

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING P.C.
— a one-act by DANIEL CURZON (curzon@pacbell.net)
(Winner of the 1999 national New Play contest for *Godot Arrives*)

SYNOPSIS: A mother from Berkeley interviews a suitor of her daughter to determine if he has the “proper” views for our age.

CHARACTERS: (2)

MRS. BERKELEY, a forceful, politically correct matron, over forty
JACK WIRTHLISS, a suitor to Mrs. Berkeley’s daughter

SETTING: A parlor, present day, with a small table and a chair or two.

AT RISE: (JACK is pacing nervously.)

JACK Dear, oh dear! (Paces some more.) Oh, dear!

(Enter MRS. BERKELEY.)

JACK Oh, there you are, Mrs. Berkeley! I was beginning to worry.

MRS. B You needn’t have. I was shopping at the Workers’ Paradise Cooperative and stayed a little longer than I meant to. There were some Peruvian figs on sale that looked especially appealing.

JACK Well, no harm done. I didn’t mind waiting.

MRS. B I should hope not, Mr. Wirthliss. One can never spend too much time examining the fruits of the peasant class. As I’m sure you agree.

JACK (not strongly) Of, of course. Did you buy some of the peasant figs?

MRS. B Unfortunately no, Mr. Wirthliss. They were rather rotted and covered with a strange purple fungus.

JACK Really! What a shame.

MRS. B Yes, I’m afraid the exploitative corporate owners did not provide sufficient tools or training to prevent a bad crop from their workers.

JACK Pardon me, but didn’t you say the figs looked especially appealing?

MRS. B Because they had been produced by peasants with their own gnarled, calloused hands! Believe me, Mr. Wirthliss, there is no greater sight on this earth than the gnarled, calloused hands of peasants!

(JACK absorbs this, decides not to reply.)

JACK Why don't you call me Jack!

MRS. B. Why don't we save that informality until such time as we see whether you and my daughter are truly going to make the match we all hope for.

JACK Fine . . . All right. Won't you have a seat, please?

MRS. B. (looking around) I would, but I couldn't help noticing when I arrived that you have obviously not laid out your apartment in conformity with the principles of feng shui. (pronounced *fung shway*) (accusingly) Have you?

JACK No, I guess not. Feng shui?

MRS. B. Exactly as I thought! That table over there clearly needs to be moved at least three inches to the east!

JACK You think so? Well, I can move it, if you like. (He starts to.)

(MRS. B waits while he moves the table.)

JACK Is that east? . . . How's this?

MRS. B. (testing the "feel") Not quite.

JACK How about this? (Adjusts the table.)

MRS. B. (emphatically) Yes! I feel *infinitely* better already! Don't you?

JACK (going along) Sure.

MRS. B. We in the West can never learn enough from other cultures, you can be sure of that, Mr. Wirthliss.

JACK As long as they're not just imported superstitions, I suppose.

MRS. B. Never, never be culturally arrogant, young man. It isn't becoming.

JACK Sorry.

MRS. B. I also couldn't help noticing that your front door faces in a thoroughly unlucky direction.

JACK (joking) That must account for the last year or two! (Smiles)

MRS. B. If I were you, I would see about having your front door moved.

JACK But I don't own this place. I can't move the door. I just rent.

MRS. B. What do you think rent boards are for, Mr. Wirthliss? I'd speak to mine if I were you. And soon. Failing that, I would expect you to vacate this apartment before any wedding that may or may not take place.

JACK Really? I just got this place. It wasn't easy. There are lots of people —

MRS. B. You can't actually expect a sweet girl like Gwendolen to live in an apartment that has a front door facing in the *wrong* direction, can you?

JACK I'll see what I can do. Do you feel like sitting now? (Points to a chair) How's my chair's feng shui holding up?

MRS. B. The chair is satisfactory, Mr. Wirthliss. But I detect a certain element of dismissal in your tone. I must say it is not helping us to get off to a good start.

JACK I'm sorry. I'll try to do better.

MRS. B. Let's hope you do, young man. For I know that Gwendolyn adores you, and I would hate to see her disappointed for even one second, should matters here not prove simpatico.

JACK Maybe *I'd* better sit. (He does.)

(MRS. B. takes out a notepad and pen.)

MRS. B. Excuse me if I take some notes on our conversation, won't you? I would like to refer to them later when Mr. Berkeley and I make our joint decision.

JACK We could use my video camera, if you'd prefer. (lightly) So there's no room for error!

MRS. B. The notepad should be sufficient. What with computers and such, I rarely use a pen or pencil anymore, and I would like to be sure that I keep my mind and my gross motor skills intact. (Opens the notepad.) Now I feel obligated to tell you that you are not high on my list of eligible bachelors for our Gwendolen.

JACK No?

MRS. B. Yes. Neither Mr. Berkeley nor myself has ever seen you at a single protest.

JACK I confess I have never been to a protest of any kind, Mrs. Berkeley.

MRS. B. Hmm. Well, I am willing to overlook that, if your subsequent answers should prove to be what a truly concerned mother requires. Do you believe in de-clawing cats?

