watch, looking irritated, slams a chair) Oh, not again!

ANNABELLE (entering hurriedly) Hi, Derek! Sorry I'm late!

DEREK Where is everybody?

ANNABELLE I saw Heather trying to park. She may be delayed. I think she ran over something or somebody. (She takes out a cigarette and puts it into a long cigarette holder)

DEREK That woman, I swear!

ANNABELLE Maybe it was just her brakes. They squeak.

DEREK I thought you gave up smoking.

ANNABELLE I did. I don't light them anymore. (Takes a drag) How have you been?

DEREK Much better than yesterday, thank you. Been working on a re-write of the script we read last time. It's coming along quite well, if I must say so myself.

ANNABELLE I sort of liked it the way it was.

DEREK You did? How come you didn't say something?

ANNABELLE I thought it was just awful the way the others jumped all over your poor script. I think you handled it very well. You weren't defensive at all.

DEREK I shouldn't ask my fellow playwrights to give their feedback unless I'm prepared to accept it, should I?

ANNABELLE Do you really feel that way, Derek?

DEREK (brittle) Of course. I'm a professional. By the way, how does your new play look, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE Pretty good, it seems to me. *If* I have the scripts! I may have dropped

them on the bus. (Searches in her backpack)

DEREK Why didn't you show it to me? I hope I'm not in it. I wouldn't like that.

ANNABELLE (surprised) You wouldn't?

DEREK Not at all. Well, *am* I?

ANNABELLE Oh, no! Not really.

DEREK You're positive?

ANNABELLE (brazening it out) Absolutely!

DEREK I'd hate for anything to interfere with our friendship.

ANNABELLE Me too. You're going to love it. Just wait.

DEREK I heard we may get Stage II back! The Fire Marshall told our new artistic director he might just possibly change his mind and let us stay open.

ANNABELLE Yeah? What happened?

DEREK I believe Paul is trying bribery on the bastard.

ANNABELLE Well, whatever works. Our plays have got to get on!

DEREK Of course the Fire Marshall may be above corruption. Or the bribe might not be big enough.

ANNABELLE (searching more frantically) I can't find my scripts! God! Where *are* they?

DEREK Does anybody else have copies?

ANNABELLE Oh, right! I gave Carleton and Heather copies — I think. They were supposed to rehearse on their own. (emptying her backpack) What did I do with those scripts?

DEREK Did I tell you I'm going to be interviewed on Channel 2 next week?

ANNABELLE Marvelous! Your new plays?

DEREK One of those Sunday morning things where the interviewer doesn't know who you are, hasn't read a word you've written, and is half asleep from some debauch the night before. But who's complaining? Publicity is publicity!

CARLETON (entering with a bag of donuts and a bag of generic beer) Howdy, folks!

Please don't stand!

ANNABELLE (relieved) Thank God! Carleton, did you bring the script?

CARLETON Sure did, sweetie pie. (holds up a rolled-up script) Afraid I didn't get a chance to look at it.

ANNABELLE What in the world did you do to the script?

CARLETON What does it look like? (holding up the rolled-up script) I raped an old lady! (before she can say it) "Carleton, rape is not funny!" *Mea culpa! Mea culpa! Mea maxima culpa!*

ANNABELLE Well, it's not funny!

CARLETON (hugging her) I know, darling one. That's why I keep asking you to sleep with me. It's still in the asking stage! By the way, I'm very good in bed. Just one night, Annabelle! Just one night!

ANNABELLE (disengaging herself) I'm the only woman around here you haven't slept with. That's the only reason you take me seriously.

CARLETON Isn't she heartless, Derek! One night — that's all I'm asking for! I don't have herpes. Honest!

ANNABELLE Maybe I do. Have you considered that?

DEREK You heterosexuals continually amaze me!

CARLETON Don't knock it till you try it. Hey, thanks for the mention in your last column! Nice!

ANNABELLE (taking the script from CARLETON) So I'll just take this back. And give you some new pages. If I can find them!

DEREK Glad to help out a fellow writer. How's the adaptation of that novel coming along?

CARLETON Did fifty pages. Then my agent called and said there'd be no upfront money. Somehow my heart went out of it.

DEREK I didn't think you could afford to be so choosy. Aren't you still acting in those porn films?

CARLETON Right, one more cramp from a forced erection and I'll write whatever they want.

DEREK (looking for the other playwrights) Where are the rest of us? As somebody once said in a famous movie.

ANNABELLE I hope they're not boycotting my script!

(HEATHER enters)

At last!

HEATHER Forgive me my trespasses!

DEREK But the list is so long. Where shall we begin?

HEATHER (sweetly) Derek, what a pleasure, as always.

CARLETON Are you two having an affair?

HEATHER Oh, Carleton!

ANNABELLE Heather, did you bring your script with you?

HEATHER Right here! (Takes it out of a folder) It's got some Gerber's junior food on it. I'm really sorry!

ANNABELLE Did you look it over?

HEATHER Oh, I'm afraid I was so busy taking little Billy to the dentist after the rehearsal yesterday and working on my monologue I didn't get a chance to even look at it. I'm sorry! But thanks so much for your help with all that business yesterday. I can read it now if you like.

ANNABELLE You people!

HEATHER (sweetly but with an edge) You didn't lose your own copies again, did you, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE Just misplaced them temporarily! Maybe I dropped them on the bus?

HEATHER You're too much! How do you manage to get your plays put on?

