

SOUR GRAPES

— a one-act play

["Sour Grapes" was selected as one of three *contest-winning* one-act plays and produced by the Actors Theater of Santa Cruz in 1997.]

CHARACTERS: (6)

MEL MUDD, irate actor/director/producer, 25-45

LEX PENNYWHISTLE, jaded, bored, witty, 35-60

MARK HALEY, helpful, judicious, gentlemanly, 30-45

BARBARA WINSTON, a good-time Charlie, a freeloader, a pushover, 28-50

DEENA BRUCE, a hypocrite, a conniver with a secret agenda, age 25-40

HARRY FLERQUE, a joke-telling fool, 30-50

SETTING:

A meeting room of a television station in a large city, where a party for the Critics Circle is about to begin. Some chairs, a table or two, a punch bowl, a bottle of white wine, some paper cups, a few snacks; nothing special.

(MEL enters cautiously, looks around to make sure no one can see him, goes to the punch bowl on the table, takes out a container with a clear liquid inside, pours it into the bowl, stirs it, looking around stealthily, then starts to sneak out just as LEX enters.)

LEX Is the party in here?

MEL (annoyed) Are you Lex Pennywhistle?

LEX So it's said.

MEL In the flesh?

LEX (suspiciously) Yes.

MEL Then this is your party. (Points into the room) I understand the punch is especially good.

LEX You don't say. Are you the busboy?

MEL (insulted) That's exactly right. I'm the busboy. (Leaves)

LEX (calling after him) Hey, there's something I wanted! (MEL leaves even though he hears LEX) I wanted some — (He throws up his hands at the lack of service) Oh, I suppose he'll be back. (Enters the room further, checks out the punch bowl, lifts the ladle, sniffs the punch) Oh God, it's virgin! (He ladles out a cupful anyway, holds up the paper cup dismissively) Wouldn't you know Harry'd have paper cups! (Puts his cup down in mild disgust without drinking it)

MARK (entering) Lex, how nice to see you. Looks like we're the early arrivals, doesn't it? Saw you at the mystery play the other night. Wasn't that fun? That wonderful old mansion — and three murders in four courses.

LEX Mark, the food was atrocious. I am so tired of nasturtiums in my salads! If I want flowers in my food, I'll become a florist! And the whole play was just one joke that limped to that overextended ending.

MARK Really? I thought the ending kept building.

LEX And when they had the critic from *The Scimitar* at the far table turn out to be one of the so-called murder victims I thought, Oh, god, can't they do better than this. Putting one of us in their four-course stomach ache. Please!

MARK (easy-going) Maybe it depended on the table you were sitting at.

LEX Maybe so I saw you laughing like a hyena.

MARK (tolerantly) Was I? I hope I didn't disturb you.

LEX I simply couldn't understand why everybody seemed to be laughing so much. Did they hire a clique? If they think all that have to do to get a good review out of me is feed me, they've got another think coming.

MARK Lex, have you ever thought that just possibly you might —

(BARBARA enters flamboyantly)

BARBARA Oh, my god, food! (Grabs a cracker from the table immediately, gobbles it up) Oh, this is fantastic! Four stars! Four and a half!

LEX Hello, Barbara. Hello! Did you see us over here? (teasing) It's just a cracker, Barbara!

BARBARA (with lots of energy) Oh, hi you two! I'm sorry, you're right. Naughty me, I headed right for the snacks. Hold me back! Keep that table away from me. Be gone! (She makes a cross with her fingers as if keeping off a vampire) Oh, maybe one more little bite. Who's to know? Takes one) Where's Harry? I thought he'd be here by now.

MARK He said for us to go ahead and party without him and he'll be up later. He's re-doing one of his reviews.

BARBARA Wasn't Harry good at the Awards Ceremony? I'd give him a ten out of ten any day.

LEX But did he really have to tell three incontinence jokes when he presented the award to Theater Elder?

BARBARA Oh, Harry means well! So he's a little insensitive sometimes. Oh, look, punch! Aren't you having any, Lex? What's wrong with it? Aren't we supposed to drink it yet?

LEX (under his breath) We're supposed to bathe in it first.

BARBARA It looks delicious! (stirs it) Two thumbs up. But, no, I better not. Too many calories. Get away! Get away!

MARK Harry said that's alcohol-free.

BARBARA (recoiling in mock horror from the punch bowl) Ugh! No alcohol! Ugh! Ugh!

LEX Why don't you try that one for a change? You know how you get, Barbara.

MARK Harry said he's bringing up another bowl of punch — one *with* alcohol.

BARBARA (to LEX) What do you mean, how I get?

LEX Never mind.

BARBARA Never mind 'never mind.' What do you mean — how I get?

LEX I was referring to the way you presented your award the other night.

MARK You were delightful, Barbara.

BARBARA That's what other people told me. But not to you, Lex?

LEX Why am I always condemned to speak the truth?

MARK Perhaps it's not the truth, Lex.

BARBARA God knows, *you* drink enough!

LEX But I can handle it.

BARBARA If you call getting so immobile you can't move handling it.

LEX Barbara, you fell down going up to the podium. Or did seeing that depend on which table you were sitting at too?

BARBARA That was intentional.

LEX Cutting your lip was intentional? Bleeding on your dress was intentional?

BARBARA Lex, you have no sense of theater! At least I got up on the stage and did something.

LEX And I just sulked and seethed in the background?

BARBARA You've never been up there once. You really should try it. It'll open your chakras.