JACK Did you say de-clawing?

MRS. B. Yes, surgically and needlessly removing the front claws of domesticated cats without their consent. Do you approve of that practice?

JACK I'm afraid I've never owned a cat.

MRS. B. No one has ever "owned" a cat.

JACK I beg your pardon?

MRS. B. Human beings do not own animals. Sometimes they are guardians. Temporary guardians at best.

JACK Well, I don't really like cats. Allergies, you see. So I doubt very much that I would ever de-claw a cat.

MRS. B. (writing that down) I will note that as prevarication, Mr. Wirthliss.

JACK Please call me Jack! Everybody does.

MRS. B. About your last name, Mr. Wirthliss. I can't help noticing the spelling. W-I-R-T-H –

JACK (continuing) L-I-S-S. Wirthliss.

MRS. B. And what is the origin of that surname?

JACK Oh, it must be Old Something or other. I think it was probably meant to be a pun. You know, worthless – wirthliss.

MRS. B. (not impressed) I see.

JACK Of course my family always pronounced it *liss*. (over-articulating) Jack Wirth*liss* – that's me!

MRS. B. (making a note) Interesting. Do you smoke?

JACK (hesitating) Do I smoke?

MRS. B. (pen poised) This one must be fairly easy to answer, Mr. Wirth*liss*. Do you or don't you?

JACK Ah . . . I guess I have to admit I do occasional have a puff.

MRS. B. (frowning) Not cigarettes?

JACK (very uncomfortable) Ah, no, not cigarettes. . . . Pot!

MRS. B. You smoke marijuana, Mr. Wirthliss!?

JACK Not that often. Just once in a great while. Only under stress and when –

MRS. B. I am very glad to hear it . . . Jack.

JACK You are?

MRS. B. I assume that your use of it – for stress, as you indicate – is completely for medical purposes.

JACK (with a too-straight face) Oh, completely.

MRS. B. Mr. Berkeley and I have been known to partake of a little cannabis ourselves, but I am afraid we once overdid the recreational use of it, as have many. But if yours is *medical* marijuana, then I am quite proud to hear that you standing up to government interference with our Constitutional rights. It has recently come to light that no less a personage than John Hancock himself smoked medical marijuana!

JACK Amazing! And thank you.

MRS. B. I have always thought that a man who is thinking about getting married, should know where he stands on important matters. Where do you stand on the spotted owl, Jack?

JACK (thinking) Where do I stand? (an attempt at levity) Well, I can say in all honesty I have never stood on a spotted owl!

MRS. B. Is that intended as levity?

JACK Not even once. . . (backing off the jokes) Okay, guess not. To be honest, Mrs. Berkeley, I don't believe I've ever seen a spotted owl.

MRS. B. Exactly! They're endangered. No wonder we don't see them! I like your answer, young man. (Writes a note)

JACK You do? Well, good. Are we finished then?

MRS. B. Oh, it's not so easy as all that, Mr. Wirthliss. We're not done yet, and when

we are I will inform you of that fact. Now, when it comes to opinions, it seems to me that one has either the correct ones or the incorrect ones. Which ones would you say that you have?

JACK Must they be all one or the other, Mrs. Berkeley? That seems to me to be rather...

MRS. B. Are you waffling, Jack?

JACK I'm trying not to.

MRS. B. You believe in free speech, do you not?

JACK Oh, yes, very much.

MRS. B. Good! Then tell me your opinion — about opinions.

JACK Well, it seems to me that it makes more sense to have some of one kind, if that's what you believe about a particular topic, and maybe some of another kind, if it's a different topic. You know, sort of mix and match, depending on the . . .

(She stares hard at him.)

MRS. B. I see. Well, I think I've heard quite enough already. (Starts to leave.)

JACK Don't go! Please! I can change my opinions!

MRS. B. I don't know, Jack. You don't seem to take this matter of free speech very seriously. (sternly) One might think that you don't *care*. Some of us care very deeply, my boy. We must protect free speech like a delicate bloom, or surely it will wither and be no more! So tell me where you really stand on the following issues! Ready?

JACK Fire away!

MRS. B. The rain forest!

JACK (not sure) I'm for it?

MRS. B. I'm very pleased to hear that, Jack. War?

JACK Which one?

MRS. B. (sternly) Jack?

JACK (guessing) I'm against it?

MRS. B. Excellent! Do you own a car?

JACK I admit I do own a car, Mrs. Berkeley.

MRS.B. Not an SUV, I hope?

JACK Oh, no, no. Nothing as big as that.

MRS. B. A gas-guzzler?

JACK Practically none. Actually it puts gas back into the ground.

MRS. B. (unsmiling) What does that mean?

JACK It has a leak.

MRS. B. So you believe in polluting the environment?!

JACK Well, I wouldn't call it a *belief*. I just haven't had a chance to get it fixed yet. I intend to – tomorrow.

MRS. B. In the meantime naturally you are taking public transportation.

JACK I don't really care for the way some people behave on public transportation, especially buses, Mrs. Berkeley. I'm sorry, but I have to tell you this.

MRS. B. You sound like a man who has been raised in wealth. True?