ANNABELLE The gods protect writers and imbeciles. And I'm both!

HEATHER Now you're not that bad! You're special.

CARLETON Let the play begin! I've got to be home by ten thirty. Bambi is coming over to inflict more alimony demands on me.

DEREK (snottily) How is "Bambi"?

CARLETON The same. Evil.

ANNABELLE We can't start until Paul gets here. And Lanny. And G.G!

DEREK Oops, I forgot! G.G.'s had some trouble, and he will be late. (Shows the message) All I can say is that it's extremely personal, none of our business, and we shouldn't be at all interested. As for Paul — now, he definitely isn't coming. Got bogged down in some meeting with the board of directors at his house. He called and left a message. (Hands her the message) And I ran into little Lanny yesterday and he has to see a man about an option.

ANNABELLE Paul's not coming? Oh, poo! Triple poo!

HEATHER Maybe we ought to postpone the reading, if he can't be here.

DEREK I could make a tape of the reading, and he could listen later. (Gets it)

ANNABELLE That's an idea! All we really need now is G. G.

CARLETON Is he supposed to read for you? I can do double service if you like. Am I right for the part?

ANNABELLE I don't think so. I'm sorry.

CARLETON I'm easy! (Offers bag) Anybody want a donut? They're *delicioso!* Caramel and custard fillings! Yum, yum, yum!

(General decline, ad lib)

And these new ones with marshmallow and raspberry centers!

HEATHER It's a good thing I didn't bring little Kathy with me. She won't eat right after she's been around you for five minutes.

CARLETON (gently teasing) At least I can park a car!

HEATHER I can park!

DEREK I'm curious, Heather. Did you or did you not run over somebody outside?

HEATHER What?

DEREK There's been a nasty rumor going around. We best squelch it at once.

HEATHER There was a broken beer bottle under my rear tire.

DEREK We'd heard you'd run over a cat.

HEATHER A cat?

CARLETON Let me go with you later, Heather, and help remove the broken glass.
Don't want you to get a flat tire and have to spend the night — (suddenly springing it on her) at my place? (Leers, hugs her)

HEATHER How's that divorce coming, Carleton?

CARLETON It's almost final. I'm horny all the time. Kiss me!

HEATHER (trying to get away from him) You'd never know it!

CARLETON They say I'm very thoughtful in bed. Really!

HEATHER I'll tell my husband that.

CARLETON I don't want to go to bed with him. Just you! But tell him I said hello.

HEATHER (ironic) Oh, I will. I'll tell him you send your best.

CARLETON I know you all think because I do porn that I'm getting it all the time. But I also need some affection in my life.

ANNABELLE Oh, brother.

CARLETON Scoff not, Annabelle, at wounds never felt. How's that monologue coming along, Heather?

HEATHER Finally finished it! And they're going to do it at the Montauk Writers' Festival.

(General very faint congratulations)

DEREK Maybe I can mention it in my column. What's it about?

HEATHER It's about this Southern family — poor whites in rural Arkansas during the Civil War.

CARLETON Again?

HEATHER Well, you write about rich Italian wine makers in the San Joaquin Valley all the time!

CARLETON But I do it with charm and vivacity!

HEATHER Well, it's harder to be charming and vivacious about starving poor people suffering from economic hardship caught between —

CARLETON Yes, Heather, yes, we understand. We applaud. Our liberal hearts bleed

for your people! All those suffering proletariat!

HEATHER They're not just terms! They're people!

CARLETON "We're the people; we go on!" And on. Anybody get it?

DEREK Steinbeck.

(CARLETON nods)

HEATHER Where's Christy?

DEREK She can't make it tonight either. Not feeling well. My lips are sealed.

ANNABELLE Is she still recovering from the bad reviews?

HEATHER She really suffered.

CARLETON Maybe she should try writing something else for a change.

HEATHER I thought her play was beautiful.

CARLETON Twenty-seven monologues of four pages each?

HEATHER It wasn't that long!

CARLETON Christy has got to learn to write for the stage. Not for herself. Not for her Art. For people: overworked, overfed, vaguely educated, out-to-have-a-good-time people!

ANNABELLE You're just saying that because she got the Guggenheim and you didn't.

CARLETON (holding his heart, exaggeratedly) Oh, cruel and sudden! You're only saying it because she's a woman. You know how I hate to stereotype, but you people do stick together! Is that a touché or is it a touché?

HEATHER (sweetly) How about a cliché?

DEREK (to cool the moment) How about a donut, everybody?

CARLETON Oh, we're all friends here, Derek. What are friends for if we can't speak our minds?

HEATHER Carleton, you've got to think of other people's feelings, at least sometimes.

CARLETON Sorry, I guess I'm just too macho.

HEATHER You're not *that* macho, Carleton.

CARLETON One night, Heather! *One* night is all I ask to prove myself!

ANNABELLE Where the hell's G.G.? I gave him a copy. I wonder if he hated my play! No, it should be on the main stage this summer. (Pulls them out of knapsack) Ah! Here are the new pages! I put them in my secret compartment. So nobody could steal them.

CARLETON No comment. I'm a gentleman.

DEREK We'd all like to be on the main stage this summer, Annabelle. Don't be greedy now.

ANNABELLE We did your play last season. Give the rest of us a chance.

DEREK Is that how it's done? Not quality. You have a turn! (gesturing around) Now you! Has everybody had a turn?

