

NEXT ACTOR, PLEASE!

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT

By Claudia Haas

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SYNOPSIS: At an audition, the director is overwhelmed when the actors include “The Swamp Sheik,” a dictator-like Shakespearean actress and a delusional secret agent. Next to them, the vindictive gypsy, the homeless guy and the actress prone to panic attacks seem normal.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(THREE MEN, SEVEN WOMEN)

- JESS (f)Overwrought director (*31 lines*)
JELLYBEAN JAZZ (m)A jazzy actor with vision (*25 lines*)
SUSANNAH SPEARE (f)The quintessential Shakespearean actress (*25 lines*)
JULIET (f)Looking for her Romeo – who just happens to be a dog (*23 lines*)
ARNOLD (m)Desperate actor – in need of therapy (*17 lines*)
ESME (f)Thinks she’s a secret agent (*17 lines*)
MELISANDE (f)An actress prone to panic attacks (*18 lines*)
GYPSY ROSALIE (f)One determined gypsy (*22 lines*)
GLORIA (f)Actress having a bad day (*31 lines*)
JOE (m)Homeless guy (*35 lines*)

Time: A “normal” day, today.

Running time: 35 minutes

SETTING:

A bare room with a desk and a chair; a rack with various costumes may be behind the desk. Pictures and resumes adorn the desk.

AT RISE:

JESS (the Director) is desperately going through pictures and resumes. She is mumbling to herself and frustrated.

JESS: No . . . no . . . no . . . who knows . . . no . . . I don't know . . . no . . . *is there no one who can play Romeo and Juliet?* Coffee. I need coffee. *(She turns the coffee mug upside down. Nothing comes out. She gives an involuntary shake.)*

No! No more coffee! I need a Romeo and Juliet. What was I thinking? Why direct *Romeo and Juliet!* SOMEONE SEND IN THE ACTOR, PLEASE!

JAZZ enters. He is one jazzy dude. He may even be plugged into an iPod. He mimes playing an instrument.

JESS: *(Continues.)* Uhhh . . . hello?

JAZZ: Whoa, little lady! You're interrupting the rhythm, know what I mean?

JESS: It's been a long day. Do you have a resume?

JAZZ: I'm the resume, dig? My life experience is all here . . . *(He points to his head.)* Don't need no piece of paper. I fly solo! I'm Jellybean Jazz, the man with the music.

JESS: Your parents named you Jellybean Jazz?

JAZZ: Stage name, lady. I tell it like it is.

JESS: Oh. I can work with that. I guess. What monologue are you doing?

JAZZ: Don't do no mon-o-logues, lady! I got the music. I got the moves. I got vision!

JESS: Yeah. Great. Here. Read this.

JAZZ: What's that?

JESS: A script.

JAZZ: Don't do scripts. I am all about the mel-o-dy!

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JESS: It's Shakespeare. He wrote scripts. Act I, Scene 5 – the “she doth teach the torches to burn bright.”

JAZZ: “Doth?” I don't *do* doth! I bring you background, harmony, solos -

JESS: Wait a minute! Aren't you here for Romeo?

JAZZ: I'm here for the vision! I'm here to bring it all alive! Now, where do you see this taking place?

JESS: What are you doing? Testing me? I'll have you know – I have this all worked out. It's 1860 in Virginia. Tensions between the north and south are high - Romeo is from the south and Juliet is from the north - -

JAZZ: Romeo and Juliet in pre-Civil War - been done to death. Old news. Now listen to how I see it - my way rocks!

JESS: But – I mapped everything out. The plantation where they meet. Mercutio ... Benvolio – I know what I'm doing!

JAZZ: Listen up! I'm here to break it down for you. Our generation's got no use for words, dig? We latch onto the music – we got vision – we do the essence of Shakespeare. Now – how you going to make the play rel-e-vant?

JESS: It's a timeless love story – of course it's relevant. And the background of the north and the south – well – come on – you have to admit that's good.

JAZZ: That is so – five minutes ago. Pay attention, little lady. You are in “Directing School!” The setting – is the Bayou. It's a humid summer night. In the background a lone saxophone is singing his soulful tune. Rosalind has broken up with Romeo and he goes to drown his sorrows in the swamp –

JESS: Swamp?