LEX I don't want my chakras opened, thank you.

BARBARA Well, I'm glad you didn't review me! I thought we had a great time at the Awards this year. 'It had laughs. It had tears. I loved it!'

LEX In fact, you'd give it three thumbs up! If you had them to give. (Shows his two thumbs) You know what I hate most about being a critic? It isn't the deadlines. It isn't publicists hounding me to see their plays. It's not even the large number of tedious evenings I have to spend in the theater. It's finding adjectives! 'Stunning!' 'Riotous!' 'Finely chiseled!'

MARK (tongue in cheek) I didn't think you knew words like those, Lex.

BARBARA Yes, Lex, have you have considered that perhaps you —

(DEENA enters)

DEENA There you are! My favorite people in the whole world!

BARBARA Deena, you look lovely!

DEENA (showing off her outfit) Like it?

BARBARA It's exquisite! Take it off! I want it immediately.

LEX 'Five stars for that outfit!' 'She loved it.' "Worth a trip from anywhere in the Bay Area!"

DEENA Lex! Just the person I want to see!

LEX I'll bet.

DEENA No, it's true. Can we talk . . . privately? Come over here. (Pulls him away from the others)

LEX What's up?

DEENA (to the others) Go on about your business now. I'm talking to Lex.

(BARBARA and MARK start to talk quietly together)

DEENA (suddenly to LEX) How's Barbara tonight? Drunk?

LEX Not yet. Just peeing her pants over everything, as usual.

DEENA Wasn't she embarrassing at the Awards Ceremony! I felt so sorry for her.

LEX You did?

DEENA I saw you scowling. Believe me, I felt the same. And she's the Vice President of this organization too!

MARK (calling pleasantly) I hope you're not talking about us, Deena.

DEENA What makes you think that? (to LEX, about MARK) He's such a wimp, don't you think. So gracious, always the gentleman. Makes me want to puke — in a ladylike way, of course.

LEX I thought I was the only one who felt that way.

DEENA Trust me, Lex, you're not alone. I feel a real kinship with you.

LEX You wouldn't say things about me now when I wasn't listening, would you, Deena?

DEENA Lex, what do you take me for? You're the one person in the Circle I can relate to. I don't let on, but I still feel uneasy around these people. Since I'm new to the Circle, I was hoping I could count on you as . . . Can I tell you something?

LEX What's that?

DEENA I'm not inviting the others, but I'm hoping that you'll come see my show. Yes, I'm acting again! But I'm scared to death. Say you'll come and see me. I really value your opinion.

LEX But I'm such a terrible curmudgeon, I thought.

DEENA You're hard, but you're fair. It's not because I want your vote for a Circle award. Good heavens, I'm too grown up to care about awards from critics. I just want you to come and see my work. Honestly!

MARK (on the other side of the stage) What do you suppose she's saying to him?

BARBARA (thinking about the spread) Do you suppose they're going to have any Swedish meatballs tonight? I love Swedish meatballs.

MARK Harry said it's just a little get-together, nothing big, to unwind after picking all the awards and putting on the ceremony, so I don't think he's planning meatballs.

LEX (on the other side of the stage) I promise I'll come see you act, Deena. But I can't promise more than that. We all know what happens to critics who let themselves be used. Once the dear artists have their ego needs satisfied, they toss us aside like . . . like used rubbers.

DEENA Now, Lex, I don't want you to misunderstand me. I never meant to influence your opinion. You know that!

LEX I'm sure you didn't, Deena.

DEENA It's just that I respect your opinion so much.

LEX And I yours.

DEENA I admire a man with a brain. And I think it's so nice when men and women can relate, as friends, without all that sex stuff.

MARK (to BARBARA) It doesn't look like much of a turnout tonight, does it?

BARBARA I wonder what happened?

DEENA (overhearing them) I think a lot of the critics are just worn out. They work so hard.

(HARRY enters carrying the second punch bowl — this one with alcohol)

HARRY Lady with a baby! Lady with a baby! Make way for alcohol! Are we having fun yet?

BARBARA Harry! I thought you'd never come!

HARRY You didn't wait, did you? Dig in! Dig in! What's this in the paper cup?

LEX I poured myself some punch. But I haven't touched it. So if . . .

BARBARA (teasing) It wasn't because there was no alcohol in it, I hope, Lex.

LEX (dismissively) Have a meatball, Barbara.

BARBARA Where did this rumor start that I indulge too much! It's not true! Great spread, Harry!

HARRY (about the second punch bowl) Plenty here for everybody! Come on! Come on and get it, you guys!

BARBARA Well, I'm not going to drink liquor now. I'll have some of Lex's instead. (Picks up the "poisoned" paper cup and almost drinks from it) Maybe it'll make me as sober as he is. We can sit around and scowl together. (Makes a face at him)

LEX (interrupting her before she can drink) No, I want my cup now, Barbara.

BARBARA But you said you didn't!

LEX Harry's busboy highly recommended it. So may I please have it back?

BARBARA Finders keepers! (She keeps the paper cup away from him, playfully, threatening to drink it)

HARRY (to LEX) My busboy? I don't have any busboy. By the way, everybody, do you know how a Southern mother knows when her daughter has started to menstruate?

LEX That guy that was fixing the punch when I came in.

HARRY Don't know what you're talking about.

LEX Here in the room. Didn't you send him up to make the punch?