ANNABELLE I loved your play, I did! Now it's your turn to love mine. We'd better start, I suppose. I could kill that G.G.! Let me go see if he's on his way. (Runs offstage)

CARLETON What do you say to a six-pack while we read? (Pulls it out of the bag)

DEREK Do you suppose Noel Coward brought six-packs?

CARLETON I'm not Noel Coward.

DEREK I won't touch that!

CARLETON I'm afraid it's generic. (Shows a can labeled simply "Beer")

HEATHER You're incredible, Carleton! (Takes the bag) Beer's beer!

DEREK Not for me.

CARLETON Here! (throws DEREK a beer anyway) And donuts too! (Shows them)

DEREK Beer and donuts — working-class ambrosia! On second thought. (Won't touch either)

HEATHER By the way, there's a cookout at my house on the 28th. Big Bill and little Billy and little Kathy are going to make sloppy joes!

DEREK (Makes a face)

HEATHER And I invited my Fred, my ex.

ANNABELLE (returning) You did?

HEATHER All he had was a slight concussion. So we've kissed and made up. We even cast him in a *Midsummer Night's Dream*. As a wolf!

CARLETON Sorry, but I'll be in Los Angeles then. (bragging) Got the playwright-in-residency!

HEATHER (reluctantly) Terrific, Carleton.

(The others offer their congratulations but without enthusiasm)

CARLETON Should open some doors.

ANNABELLE I don't see G. G. anywhere. Let's start without him. Derek, would you read the part of *Darryl*? (Hands him script)

DEREK I'm flattered. But I hate to read cold.

ANNABELLE Please.

DEREK Any suggestions on my part?

ANNABELLE (thinks) Just try to be personable.

HEATHER It'll be a stretch, but he'll try.

ANNABELLE I guess I should read the stage directions, shouldn't I?

CARLETON (pretending petulance) I'm gonna pee-pee unless I get to play a part!

ANNABELLE You can't, my petulant pet.

CARLETON You don't like Carleton's acting?

ANNABELLE We all love Carleton to death. But you didn't prepare it, and Derek is more suited to the role now that I think about it.

CARLETON I won't forget this, Miss Poe. You can't have any of my donuts, not even the yucky ones on the bottom!

ANNABELLE Okay, cast! Places! The curtain is going up! (They move around, getting ready) How about if we stood? It gives it more the flavor of a real performance.

CARLETON I'd rather sit.

ANNABELLE And drink beer. I know.

HEATHER Well, some of us can sit and some of us can stand, how's that?

ANNABELLE Won't that seem funny?

CARLETON Can't hurt this script.

ANNABELLE Come on, everybody! (when they don't show a lot of enthusiasm) What if it were your script?

HEATHER Is it a comedy?

ANNABELLE I haven't decided yet.

HEATHER Do we need anything else?

ANNABELLE Just a knapsack. We can use mine! (Holds it up)

CARLETON Do we have to get into all that? I thought we were just going to read for the words.

DEREK I love words!

ANNABELLE Don't get all excited. I just want to give it the best reading possible. I'm a little nervous.

CARLETON It's not supposed to be a staged reading.

ANNABELLE If it goes well here, then Paul will take it more seriously. You've got to make your work look good to get it put on!

CARLETON That's why you misplaced the scripts?

ANNABELLE So I'm a little eccentric! Isn't that a sign of genius?

CARLETON Now that is a straight line! But I refuse to take the advantage now being offered me. (under his breath) Just one night, Annabelle, just half a night?

ANNABELLE *Avanti!* I've come this far!

CARLETON Nobody will say yes to me!

DEREK You haven't asked me, Carleton.

CARLETON You know, lately that doesn't seem like such a bad idea! (Looks around as if to shock the others)

DEREK Ah, whisper those sweet nothings in my ear and I'll follow you anywhere. Remember, boys and girls, that sex can be generic — just like beer.

ANNABELLE Anybody else for sex before we start?

CARLETON One for me!

(ANNABELLE arranges CARLETON and HEATHER far upstage, which becomes her "offstage.")

ANNABELLE Derek, there! (Points) Me, here! (to all) Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Playwrights Group of the Downtown Theater! (Applause from others) Tonight we're about to hear an exciting new play by Annabelle Poe, that shining luminary in the glittering world of theatrical art! (More applause) (to DEREK) Is the tape ready?

DEREK All set!

CARLETON I'll start it when it's time.

DEREK No, I'll start it.

CARLETON I'm closer to it.

ANNABELLE Don't fight. Do it together.

DEREK Annabelle, these pages are a mess!

ANNABELLE I can point to you when you're supposed to speak. See, Carleton-poo, you get to play several parts after all. (putting him far downstage, as though he's offstage)

CARLETON Goody! Do I get to cry? I give good cry.

ANNABELLE And I guess I'd better read the extra parts myself.

CARLETON What's this play about anyway?

ANNABELLE The setting of the play is backstage at a downtown theater where a group of playwrights is having a play reading.

(There is a slightly stunned silence)

DEREK Clever! Anybody we know?

ANNABELLE That's all I'm going to tell you. Oh, and it's a one act! Are we ready? Oh, I don't want anybody to take any of the play personally. Promise?

DEREK Uh-oh! Is it, by any chance, called "The Murder of Gonzago"?

ANNABELLE It doesn't have a title yet.

DEREK There are some twelve or sixteen lines I'd like to insert myself, perhaps. (There is no response) That's called a literary allusion. Hamlet. (still no response) The play within the play. Jesus, what illiterates!