JACK Ah . . . yes, both my parents came from money.

MRS. B. I suspected as much! I am never wrong about such things. Spurning the lower classes while riding on their backs. It wouldn't surprise me if you had your own personal rickshaw driver! Mr. Berkeley and myself, unfortunately, also come from money, but I am happy to say that we have re-invested every cent of it in stocks and bonds with companies that are exclusively and entirely environmentally friendly! On that point you can be assured that our consciences are absolutely clear!

JACK Well, how nice! And which public transportation would you recommend as the best, Mrs. Berkeley?

MRS. B. Oh, I never take public transportation myself! But for young people I think it is one of those character traits that define a son-in-law!

JACK Really? Well, I'd better get on it real soon, hadn't I? (Pause) That is, get on public transportation . . .

MRS. B. I get the joke, young man. It just occurs to me that this jocular attitude of yours betrays a certain nonchalance, or even a lack of seriousness. While Mr. Berkeley, Gwendolen, and I all would certainly like a son-in-law with a sense of humor, having too much of a sense of humor, or, worse, having a sense of humor about inappropriate topics, may indicate a careless and even suspicious political, social, and moral attitude to which we clearly would not wish to subject our darling and only daughter.

JACK (trying to change the subject) Would you like some coffee? Where are my manners. I made some. (Points off.) It's probably still hot.

MRS. B. I might have a cup at that.

JACK Great! (Heading offstage) Milk? Sugar?

MRS. B. Just black. It's organically grown, I assume.

JACK Absolutely. I'll get some. (Goes off.)

MRS. B. (looking around his apartment, making notes on her notepad) No ivory – good! . . . No television set – good! . . .

JACK (calling) It's almost ready!

MRS. B. (calling) It's grown on non-exploitative plantations, right?

(JACK entering with an empty cup.)

JACK I don't know about that, Mrs. Berkeley. . . . (hopefully) It's acid free!

MRS. B. Never mind the coffee, Mr. Wirthliss. I hope you aren't going to expect Gwendolen to do all the cooking, including buying and making the coffee, like some sexist relic of the past!

JACK Wouldn't dream of it. I like to cook. I'm just not very good at it. And I'm more nervous today, Mrs. Berkeley, than I normally am. That's why I'm all thumbs.

MRS. B. Because I'm here? I hope the presence of a strong woman doesn't intimidate you, young man. Because I have raised Gwendolen to be equally strong.

JACK Some might say that you can be strong by bending a little.

MRS. B. (harshly) What?!

JACK Just a little. Not a lot!

MRS. B. You want to bend Gwendolen to your will, like some Adolph Hitler!

JACK That isn't exactly what I meant.

MRS. B. Say what you mean, Mr. Wirthliss! And mean what you say!

JACK A very good principle, Mrs. Berkeley. Alas, it doesn't always seem possible to follow it with some people.

MRS. B. I trust that you are not insinuating that you can't speak your mind around me, young man.

JACK Oh, I'd never insinuate such a thing around you, Mrs. B.

MRS. B. *Did* you call me Mrs. B?

JACK I'm sorry. Mrs. Berkeley!

MRS. B. No, I rather like it . . . Mrs. B.

JACK You do?

MRS. B. It shows a certain dangerousness.

JACK Dangerousness?

MRS. B. I like a rich young man like yourself who isn't afraid to abbreviate a person's name, even a person he barely knows. This has all been something of a test, Jack. But not quite the one you thought.

JACK No?

MRS. B. It's been a test to see how well you could *thwart*.

JACK Thwart?

MRS. B. All in all you seem like a well-bred, thoughtful young person who chooses his words carefully.

JACK I try to be.

MRS. B. No, Jack, no! When you called me Mrs. B, I spied the potential for true correctness in you!

JACK You did?

MRS. B. Because I can see that you would, over time and with the proper instruction, become one of the leading activists of our time!

JACK I could?

MRS. B. You didn't hesitate to – well, yes, you did hesitate, and quite a bit in fact – but ultimately you took the bull by the horns and were not reluctant to shorten the name of someone who could stop you from marrying the girl of your dreams!

JACK I did, didn't I!

MRS. B. You start with shortening people's names. Then you advance to overthrowing the government! By the time you're my age you could see every single institution in our whole corrupt way of life thoroughly gasping its last breath!

JACK I could, couldn't I!

MRS. B. I knew there was something in you when I first saw you today!

JACK You did, didn't you!

MRS. B. Jack, let me embrace you!

JACK Okay!

MRS. B. Oh, Jack!

JACK May I call you *mother*?

MRS. B. Don't ask, Jack! Don't ask!

(They embrace.)

MRS. B. I never thought I'd find a suitable son-in-law among all the namby-pamby polite suitors Gwendolen has experienced all these years. But finally at last it happened today! And what have you learned today, Jack, what have you learned?

JACK (a bit of a tongue twister at the end here) Oh, Mother, when it comes to society, I have at last learned the vital importance of *thoroughly thwarting authority*!

MRS. B. Oh, Jack, my future son-in-law! The anarchist!

(They embrace again.)

BLACKOUT