HARRY I made this punch myself. But then I had to leave to re-do my review. Somebody broke my videotape. Vandals got in, apparently. . . . So how does a Southern mother know when her daughter has started to —

LEX I don't mean to make a big deal of this, but I am concerned about who that guy was and why he was in here.

HARRY It was probably just somebody from the station checking on who's who and

what's what. Lighten up. It's a party.

MARK I thought you didn't believe in critics becoming embroiled in murder mysteries, Lex.

LEX But that man knew my name. And there was something wrong about him.

DEENA What's the problem over here?

HARRY Just Lex being Lex. So anyway, how does a Southern mother know when her —

MARK Harry, that's an extremely crude joke. You sure you want to tell it?

HARRY It is?

LEX I haven't told any of you this, but I've received a few unpleasant phone calls in the last few days.

HARRY What do you mean by unpleasant?

LEX Like in not pleasant. What do you suppose unpleasant means?

HARRY Geez, Lex, I'm just asking.

LEX The calls were hang-ups, far too many of them.

MARK How many?

LEX Twelve. . . . You don't suppose someone could have come in here and put something in the punch, do you?

DEENA Who'd want to hurt us?

LEX I've made my share of enemies in the theater.

BARBARA (teasing) The list of murder suspects will be endless.

HARRY Then how about this one: what did the Arab say to the chicken that was crossing the road?

LEX Harry! For god's sake!

HARRY You heard it already?

LEX No, I haven't heard it already, and I don't want to hear it already!

HARRY Why not? It's a good one. Okay, what about this one? How many mongoloid idiots does it take to open a shopping mall?

LEX I don't understand why you people aren't taking this more seriously.

BARBARA The wages of sin, Lex!

LEX No sins. I've merely said what I think. That's what they pay me for. And need I point out that it won't be yours truly alone who drinks this punch.

BARBARA Oh, you're spoiling the fun, as always! (Puts down the paper cup)

MARK Well, what should we do?

HARRY I know! I'll taste it. (He starts to without thinking)

DEENA (stopping him before he can) Harry, don't drink that!

HARRY Well, if I fall down and starts screaming, you'll know it's no good.

DEENA Harry, don't you think there might be an easier way?

HARRY (thinking) Oh yeah, I guess you're right. Just trying to be a good host. It also seems to be the only way I can get to the 'punch line.' (Laughs too hard) Get it — get to the 'punch line'?

DEENA Could I have a word with you for a minute, Harry? (Beckons him off to the side)

HARRY (going with her) Yeah, what is it, Deena?

LEX (to the others) I'm sorry! But I'm removing that punch. (Goes for the bowl)

BARBARA Oh no, you're not! (Blocks his path, tries to stop him) Leave it where it is!

MARK Now you two! Don't turn this into a brawl.

(They argue, ad lib, but not so as to drown out DEENA and HARRY)

DEENA (off to the side) I don't know how you put up with them, Harry. They treat you terribly.

HARRY They do? (dawning) . . . You know, you're right. They *do*!

DEENA You do nice things for them and all they do is take you for granted. Won't even let you finish a joke.

HARRY Damn right! Do you know how many mongoloid idiots it takes to open a shopping mall?

DEENA Not right now, Harry. There's something I want to ask you.

HARRY Shoot away.

LEX (across the stage) Barbara, I know what I'm talking about!

BARBARA Why throw away perfectly good punch?

LEX I won't throw it way. I'll send it to thirsty mongoloid idiots opening a shopping mall!

DEENA Harry, I don't know if you know that I'm acting again. I've got the lead in a new play. Now I know I'm not eligible to vote for myself for one of our own awards, but it's my understanding that I *can* be nominated even though I'm a member of the Circle, is that right?

HARRY Absolutely.

DEENA Not that I expect to win or anything. I was just wondering if you might be able to make my opening. There's a scene where I — oh, how can I say this? — a scene where I take off all my clothes and stand like the Statue of Liberty.

HARRY (excited) Yeah? That sounds great!

DEENA It's very patriotic.

HARRY Yeah, I like patriotic!

DEENA That's why I'm inviting you. I'm not telling the others because, frankly, I don't value their opinions very much. But as for yours . . . (Touches him.)

HARRY You like mine, huh?

DEENA If you want — but only if you want — maybe you could even cover me on your TV show. I could probably get a video for you — of me as the Statue of Liberty. We could doctor it. You know, a band across *here* or *here* so that it can be telecast. It's going to be pretty explicit. (Points to parts of her body, getting him more excited)

HARRY That sounds fantastic, Deena. I'll see what I can do.

DEENA Now don't tell the others. Let this be our little secret, okay?

HARRY (nodding, tumescent, giddy) Okay! Okay!

LEX (about the punch) Harry, settle this once and for all! . . . (looking) Where are you?

HARRY What seems to be the problem now?

DEENA (slyly, quietly) Mark, could I see you for a second?

MARK Sure. What is it, Deena? (Goes off to the side with her.)

DEENA I was wondering if you could give me some advice on something. You're so gracious, such a gentleman. Maybe you could explain a few things to me. You see, there's this part I'm thinking of playing — a really nice woman — but I don't want her to be dull, and I'm not exactly clear on how I should do it. But, Mark, I bet you'd have some insights since —

MARK Me?

DEENA Yes, you . . .

(Their voices fade as she goes on conniving as MARK nods.)

LEX (separately, to the others, about the punch) I'm leaving. I've had enough of this.

MEL (entering) Oh, no, you're not! You're going to stay here and writhe on the floor while I watch!

LEX It's the busboy!

MEL (angry) Yeah, the busboy all right.