JAZZ: Yeah – bog, march, wetland, quagmire – whatever you want to call it – I'm open. And as Romeo slogs through quicksand to escape society – up from the swamp comes Juliet!

JESS: Juliet enters from the swamp????

JAZZ: Yeah. She's the ultimate swamp princess. Of course her family is against her marrying the dude who lives on land –

JESS: Swamp princess????

JAZZ: That's what I said. Work with me, lady! Together you and I can break open the conventions of the stage and bring in a new era of swamp theatre!

JESS: So – you're not interested in playing Romeo – you want to direct this piece?

JAZZ: I don't direct – I play my notes and conjure up swamps. I make music from the marsh! I am the Supporter of the Slough!

JESS: You know – I only took this job 'cause I needed a classical credential. I have been auditioning people for days and I can't find anyone who can say these words – much less have a – swamp vision. I think – you're really much more suited to direct this. How would you like this job? I'm sure I can sub-contract.

JAZZ: Whoa! You handing me a new gig?

JESS: Yeah – it's yours – ROMEO AND JULIET IN THE SWAMP! Now you just have to cast it. Lots of luck! I'll send in the next actor. Ciao!

JAZZ: Later, gator! Cool. I got me a real job. I'm the genuine Director!

He looks at the rack of costumes and finds a black cape or something outrageous.

JAZZ: *(Continues.)* New rags. Gotta look the part. I am King of the Swamp, Director of the Play!

SUSANNAH enters. She is the quintessential Shakespearean actress. Trained at RADA in London, superior in all ways to all people and possibly even talented.

SUSANNAH: Susannah Speare . . . here is my resume. I don't want to waste your time. You have your Juliet. Sit down please. *(SUSANNAH notices the cape.)* What are you - the Vampire Director?

JAZZ: I'm the Baron of the Bayou, the Swamp Sheik, the -

SUSANNAH: Spare me. Look. Listen. Learn. I have this all worked out. Juliet is an ancient Greek princess who falls in love with a Roman soldier – who is Romeo. It's never been done that way

before. I shall now – act! (*She puts on her “acting” voice.*) “The clock struck nine when I did send the nurse! In half an hour she promised to return! (*In sudden shock.*) Perchance she cannot meet him! (*In relief.*) That’s not so! (*In disgust.*) O! She is lame! (*In the essence of romance.*) Love’s sweet heralds should be thoughts, which ten times faster glides than the sun beams! Driving back shadows over luring hills! (*In utter fury.*) Now is the sun upon the highmost hill of this day’s journey, and from nine till twelve is three long hours, yet she is not come!” There’s more but the Nurse does come and she throws herself at the Nurse’s feet. Stand over there! (*JAZZ does so and SUSANNAH throws herself at his feet.*) “O honey Nurse! What news!” And of course, the Nurse is mad at Juliet because she has been treated badly in town - -

JAZZ: Yeah – well – I don’t think you got the drift of this Juliet-in-the-Swamp -

SUSANNAH: No swamp! We are in ancient Greece! Now, sit down! I’m not done! Juliet undertakes a plan to have them married.

JAZZ: Yeah, this script analysis doesn’t have any point -

SUSANNAH: Quiet! In the end – she has to devise a plan that is dangerous for them both. She takes a sleeping potion – but at the last minute has doubts -

JAZZ: I’m not sure I’m going with the Shakespeare script -

SUSANNAH: You will refrain from speaking until I am done! (*She takes out a vial and dismisses JAZZ.*) “Farewell. God knows when we shall meet again. I have a faint, cold fear thrills through my veins that almost freezes up the heat of life. Come vial. What if this mixture do not work at all? (*She shakes JAZZ.*) Should I be married then tomorrow morning?”

JAZZ: Don’t bring in your personal life.

SUSANNAH: “No, no. This shall forbid it. Lie thou there.”

JAZZ lies down.

SUSANNAH: Not you! The vial!

JAZZ: (*Getting up.*) I knew that.

SUSANNAH: “What if it be a poison which the Friar subtly hath ministered to have me dead?”

JAZZ: You’re scaring me.

SUSANNAH: Not another word! Speak again and I’ll have you drawn and quartered!