ANNABELLE I got it! Let's go! It's definitely not about anybody here. Is that clear? (Points to HEATHER) Okay, start! (There is a hesitation) Sorry, you're right — *I* start! (reading from script as she enters from the same place she entered at the beginning of the play, behaves in a similar way to the opening, just slightly different in movements) "Hi, Darryl! Sorry I'm late!"

DEREK (reading from script) "Where are the other playwrights?"

ANNABELLE (reading) "I saw Hannah trying to park her car. She may be late. I think she ran over a chicken."

DEREK (reading) "A chicken?"

ANNABELLE (reading) "Maybe it was just her brakes. They squeak. How have you been, Darryl?"

DEREK (reading) "Working on a re-write on the script we read last time. It's coming along quite well, if I must say so myself."

ANNABELLE (reading) "I thought it was terrible."

DEREK (reading) "You did? Well, what do you know!"

ANNABELLE (reading) "It needed a lot of work."

DEREK (reading) "Like hell it did! You people were so busy writing it the way you would've written it, you barely heard it!"

ANNABELLE (reading) "Don't be defensive. I've noticed that about you, Darryl. You're very defensive."

DEREK (reading) "I'm not defensive!" (as himself) Hey, what is this?

ANNABELLE Just a play.

DEREK Sounds vaguely familiar.

ANNABELLE It's sort of *commedia*. Comic types.

DEREK You mean generic?

ANNABELLE Keep on!

DEREK (reading) "Aren't we supposed to read your new play, Abigail?"

ANNABELLE (reading) "If I can find it. It may be in my inside coat pocket."
(She looks for scripts) That's your cue, Carleton.

CARLETON (He's been reading a newspaper, bored) Oh, sorry. (reading)
"Howdy, folks! Who wants to have sex with me?" (as himself) *What?!*

ANNABELLE Just read the lines.

CARLETON Nobody'd say that, not as soon as he enters.

ANNABELLE I made up the character. I know what he'd say!

CARLETON I don't buy it. . . . Okay, it's your line, "Abigail."

ANNABELLE Sorry. (reading) "I don't want to have sex with you, Charles."

CARLETON (reading) "Why not? I have a stupendously large penis." (as himself) He
wouldn't say that!

ANNABELLE Yes, he would! (reading) "I don't want your penis, Charles, now
or ever, stupendous or small."

CARLETON (reading) "Not even for one night of erotic bliss?"

ANNABELLE (reading) "If it's so great, how come your wife left you?"

CARLETON (reading) "Oh, cruel and sudden!" (as himself) I don't always say that!

ANNABELLE Keep going! It's not you!

CARLETON (reading) "Hi, you two! Do you have any donuts? I ate a whole bag
of double glazed ones from Donut Heaven while my ex-wife, Thumper,
drove me here, and now I've run out." (as himself) Thumper?

ANNABELLE (reading) "Donuts are bad for you, Charles."

CARLETON (reading) "At least I don't forget everything, like some individuals I could
name."

ANNABELLE (reading) "Are you insinuating that *I'm* forgetful?"

CARLETON (reading) "I'm changing the subject! Where's Misty?"

DEREK (reading) "Misty can't make it tonight. She's depressed over the bad reviews
of her play."

ANNABELLE (reading) "She shouldn't pay attention to reviews, especially from Mortimer Heinous — and that rhymes with anus — of the *Chronicle*."

CARLETON (reading) "*She* should pay attention!"

ANNABELLE (reading) "You're cruel, Charles."

CARLETON (reading) "Would you rather I be hypocritical?"

ANNABELLE (reading) "A little tact never hurt anybody."

CARLETON (reading) "Nobody except Misty's audiences." (as himself) I don't like these lines. The character's too nasty!

ANNABELLE Heather, your entrance!

HEATHER (reading) "I finally found a parking place. It was tight and getting into it I killed a wino. But I'm here on time! Hi, Charles! Hi, Abigail! Hi, Darryl!"

OTHERS (together) "Hi, Hannah!"

HEATHER (reading) "Where's P. J.?"

DEREK (reading) "He's working late on the play festival."

HEATHER (reading) "And Saul, our new artistic director?"

DEREK (reading) "Can't come tonight. He's been negotiating to get the little stage next door back. The Fire Marshall may relent — if we promise not to burn up our audience."

CARLETON (as himself) It's not moving fast enough, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE Give it a chance! A real good part's coming up. (looking at script) Oh, that's my line! (reading) "Okay, ladies and germs, tonight we're going to hear a new play by that shining luminary in the glittering world of theatrical art — Abigail Baudelaire!"

CARLETON The names of the characters are awful!

ANNABELLE If you don't mind, save your feedback till later!

CARLETON (muttering) Abigail Baudelaire!

ANNABELLE Here's the good part — the play within the play! (reading) "My new play — a one-act — is about a group of playwrights meeting backstage at a theater to read one of the playwrights' new plays."

DEREK (reading) "Is it called 'The Murder of Gonzago'?" (as himself, about how she guessed what he would say) Annabelle, I'm impressed!

ANNABELLE The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of my . . . friends?

HEATHER I can't wait to find out what horrible deed is revealed in the play within the play.

ANNABELLE (reading) "Annabelle, out of breath, enters. (Pants) I'm sorry, Derek. Am I late?"