HARRY Oh, good! I didn't even know we had one. But since you're here, would you mind getting rid of this punch and bringing up a fresh batch?

MEL What's wrong with that? (Points to the first bowl) I made it just for you.

HARRY Lex thinks there's something wrong with it.

LEX Harry, you're telling the very guy who was putting something in it!

HARRY Oh, sorry. . . . You didn't put anything in this, did you?

MEL I certainly did! You're all about to die! (Reactions from the group: "What?" "What do you mean?" etc.) The poison should be taking effect any minute now. But it's slow-acting, so I'll have the time I need to set a few things straight around here.

(More fearful reactions from the group, such as "Poison?" "Oh, my god!" "Who is this guy?" and "This can't be happening!")

LEX There's just one thing wrong with your plan, sweet cheeks.

MEL Yeah? And what's that, sour nuts?

LEX None of us have drunk any of your punch.

MEL Of course you have! That punch has been up here for ages. You must have drunk some of it. Isn't this the Critics Circle?

LEX You forgot one thing in your little plan — the desperate refusal of this group to drink anything unless it has alcohol in it!

MEL Oh, my god!

MARK So you'd better leave while the leaving is good.

MEL I'm not leaving this room, and none of you are either. You're going to pay for what you did to me. Pay and pay dearly!

HARRY (uncertain) What is he going to do — charge us for something?

LEX (ironically) Yeah, is that your plan?

MEL I'm a desperate man. I'm going to — I'm going — (coming up with a new plan) No — commit suicide right here in front of you! (Dips himself a cupful from the second punch bowl) (dramatically) With this! (Holds it up) Don't try to stop me!

HARRY That's the wrong bowl, asshole. This is the one with the poison. (to the others) Isn't this the one with the poison?

OTHERS Yes. I think so, etc.

MEL You don't care if I live or die?

LEX If you're going to die, would you please hurry. You're interrupting the party.

MEL Laugh all you like, but when I go, I'm not going alone.

LEX (disgusted) Oh, please. . . . (a joke) Please go alone.

HARRY I've heard that suicidal people really do like to take others with them when they go.

LEX (about HARRY) You can take *him* with you. We won't mind.

HARRY Lex!

MARK What exactly did we do that's made you feel this way?

MEL You don't even know!?

MARK Not really.

MEL . . . I'm Mel Mudd!

DEENA Who?

MEL Actor, director, producer. (He waits expectantly.)

LEX Yeah, so?

MEL I've been doing theater in this town for years and you don't even know my name? Well, you're going to know it after tonight.

BARBARA Why don't you think this over. I'm sure you don't want to kill yourself.

MEL I have nothing to live for, after the way the play I directed was trashed.

MARK Nothing's that important. Nobody's review. Give it some time. The sting will go away.

MEL No, it won't.

HARRY Sure it will. What you need is some cheering up.

MEL No, I don't!

HARRY Sure you do. How many mongoloid idiots does it take to open a mall?

MEL This is cheering me up?

HARRY Come on, it's a good one.

MEL I don't care how many mongoloid idiots it takes to open a shopping mall! Or how many mongoloid idiots it takes to run a Critics Circle. Can't you people understand my pain! Or is it that you understand it but just don't care? (Suddenly makes a loud animal noise, preferably a duck or something equally bizarre, but something the actor can make funny) Sorry, but when I get emotionally upset, my Tourette's syndrome kicks in. (Has facial tics, then starts

loudly singing) "Some enchanted evening! You may see a stranger!" . . . I'm afraid I can't control it.

LEX When was this so-called bad review you got?

MEL Last week.

LEX Who gave it?

MEL None of the critics liked it. (to LEX) But yours was the worst.

MARK Was yours the piece where the woman keeps bumping into the wall and complaining about corporate greed?

MEL Exactly! Except that we didn't plan those bumpings into the wall. (reverently) It was a breakthrough on opening night!

LEX She should've 'broken through' that wall and kept right on going.

BARBARA I thought that was quite good, that piece. My review just hasn't come out yet. I called it 'zany,' 'nonstop laughs.'

MEL It was supposed to be serious! It's too late in any case. We've closed. You never gave it a chance.

LEX It had about as much chance as a butterfly up your butt.

MEL It's mainly because of you and your snotty words that you're all going to watch me die in horrible agony. You'll have me on your consciences forever. And then I'll come back as a ghost and haunt you all! (Suddenly more facial tics along with another inappropriate animal noise, such as a dog barking or a cow mooing) . . . You can see that my life is a mess!

HARRY Maybe you can get a job impersonating a _____ (names the animal that MEL just did)

MEL The ridicule doesn't even stop now!

LEX All right, so what was this oh-so-horrible review I gave you?

MEL You don't even remember?

DEENA He writes a lot of reviews. You can't expect him to remember everything he says.

MEL Well, I'll remember until the day I die.

MARK (impatiently) What the hell was it?

MEL He said I belong to the most vile of all the minorities.

MARK Which one is that?

MEL The totally untalented.

LEX Did I really say that?

MEL You certainly did!

LEX I'm surprised I forgot it. That's quite a good line. Do you have a copy on you?

MEL You bastard! How can you live with yourself writing lines like that?

LEX How can you live with yourself having some poor actress shout 'Corporate greed! Corporate greed' while she bumps into a wall?

MEL You treated my heartfelt work like ca-ca. *Ca-ca!*

LEX I consider that a positive review. I didn't say how much I truly hated it. If I had, maybe you'd be dead already and we wouldn't have to put up with this childish temper tantrum.