DEREK (as himself) *Derek?* (reading) "I expect you turkeys to be late. You're so wrapped up in yourselves you don't have the consideration to start anything on time — unless it's your own play of course!" (as himself, about the bitterness of the line) Ouch!

ANNABELLE (reading) "I saw Heather trying to park. She ran over her child — the boy, I think."

DEREK (reading) "She's young. She can have another."

ANNABELLE (reading) "Yes, I suppose *she* can."

DEREK (reading) "What does that mean?"

ANNABELLE (reading) "Nothing! . . . (moving closer to him) Can I tell you something confidential, Derek?"

DEREK (reading) "Of course — I'll use it immediately in my column."

ANNABELLE (reading) "I sort of envy Heather. I've never told anyone this . . ."

DEREK (reading) "Because she can have children and you can't? Oh, we all know all about your problem. We discuss it all the time, behind your back"

ANNABELLE (reading) "She can take them for granted — run over them and whatnot, but I can't have even one!

CARLETON (reading) "Did I hear somebody say 'one'? *One* night, one night, with any woman here. That's all I ask!" (as himself) You're sick, Annabelle!

ANNABELLE I don't know what you're talking about!

CARLETON You know very well what I'm talking about. You put us in your play!

ANNABELLE Don't be silly. The names are similar, that's all!

CARLETON Well, I don't like the way I'm being portrayed. It's not accurate!

ANNABELLE Just holding the mirror up to life!

HEATHER I thought we weren't in it!

DEREK Can't we change "Derek's" lines a little — to make me sweeter?

ANNABELLE May I call your attention to page six. Go ahead, look!

(They all turn to page six)

CARLETON (reading) "Well, I don't like the way I'm being portrayed. It's not accurate!" (as himself) Am I really that predictable?

DEREK Apparently we're all generic. Look down a few speeches. (Points to script)

CARLETON (looks, then reads) "Am I really that predictable?" (as himself)
Annabelle, stop it!

DEREK (looking further in script, reading) Listen to this! "Can't I change my lines a little — to make me sweeter?" (as himself) It's uncanny!

ANNABELLE I *thought* you'd like it!

DEREK I didn't say I *liked* it. Only that it was uncanny.

ANNABELLE It's not really based on any of you.

CARLETON Like hell!

HEATHER I can't wait to see how it comes out.

DEREK We all stab and poison each other at the end?

ANNABELLE That's my other little secret.

CARLETON (angry) I think you're being a real bitch, Annabelle or Abigail or whoever you are!

ANNABELLE Who asked you!

CARLETON You're using us!

ANNABELLE I'm using my own experiences!

CARLETON It's exploitation!

ANNABELLE You sex fiends should talk!

CARLETON Sex fiend? At least I have appetites — healthy appetites!

HEATHER I think maybe what we need right now is a *deus ex machina*! (Gets up, claps her hands twice)

(The telephone rings.)

ANNABELLE (answering it) Yes? . . . G.G.?

HEATHER Is G. G. a *deus ex machina*?

(All heads turn toward the telephone.)

ANNABELLE Are you coming? We've started, but we could start over . . . G.G.? . . . G. G.? (to the others) I think he fell down. Hello, G.G., get up, dear. Get back on the phone. . . . Yes, I'm still here. . . You're talking to Annabelle, that's right.

DEREK What's he on this time?

ANNABELLE (covering the mouthpiece, waving at DEREK to be quiet) I was hoping you could be here, G. G. I've written a part for you. (Holds up the revised pages) What did you say? It's a little hard to — (covering the receiver again) (to others) He's out of it. (to G.G.) Are you going to make it tonight, G.G.? We all miss you. . . . No? You're picking the final scripts for the festival this summer. It's a madhouse up there. You've had over five hundred entries! (turning away from the others, more quietly) Did you get the copy of the play I sent? Sorry it was a little disorganized . . . You got it? . . . In fact, you got *all* our scripts! (Turns back to the others with a disapproving look)

VOICES (ad lib) All our scripts? Oh? You sent a script too? (The others give each other looks)

DEREK My, isn't that interesting! We've all submitted scripts to the same contest. Perhaps Annabelle's play here does end with murder and mayhem after all! (grabbing the telephone) As for you, G.G., I have just one thing to say. Is there anything you'd like kissed and how often? . . . What? What you pick won't be entirely your own decision. . . G.G. did you go away? G.G.? There you are! Your dad said you have to have some people from the Gluck Foundation look at the finalists. (for the others' benefit) And some of those bozos don't know nothing about plays! . . . G.G.? (explaining to the others) He fell off something. G.G, get off the floor, all right?

HEATHER Is he okay?

DEREK Oh, hi, G.G. Yes, this is Derek. . . Oh, you've got two \$15,000 play

production prizes to give out this time! (slyly) Nobody here is interested in those, I'm sure.

(Some nervous laughs. All are very interested but won't admit it)

HEATHER That's G.G.'s decision, not ours. Let me speak to him. (Takes telephone)
Hi, honey!

DEREK My, aren't we above it all, though.

HEATHER We may not all be as greedy as you, Darryl — I mean Derek!

DEREK I prefer to call it ambition, It's very American, like motherhood — "Hannah."

HEATHER (sweetly) Maybe you'd get farther if you didn't push quite so hard. (to G.G. on telephone) We're sorry you can't make it, hon. . . . G.G.? (listens) I can hear him snoring.

DEREK (sweetly) Drugs are a terrible thing. Let's get back to the script, what do you say? Here, Heather, read my part. I want to see how it sounds from an objective point of view. (Shoves the script into her hands)

HEATHER Me?

DEREK I'm sure Annabelle won't mind. If she knows what's good for her!

ANNABELLE (taking the telephone from HEATHER) G.G.? . . . He's still snoring.
(Shrugs) Bye-bye, G.G. (Hangs up)

HEATHER Okay if I read this, Annabelle?

ANNABELLE That's fine. Now I don't want any of you to take offense. It shows us all about ourselves. We can even learn how to be better human beings, me included.

DEREK It had better do something for us, Annabelle, or we'll all put you in a play, and it won't be pretty!

HEATHER Where are we?

ANNABELLE Let's pick it up on page ten. Oh, I forgot to tell you! I haven't been able to think of an ending yet.

CARLETON What?

ANNABELLE The very last part.

CARLETON We're supposed to supply your ending?

ANNABELLE Well, I thought you might have some suggestions.

DEREK Maybe one of us will stand up and yell for lights, thus revealing ourselves as the murderer.

HEATHER (playing along) Is it me, "Hannah"? Or is it you, "Charles?"

CARLETON It's not me!

HEATHER Or could it be — G.G.!

(They all turn at once to the telephone – the absent G.G..)

DEREK Or could it be —

(They all turn at once toward ANNABELLE.)

CARLETON Maybe we all murder the horrible *playwright* at the end!

ANNABELLE Now, now, this is a work of art. It's all imagination!

CARLETON It's plagiarism, from life.

ANNABELLE Read on, Mac Duff!

CARLETON Audiences won't like it either. Too in-groupy.

HEATHER Depends. They understand conflict and competition.

DEREK And greed and sordid motives!

CARLETON It's too complicated.

ANNABELLE Not once you can see the actors doing it. Besides, you can't always cater to an audience's lowest instincts. This isn't TV!

CARLETON I know what they like — and what they don't. I have low instincts and I'm proud of them!

DEREK Well, I know for a fact one thing *this* (meaning himself) audience doesn't like is a bunch of characters sitting around talking about what they like or don't like in a play! Shall we get on with it or not?

CARLETON Actually, I'm game. (to ANNABELLE) And cursed be he who cries, "Hold, enough!"

DEREK Wrong play, but not bad.

CARLETON I knew which play it was from!

ANNABELLE Let's pick it up from where the characters start expressing their opinions about Annabelle's play. Page twenty. Right after they argue about whether the characters are based on real people or not. You have to give me this – I really know my characters.

CARLETON Beware of surprises, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE Now, now!

HEATHER From what page?

(DEREK condescendingly helps her find the place.)

DEREK Twenty.

(They all find page twenty.)

ANNABELLE Annabelle says, "So what did you think of my play?"

CARLETON (as himself) Where are we in the so-called action?

ANNABELLE All the writers have just hugged and kissed and forgiven one another, and all their rivalries and animosities are resolved.

CARLETON I see. (Looks at script) "Carleton" here says, "I loved your play, Annabelle. It's funny and beautifully tender."

ANNABELLE (reading) "Thank you, Carleton. I'm surprised at how much you liked it. Heather? What did you think?"

HEATHER (reading) "It's the best thing you've ever done — very clever and well-thought-out. I'm sure the main stage here or G.G.'s festival will want to do it. Maybe both of them. Maybe Broadway!"

ANNABELLE (as herself) Some of the other characters are supposed to say some similar things here, but the pages don't seem to be here. But I say — (reading) "You're sweet. I'm flattered. . . . That leaves you, Derek."

(Disgusted, DEREK grabs the script from HEATHER.)

DEREK (reading) "Well, do you want the truth?"

ANNABELLE (reading) "Yes."

DEREK (reading) "The truth is I can only echo what I've already heard. It's a first-rate play and without question deserves a Tony!" (He drops his script in disgust)

ANNABELLE (reading) "Oh, thank you, one and all. I hoped you'd like my little effort!"

SCRIPT CHARACTERS (together) "We love you, Annabelle!"

ANNABELLE And then they hug and kiss and there's a . . . How about a folk dance at the end? (She does a little bit of a dance)

(There is a silence after they finish the script. They stare at her.)

ANNABELLE Well?

CARLETON Why don't we go out to Lefty's and have a few drinks and talk about it there?

HEATHER You guys have fun! (Starts to leave)

ANNABELLE Oh, say what you think. Heather?

HEATHER (hedging) . . . I liked it. I've never seen a play like this one before.

ANNABELLE Anybody else? Derek?

DEREK (hedging) . . . I'll call you, Annabelle.

ANNABELLE Anybody else?

CARLETON Well yeah, I'd like to give my two cents' worth.

ANNABELLE I'm sure you will.

CARLETON It seems a little self-indulgent to me. You know, bringing yourself into it like that. I think it would be better if it was more objective.

ANNABELLE It wouldn't be the same play then.

CARLETON Maybe that's not such a bad idea.

ANNABELLE Why can't a playwright refer to herself if it's relevant? I'm trying to expand the dimensions of art. Like Derek.

DEREK Don't drag me into this.

CARLETON I'm just saying that it sort of lost me near the end there.

ANNABELLE Maybe that's because you're dumb, Carleton!

CARLETON You asked for our criticisms!

ANNABELLE Only because it's expected! Heather, what did you honestly think of it?

HEATHER I liked it.

ANNABELLE Oh, you like everything! You're hedging, the way you always do!