MEL I worked on that play for years. I had it re-written seventeen times. We had three staged readings. I changed the cast four times just to get the right mix, we had to change theaters twice, we couldn't get stage hands until the last minute, someone stole our light board and half our props, and then you come along and take your pissy little seat in the back and start judging me. Who appointed you the judge and jury of my theatrical reputation! . . . Wait! I feel my Tourette's kicking in again! (Starts singing "My momma done tole me, when I was in knee pants! My momma done tole me, son!" then adds animal noise. (to the others) I'm sorry! I simply can't control it!

LEX Don't invite the critics if you can't stand the heat.

MEL I can stand the heat. What I can't stand is some tired critic stomping all over my work.

LEX It doesn't matter how hard you worked on it. What matters is the result. Invite your mother if you want unbridled praise.

DEENA Yeah!

MEL (emotionally) My mother is *dead!*

LEX Good. Then she didn't have to see it. As for me, I'll praise what I want to praise, and no actor-director-producer or anyone else is going to tell me what that is.

MEL 'Entertain me! Entertain me! But of course I'm so bored, bored, bored out of my mind because I've seen everything, nothing you put on will ever get more than a yawn out of me.' Why don't you give somebody who isn't as jaded as you are a chance to see some things before you close them down!

LEX Oh, but they sure come begging us to see their work when we don't show up. You should hear the pleas on my answering machine. 'We're putting on an all-Vietnamese Neil Simon!' 'We just know you'll love our Serbo-Croatian *Little Mary Sunshine*. Won't you please, please come?' Then it not so subtly turns into, 'You haven't been to our theater even once! How dare you not come and jump up down at our fifth-rate wonders!'

MEL What do you know about theater anyway? What have you ever done in it except park your fat butt in the seats of a lot of poor, starving theater workers!

LEX My fat butt knows more about theater than your fat butt ever will! (Points to his butt) Because this is the test. What this butt feels when it's sitting there — that's what makes the theater, Mr. Actor-Director-Producer-No-Talent-Loser!

MEL 'I liked the second-from-the-last syllable of the first speech, but I didn't at all care for the third and fifth words from the end.'

LEX You should have heard some of the audience's comments, the way I did. The only difference is that I wrote mine down.

MEL Oh, yes, I have a copy of your review. (Pulls it out exaggeratedly) And here's what I think of it. (He wipes his butt with it three times, then tosses it on the floor) So what do you think of that, Mr. Big-Time Critic?

LEX I found it very moving through the first wipe, but by the third my attention had begun to wander.

MEL You destroyer! That's all you critics are!

LEX (to the others) You know, he brings up a very interesting question. What is the proper relationship of the critic to the artist? Advisor or pimp?

MEL How about jealous rival? How about a bunch of failures who couldn't make it in the theater themselves? So they sit around writing reviews, trying to drag down the rest of us who are actually doing something.

DEENA I am hardly a failure. I just don't toot my own horn like some people.

BARBARA What do you want — a resume? Do you want me to tap-dance for you?

LEX Even I could put on a play about a woman bumping into a wall. I'm sure Harry could. You people always use that as your excuse. You just said I see too much! Which is it to be — I see too much or I don't see enough? Mark here is the most balanced person in the whole Circle, and what did he think of your play?

MEL I don't remember precisely.

LEX Because it was so bland you don't even remember it. Is that kind of review going to help? Mark, do even you remember what you said?

MARK I'll ignore your condescension, Lex. I'll even answer. I liked the way the woman bumped into the wall. The 'corporate greed' message could have been handled less obviously.

LEX Cop-out!

MARK It's not a cop-out. I just don't believe in panning plays for the fun of it.

LEX You really hated it, but were afraid to say so!

MARK Don't ascribe your emotions to me, Lex. I did not hate it. I don't hate as easily as you.

LEX Barbara loved it! Harry didn't understand it! Deena thought she should have been acting it. And good old Mark thought it needed a smidgen more of this and a smidgen less of that and it would have been just 'hunky-dory' and 'peachy-keen' and it 'certainly showed a lot of promise.' You people make me sick.

BARBARA And what do you think you make us, Lex?

HARRY Yeah!

MEL Even your own kind can't stand you!

LEX Oh, so we're having a little *veritas* in our *vino*, are we, and we haven't even had any yet.

MARK You seem to assume, Lex, that because your opinions are so often negative you're of a higher moral caliber than the rest of us. But maybe you're just a prick.

LEX (ironic) Mark! Is it possible you aren't a wimp after all, the way Deena said you were?

MARK (looking at her) Deena said?

DEENA (caught out) Oh, god! . . . Lex! What —

LEX It all boils down to whose opinion of the theatrical truth is going to be expressed. Well, I'll tell you I'll fight to the death for mine.

MEL No one cares about your opinion! Can't you see that? Yours isn't the only one, the right one! You have the most power because you write for the biggest paper, that's all.

HARRY He's got his points, you know.

MEL (to the others) You people all agree with me! I can see it in your faces. (Breaks into "Brylcreem! A little dab'll do ya! Brylcreem! You'll look so debonair!" plus animal noise) . . . I'm sorry! I'm sorry! My emotions!