HEATHER No, I'm not! I liked everything except the ending. It sort of petered out, I thought. What did *you* think of it?

ANNABELLE I found the ending warm and good-natured — Shakespearean — after all the bickering early on.

HEATHER It might need a bit more resolution of the issues brought up.

ANNABELLE Why? Life doesn't resolve issues, all neat and tidy.

HEATHER Well, no. But this is a play.

ANNABELLE I thought you liked it.

HEATHER I did. That doesn't mean it can't be improved.

ANNABELLE You want me to change the ending and make them all slash one another to death? There's too much violence in everything these days as it is!

DEREK The sad fact of the matter is people like violence. They yawn otherwise. It was good enough for Shakespeare.

ANNABELLE I refuse to cheapen my play with a lot of gratuitous mayhem!

CARLETON Then don't make it gratuitous.

ANNABELLE As I recall, Mr. Scudder, your last play wasn't so hot! You have a lot of nerve criticizing mine!

CARLETON Annabelle, you're getting defensive!

ANNABELLE Screw defensive! I'm merely standing up for a work of art that apparently is over the heads of most of my illustrious companions!

HEATHER (trying to be a peacemaker) I thought it had a lot of good lines.

ANNABELLE Don't throw me any crumbs!

HEATHER It wasn't meant to be a crumb!

ANNABELLE Everybody around here is always so hyper-critical! Maybe it's not

the play. Maybe it's the way you read. Maybe you weren't *right* for the parts!

CARLETON We're being polite! It was pretty tacky of you to bring up our personal problems in *your* play!

ANNABELLE I can write about anything I damn well please!

CARLETON I don't always eat donuts! I do other things!

ANNABELLE I know — drink beer. But there's only so much room in a one act, Carleton.

HEATHER And I didn't like the tasteless jokes about my parking skills. I don't think you, as a woman, should contribute to that old stereotype about bad women drivers!

ANNABELLE But, Heather, it happens to be true about you!

HEATHER I thought you said it wasn't about us!

ANNABELLE (exasperated) It's about you, and it's not about you. It's literature!

HEATHER I came off as such a dull character.

ANNABELLE I give you a little bit of humor, and then you complain about that!

CARLETON I'm not that one-dimensional creep in your play!

ANNABELLE You could've fooled me!

CARLETON You'd better not put this on the main stage, or anywhere else, or I'll sue your for defamation of character!

ANNABELLE You're not famous enough for anybody to know it was you!

DEREK I didn't particularly relish the way you portrayed me either. I'm not that bitchy. Another stereotype!

ANNABELLE Where do you think stereotypes come from? Evidently you two never listen to yourselves! Besides, they're both great parts!

DEREK I don't understand why you felt it necessary to attack us! I thought we were friends.

ANNABELLE It's not an attack. There's a lot of affection there.

CARLETON Affection? I feel like I've been . . . raped! And it's *not* funny!

ANNABELLE Do you all feel that way?

HEATHER My part isn't very big. And I seem like a buffoon. Is that really what you think of me? What you all think of me?

ANNABELLE You know how writers work. You take things and you change them around. What I heard I thought was real funny. I bet G.G. would love it!

HEATHER I notice you didn't do a number on him like you did on us. Were you afraid he wouldn't pick your play for the festival?

ANNABELLE I — I was selective. I have a right to use just as much as I need.

DEREK/ HEATHER/ CARLETON Yeah!

ANNABELLE It was cathartic. After all, I have to live through these readings we have!

DEREK We don't?

ANNABELLE I thought of it first! Month after month, you people come in here without having rehearsed anything, without even having read through the scripts most of the time. I gave you this one ahead of time and you still didn't even bother to read it! Or your own scripts are a mess. And then we sit around and stumble through these half-assed exercises and drink beer and then give our petty, bleary-eyed, self-serving critiques, and then we go home and plot — not our plays — but plot how to get our plays — and not somebody else's — put on! We all know we're never going to get Stage II back, and so there isn't room for all our plays anymore. Only for a few! Well, by god, if I have to endure all this, the least I'm going to get out of it is a goddamned one-act play!

CARLETON (applauding) Nice soliloquy, but it's not enough. The plain fact of the matter is your play isn't any good! How do you like them apples!

ANNABELLE You couldn't write your way out of a paper bag. There hasn't been one play of yours — not one — that I could respect! My play is wonderful! Wonderful!

HEATHER Annabelle, you're not being rational. Stop and think for a minute. The ending, where all the other writers congratulate her on her play, is nothing but wishful thinking.

ANNABELLE It is not!

HEATHER You yourself said it needed some work.

ANNABELLE (losing control) Oh, shut up, Heather! What do you know about it!

You've hung around kids so long you can't even read!

HEATHER Annabelle!

ANNABELLE You're all saying these things because you're jealous! You'll tell Paul my script was no good and there'll be more chance he'll pick yours!
(She runs over and turns off the tape recorder, perhaps throws it on the couch) I know how you all think, you conniving creeps!

HEATHER Annabelle, stop it! Calm down!

ANNABELLE I'd like to shoot every one of you!

HEATHER (getting up) We'd better call it a night —

ANNABELLE Sit down, you! I have a gun! (Looks in her knapsack) I can't seem to find it! But I do have this! (Takes out a knife)

HEATHER (discombobulated) Abigail! Annabelle!

ANNABELLE I've slashed two muggers with this. It'll work just as well on all of you!