LEX Let me explain how to handle criticism. Number one — Don't Kill the Critic. You may need him again, for that better show you may do later. Number two — If you can't help getting angry, at least don't beat up the critic and call him names. I know you want to give your side, because then everybody will see how sensible you are and flock to your show. Get real. You'll look like the whining little brat you are. Number three — Don't retire from show business. Don't kill yourself. Skulk off somewhere for a while, nurse your wounds, make a voodoo doll of the critic, if you must, then polish your art, and try again. Number four — If you get a bad review, eat it. Shall I say it again, Mr. Actor-Director-Producer, EAT IT!

MEL That review made even my friends stay away from my theater! We'll see who eats it! Better yet, we'll see who drinks it! (Takes the 'suicide cup' and starts after LEX) Here, have a taste of your own medicine, you poisonous son of a bitch!

LEX Stay away from me! . . . Stay away!

MEL Not even a sip or two? (Chases LEX) 'You'll love it!' It'll be 'captivating!' 'Bring the whole family!' It'll be 'a laugh riot.' . . . Whatever else, I promise you won't be bored!

LEX Are you going to let him do this? You could be next! He won't stop with me!

MEL No, I just want him. The rest of you can go.

HARRY Okay. (Starts to leave)

LEX Harry!

HARRY I never liked you. Did I ever tell you that? You never let me finish my jokes.

LEX None of you is going to back me up? Do you want artists bullying you into compliments, whether you want to give them or not? You've all given some bad reviews, haven't you? You can't let him get away with this. It'll mean the end of the Circle.

MEL You don't seem to get it, do you, Lex? They hate your guts! They don't mind at all if I poison you. In fact, it looks like they're looking forward to it.

LEX Nobody will help? (The other critics don't respond; some look away) (seeing that MEL is right) All my honesty has come to this? This is my reward? This? (sinks to his knees, giving up) Then what's the use? Give me the drink.

MEL I'll give you the drink all right!

LEX The hell you will! (LEX runs, but MEL chases him and overpowers or corners him)

MEL (grabbing LEX by the scruff of the neck and holding him by the hair) Yes, here's your reward, finally. (holds out the cup) Drink!

LEX Does it have to be from a paper cup?

MEL I'm afraid so, pal. (Forces punch into LEX's mouth) Tell me if the grapes are sour enough!

LEX I'm choking! I'm choking!

MEL To the dregs the bitter dregs, you dried-up, you dried up old — (can't think of a word)

LEX You can't even think of an insult? Tell me I should get a job suitable to my talents — like a fluffer in a morgue.

MEL I don't have your talent for nastiness.

LEX You don't have my talent for anything. As a matter of fact, I'd rather be a fluffer in a morgue than have to go to one of your plays again.

MEL (Forces LEX to drink more) Does it have a bratty mellowness with just a hint of nose? No? It's making me positively giddy. (Breaks into a howling or clucking animal)

LEX (breaking away finally) You've poisoned me.

MEL I know.

LEX I *still* hate your work!

MEL Why, you stingy-assed drooling turd, won't you ever shut up!

LEX Drooling turd? That doesn't even make sense.

MEL Maybe you need a little bit more to understand it from my perspective! (Goes to the first punch bowl, fills another cup)

MARK That's enough now.

MEL You want some punch yourself, huh? (Goes after MARK) Do you?

MARK Just stop this, right now! Stop it!

MEL Like this? (throws some into MARK's face) Stop it like that? (Throws some more) Or like this? Stop it like this?

MARK Oh, my god, some got in my mouth!

MEL You shouldn't have interfered. It's your own fault. It's your own fault!

MARK I didn't want to be a wimp! And this is what I get for it!

DEENA Are you all right, Mark? Will you still be able to come see my new show?

MARK I don't know, Deena. I don't know how long I have left. I don't think it's long. I don't feel well at all.

DEENA (to MEL) You fucker! You're wiping out the whole Critics Circle just when I have a show about to open! Maybe you need some of this punch yourself! (Goes for a cupful) You sniveling little snot, you're just having a bad booger day! (She threatens him with a cupful)

MEL Don't push me now! I won't hesitate because you're a woman.

DEENA Do you see me hesitating? (Holds out her cup) Come on, you theatrical bottom feeder, I'll take you on. Come on!

MEL (backing away) For the last time, I'm warning you.

DEENA What's the matter, afraid I'll beat you? You little Mel Mudd puppy!

BARBARA Way to go, Deena!

DEENA Thanks, Barbara. After this is over, can I speak to you privately about something?

BARBARA Of course.

HARRY Here, let me help you, Deena.

DEENA That's okay, Harry. I can do it.

HARRY You might stumble. Let me get him for you. (Grabs at her cup) I'll get him, don't worry.

DEENA I don't need any help. It's all right, Harry!

HARRY But that stuff is dangerous. You could hurt yourself.

(They begin tugging for the paper cup, not spilling any)

DEENA Let go of it, Harry!

HARRY I'm just trying to help!

(They tug harder until finally DEENA is pulled off balance, goes down, and the punch spills into her mouth because of HARRY)

HARRY Did you swallow some?

DEENA (quietly) Yes, Harry, I swallowed some.

HARRY Gee, I didn't mean it. Can I give you that maneuver — the Heinrich Himmler?

DEENA No, Harry, no more maneuvers from you. Just leave me alone to die in peace.

HARRY Do you want to hear a joke before you die?

ALL (except MEL) NO!

HARRY (whining) Why? It's a good one.

MEL (about HARRY) Shall I give this guy some of this punch?

OTHERS YES!

MEL Come here, you.

HARRY Now I don't think I want that.

MEL Sure you do. (Stalks HARRY)

LEX (weakly) Come here, Harry. I'll help you.

HARRY Oh, thank god! (Runs to LEX)

LEX (grabbing HARRY) I've got him! Give him a dose of that! Quick!

DEENA Here, let me help you. (Also grabs HARRY, helps hold him down)

MARK That's not such a bad idea. (He crawls over and helps hold HARRY down)
Got him?

HARRY Hey, why are you all acting like this? . . . By the way, do you all know the difference between a vagina and the Pope's penis?

BARBARA Let me help too. (Goes over and helps hold HARRY down)

MEL (to the helpers) Why, thank you very much. (to HARRY) Here, clown, have a drink on me! (Forces the punch into HARRY'S mouth)

HARRY (released but poisoned) Oh, no! My jokes weren't that bad! Enough to poison me?

MEL My plan succeeded beyond my wildest dreams. Four out of five. (looks at BARBARA)

BARBARA Well, I certainly won't tell anybody.

MEL I know you won't. Because now I'm going to make it five out of five.

BARBARA No, please. People in the theater love me! They need me!

MEL No, they don't. They laugh at you behind your back. If Lex is too cruel, too jaded, you're too (very dismissively) peppy! Not even one star, Barbara, not even one!

LEX I told you being a critic is a thankless job.

MEL Don't worry. It won't be your job much longer. None of your jobs. I seem to be out of poison. Excuse me, while I get just one more cup. (Starts for the punch bowl)

BARBARA We'll see about that! (Beats him to the bowl) Aha, I got here first!

HARRY See, she beat him to the punch . . . bowl. (Laughs) Get it?

OTHERS SHUT UP, HARRY!

MEL But what are you going to do about it, Barbara? Do you think you're stronger than me?

BARBARA Maybe not, but how about this! (She moves the two punch bowls back and forth several times, like a shell game) Let's see you figure out which one has the poison it in now!

MEL I think it's . . . this one. Or is it this one? . . . Oh, my god! I can feel my Tourette's coming back! But I'm going to fight it. (He is threatened with yet another animal noise, commercial, or song, which starts to emerge so that we hear some, but he manages to fight it off.)

DEENA You've got him now, Barbara!

MEL Does she? . . . How about if I mix the two bowls together? (Dips some from both bowls into one cup) What do you think, Barbara? Care for a mixed drink?

BARBARA They'll figure out who did it. Your fingerprints are all over everything.

MEL I don't care. You'll all still be dead. The world will be a better place.

BARBARA Mel, if you get rid of us, more critics will come. You must know that. (piously) There'll always be critics as long as there's theater.

MEL That's the most depressing thing I've ever heard in my life. And you're right. (He breaks down, weeping) No matter what I do here, it won't be enough to protect my work.

LEX Not as long as you're going to let audiences in.

MEL Shut up! You're dead. . . . I can't even silence him now! (Weeps more)

BARBARA (breathing heavily from running, from mixing the bowls) So you give up? You'll stop all this madness?

MEL Yes, I'll stop. . . . I'll stop.

BARBARA You're not trying to trick me now?

MEL I'm beyond tricks. I'm exhausted. (Slumps down)

BARBARA As a matter of fact, I'm exhausted myself. All this running around.

LEX Have a drink, Barbara. I hear it's a great year.

BARBARA (forgetting) That's a marvelous idea! I am so thirsty! (Immediately takes a drink from one of the punch bowls. Then she notices) . . . This isn't the one with the . . . ?

MEL Thank you, Barbara. I couldn't have done it without you.

BARBARA I *don't* have a drinking problem! Really! I just like an occasional pick-me-up! (staggers, finds a place for herself, falls down. The others are in various stages of 'dying,' slumping, lying on the floor, etc.)

MEL So I've managed to bag you all, one way or the other. Do you feel the poison I put in the punch? Is it stealing into your bodies, your brains, slowing down your heartbeats, shutting off your breathing, loosening your bowels?

OTHERS "Loosening our bowels?" "Ugh!" etc.

MEL You can't move, can you? And there's no antidote. I made sure of that. So goodbye, folks. Fond farewells. Is there anything I can do for any of you before you go?

LEX Just one thing.

MEL And what's that?

LEX Whatever you do, at our funeral don't have that actress bump into the wall, okay?

MEL That's a promise.

LEX Then I die happy.

MEL There is one more thing I can do for all of you.

LEX What's that?

MEL Review your deaths. Since you won't be able to review them yourselves.

LEX Don't bother.

MEL (proceeding anyway) Last night I had the rare opportunity to watch Lex Pennywhistle, famed newspaper critic as he lay dying in the meeting room of a San Francisco television station. At first it was thought he was poisoned, but closer scrutiny revealed he was suffering from that modern illness known as over-entertainedinitis, compounded by acute, terminal constipation of the aesthetic gland. As for his performance, it, as usual, was brittle and lacked

warmth. One must note, however, that many of his lines were quite witty, but he stumbled badly at the end. Indeed, most of his last lines were nearly inaudible, then incoherent, and then, alas, the man's oh-so-witty words stopped altogether. . . . As for Barbara Winston now, she died as she lived, by her own hand, after a surfeit of crackers and free drinks. . . . Deena Bruce died of thwarted ambition, cut off in her prime too. What a loss to the theater world! Right, Deena?

DEENA (dying) Mel . . . can I speak to you privately about something?

MEL Know when to quit, baby. Know when to quit. . . . Mark Haley, on the other hand, kept his dignity until the end. How could we ever forget Mark's last words . . . Mark?