CARLETON Annabelle, now this is getting out —

ANNABELLE Stay where you are, jackass! Or I'll cut your famous penis off!
(He sits) Anybody else got anything to say? (Silent intimidation)
Okay then, let *me* say a few words! You come here and have the gall to find fault with my work. You? This pathetic bunch of sick dogs daring to give me advice on writing or anything else in life!

HEATHER (quietly) Annabelle, please . . .

ANNABELLE (going over the edge now) I said shut up! I know all about you! So good, so family-oriented! So fertile! Well, maybe I can't have children, but at least I can write plays! And how do you manage to get your feeble little monologues produced around here? By prostituting your body to the directors, that's how! To the stage-hands! Even the guys who run the concession stand! You'd gang bang with the audience if you thought it would get you somewhere! Yes, do you all know the real reason Heather has so much trouble parking her car? Because there's usually some man in the next seat with his tongue in her lap, that's why!

HEATHER (reacts in shock, shame, turns aside) Oh! Oh, Annabelle!

ANNABELLE Deny it all you like! You know it's true!

HEATHER (breaks down and begins to weep) Oh!

DEREK That was uncalled for, Annabelle, uncalled for.

ANNABELLE And you, Mr. Experimental Playwright and all-around Mr. Sweetness, always the first to make biting remarks about others, especially behind their backs, that is when you aren't weeping over some sentimental slop about albinos! Well, what about your little known but highly disgusting sexual kink?

DEREK I hope you aren't so unliberated as to throw homosexuality in my face!

ANNABELLE Oh no, not that! What about your funny little predilection — not for sodomy with mere human beings. Nothing so ordinary! For you it's sodomy with slimy, common garden slugs! Garden slugs up your *bumhole*, night after night!

DEREK (weakly) It's not true . . .

ANNABELLE (wildly) I have photographs! (Points to her knapsack) Shall I show them around?

DEREK (breaks down) No! No!

ANNABELLE You should be ashamed! (Telephone rings. ANNABELLE seizes it furiously) Yeah, what the fuck do you want? (not nice) Oh, G. G., it's you! Did you finally haul your ass off the floor, Mr. Contest Coordinator!

CARLETON Annabelle, you're going overboard!

ANNABELLE Am I? Well, I've gone this far. I might as well go all the way, hadn't I? (into telephone) What well-connected, incompetent festival organizer only holds his job at all because his rich da-da wants his spoiled little boy to have *something* to do with himself besides space out all day long! (Listens) Got that, G.G.?

CARLETON Annabelle —

ANNABELLE It is too true, and you know it! Am I coming through loud and clear enough for you, foghead! (Slams the telephone down) Okay, I've gone this far. I've stopped kissing G.G.'s butt! Anybody else? Now could I drink hot blood!

CARLETON (stepping out boldly) There's nothing you can say about me that will affect me in the slightest.

ANNABELLE (slowly approaching him) Ah yes, Carleton, at last we come to you.

CARLETON Do your worst, Annabelle!

ANNABELLE I gave you the best part in the play, and were you grateful, appreciative? Not you! All you could think about was how badly you've been portrayed!

CARLETON (contemptuously) Is that it?

ANNABELLE He thinks he's somethin' — this greasy little donut with a beer center!

CARLETON I'm waiting, Annabelle!

ANNABELLE (holding the knife out as she advances on him) All right, Carleton. Do you want to know why no woman will sleep with you anymore? The real reason?

CARLETON Be careful!

ANNABELLE It's not because of your penis, flabby though that upon occasion has been known to be. Nor even its size, or the false advertising you surround said member with. Not even your notorious lack of precautions. No woman will spend that proverbial "one night, just one night" with you, Carleton, because of what everybody except you knows all too well — that you suffer from a perennial, mind-boggling case of — (Backs him up until he's lying on the sofa)

CARLETON No! NO!

ANNABELLE YES! Carleton! YES! You don't just have crabs. You have crabs the size of mice! Like a *horror movie*!

CARLETON Don't say it! Don't say anymore!

ANNABELLE But there is more! You have them in your eyebrows right this minute! (hovering over him) I can see them! For god's sake, man, don't you *feel* them!

CARLETON (whimpering) I can't help it! They keep coming back! I've tried everything! Everything! (sobbing) Please don't tell my porn director! I'll never work again!

ANNABELLE (wiping the hair out of her face) More? You want more, you puckered-up assholes?

VOICES (unable to move, crushed, ad lib) No more! Please! Stop!

CARLETON (weakly) Hold, enough, Annabelle! Hold . . . *enough!*

ANNABELLE Aha! And so we come to the end of our little drama here tonight. I don't suppose we'll be coming back for these readings anymore, will we? (Gone "mad") Yes, I killed it, but someone had to do it! (as in a dream) Perchance we'll all return in twenty years and reminisce, even joke, about this night — an epilogue for the future. (broadly) But until then I leave you to fester in the knowledge of yourselves as you really are! . . . Now give me back my scripts! (She goes around and collects the scripts, then hugs them to her breast as she falls to her knees) My babies! My babies! They tried to murder you, but I wouldn't let them. I wouldn't let them! (She laughs madly, holding the scripts to her chest, her head thrown back.)

(The others sit or slump, some even on the floor, in a comic way, reminiscent of the dead bodies at the end of *Hamlet*.)

ANNABELLE And the curtain falls! (Strikes a melodramatic posture, fist clenched.)

BLACKOUT

End of Play