MARK I'm sorry for you more than I am for myself.

MEL A gentleman to the end. . . . Harry Flerque, who went out in a blaze of his usual good taste and intelligence, gave new meaning to the term 'functioning moron.'

HARRY What?

MEL All in all, "Death of the Critics" left me blubbering like a baby. I recommend it highly. . . . Anything else? Any deathbed confessions? Make peace with your god, whoever or whatever that might be. Who's first? . . . Nobody?

MARK All right. I have a confession to make.

MEL Be my guest.

MARK . . . What you all took for my gentlemanliness was not that. . . . No, the truth is I didn't get very angry, very excited because I simply didn't give very much of a damn, one way or the other, about anything at all in this world.

MEL Very good, Mark. . . .Deena?

DEENA Am I truly going to die?

MEL Yes, Deena. You can dispense with all your big plans now, finally.

DEENA Okay then. Here goes. . . . I thought I was sly, but all I was a . . . was a . . .

MEL You can say it, Deena. . . . You *can*!

DEENA A conniving little shit.

MEL Splendid, Deena, Splendid! . . . Barbara?

BARBARA It's true I liked everything. . . . But I liked everything — because I was drunk when I saw it.

HARRY I've got one too! A confession.

MEL We don't care, Harry. We'll skip you.

(The OTHERS agree with MEL: "Yeah," "Shut up, Harry," "We don't want to hear," etc.)

HARRY (whining) But I've got a good one!

MEL Lex, how about you? Going to break down in your final moments on this earth? Come on, surprise us.

LEX . . . Well, indeed there is something I want to say.

MEL Well, by all means do.

LEX . . . I wasn't merely demanding high standards from actors, from directors, from producers. That was maybe part of it, at the beginning, a long time ago, but mostly, in fact for years now, I've been motivated by nothing but plain, unadulterated meanness. No one human being should see as much theater as I have. I've become incapable of kindness or goodness or . . . innocence. I've known how jaded I've become for some time, but of course my pride wouldn't let me say it, not even to myself. I simply didn't have the guts to quit reviewing, the way I should have long ago, long, long ago.

MEL 'Marvelous!' 'Enchanting!' (Applauding) I'm very pleased with your confession, Lex, indeed with all of yours! Four and half — no, make that five stars! Hell, make it six! But don't let all this praise change you and swell your heads. Just let it teach you a lesson or two that you've forgotten. Remember the principles of giving criticism? Number one — Nobody sets out to put on a bad show. Number two — If you can't like something, at least don't use that as an excuse to *murder* people in the name of theater. And number three — Spell my name right. . . . And now *I* have a confession to make myself.

DEENA You?

MEL Yes, me. . . . I'm afraid I misled you people a little bit.

DEENA What do you mean?

MEL I didn't put poison in that punch.

OTHERS WHAT!?

MEL I merely used some liquid truth serum. Interesting results, don't you think?
You'll be a little sick, but you'll recover, all too soon.

LEX You bastard!

MEL Now, now, I hope this won't turn you into your old selves again. Wasn't this a nice little moment here? Didn't you all feel purified?

(The others check themselves, check with the others, realizing that they do feel better.)

LEX (after a pause) Maybe you're right. (sighs) I haven't felt this loose in years. All the tension in my body seems to be . . .

MEL . . . gone?

LEX You're right. . . . Believe me, I'm going to stay this way. And I finally think I know how. . . . I'm going to retire from reviewing. Maybe that way, if I ever do go to the theater again, I'll be able to enjoy something with that open-eyed joy I felt when I was . . . But never mind. (flustered) I'm embarrassing myself.

MEL Excellent, Lex, excellent. . . . You know what? I think you've inspired me. (Has a *little* Tourette's fit) This whole evening has. I hadn't counted on this. But I'm getting out of theater myself. It's not easy to say, but maybe I'm not . . . as talented as I'd like to be.

LEX Not you.

MEL I don't want to go on being a wannabe. It's time to be a (hard for him to say) A never . . .

LEX Go on, Mel. You can say it.

MEL (sighs) A . . . a never-was. Oh, god! (Suddenly breaks into singing "Bebop a lula! She's my baby! Bebop a lula! I don't mean maybe! Bebop a lu, bebop a lu, bebop a lu." NO! No more! No more Tourette's syndrome! As God is my witness. (He shudders all over, from head to foot, fighting off another attack of "Bebop a lula." At last he stops, looks at him-self, looks at the others, then says) Am I . . . ? Am I really? . . . I think I'm cured! I think I'm finally cured! (He smiles, relaxed, with a little Tourette's at the end.)

OTHERS (ad lib) "Congratulations, Mel!" "We knew you could do it," etc.

MEL (acknowledging their congratulations) Thank you. Thank you. . . . Anything else anybody wants to say before we go? Lex? How about one *final* review? Okay?

LEX My final one? Sure. . . . I found the punch bowl switch with Barbara somewhat forced, the story generally too antic. But I liked the confession scene, although it got a little serious for a comedy. Of course the whole question of the artist versus the critic, I must say, has been travestied and trivialized in a most shameless, cheap, and tawdry way merely to please an audience. . . . And to think that people nowadays would actually laugh at someone's speech disorder. Shameless! . . . (MEL shakes his finger at the audience) (Lights begin to fade) As for the players now, they were . . .

(Lights up as the actors begin to take their curtain call, and the audience lets the company know how it feels about what it's seen, no doubt with applause.)

BLACKOUT