During the rest of the speech, JAZZ will write something down on the desk and crawl out of the room. SUSANNAH is lost in emotion.

SUSANNAH: *(Continues.)* Again! “Romeo! Romeo! Romeo! Here’s drink! I drink to thee!” *(SUSANNAH drinks and “dies.”)* So, I’m lying here assuming I got the part. *(A beat.)* All’s - quiet. I must have gotten to you. *(She gets up.)* Hello? Hello! What’s this? *(Reading.)* “Dear Miss Actress: You are one scary cat. I split. Have fun directing.” Directing. I like that. *(She goes behind the table and looks at the pictures and resumes. She may put something on from the costume rack, perhaps a Greek laurel wreath. JULIET enters.)*

JULIET: Excuse me, the Swamp Sheik said you wanted to see me.

SUSANNAH: For the audition?

JULIET: I’m looking for my Romeo.

SUSANNAH: You’re wrong for the part.

JULIET: I’m Juliet.

SUSANNAH: No, honey, I just got this job and I’m Juliet.

JULIET: No. Really – here’s my ID – I am Juliet. And I’m searching for my Romeo. He’s really cute. Big soulful eyes.

SUSANNAH: *(Reading ID.)* Juliet Klockenmeyer. You’re Juliet all right. But I am the Capulet.

JULIET: That’s all right. As long as you understand that I am the Juliet who needs her Romeo. What did you do with him?

SUSANNAH: Actually, I’m still searching for Romeo.

JULIET: Oh! I thought you would have found him by now. The sign outside said ‘Romeo and Juliet.’

SUSANNAH: Yes, but not till May. We have to get it ready first.

JULIET: I’m here. I’m ready. Give me my Romeo and I’ll leave.

SUSANNAH: *I’m still looking for Romeo! And I’m Juliet!*

JULIET: Romeo will only come to me.

SUSANNAH: What do you think this is – a dating service?

JULIET: I know you're not a dating service.

SUSANNAH: Thank goodness for that.

JULIET: I just want my dog. Cute little cock-a-poo. Curly dark hair.
Big sad eyes.

SUSANNAH: Come again?

JULIET: My dog – Romeo – I've come to get Romeo and then I'll
take him home.

SUSANNAH: You have a dog – named Romeo?

JULIET: He ran away yesterday. I've been looking and looking for
him – when I saw your sign – Romeo and Juliet! I don't know how
you figured out that I was Romeo's owner but I'm glad you did.

SUSANNAH: I trained at RADA in London to become a classical
actress and I find myself as a Lost and Found for Dogs?

JULIET: Are you going to give me Romeo or not?

SUSANNAH: I don't have Romeo! I'm looking for Romeo!

JULIET: Then why did you put the sign in the window saying
ROMEO AND JULIET -

SUSANNAH: *I didn't put the sign in the window!*

JULIET: *Then who did? I need my Romeo and I want him now!*

JOE: *(From offstage.)* QUIET in there! Some of us are trying to
sleep!

JULIET: *(JULIET approaches SUSANNAH.)* I'm warning you – I am
quite dangerous when deprived of my pooch. I – bite!

SUSANNAH: Stay away now – I'm not the one you want – I'm not
the one you need – I just came to audition and now I am out of
here!

*SUSANNAH runs out while JULIET searches the desk and the coat
rack for ROMEO. ARNOLD enters. He peeks in and comes in as
meekly as possible.*

ARNOLD: Excuse me? Are you ready for me?

JULIET: Do you have my Romeo?

ARNOLD: After I audition maybe you can tell me.

JULIET: I don't care what you do. I just want Romeo!

ARNOLD: Okay. I'm trying here, give me a minute and I'll see if I can deliver Romeo. You don't mind if I warm-up, do you? Auditions make me nervous.

JULIET: Suit yourself. Romeo? Rooo-meee-o!

JULIET goes through clothes looking for ROMEO. ARNOLD deep breathes a few times, does some stretching and then some physical exercises. He opens and closes his mouth, and intones some vowel sounds.

ARNOLD: AAAA-EEE-III-OOOO-UUUUU; AAAA-EEEE-III-OOOO-UUUUUU –

JOE: (*Peeking in.*) Is there a sick cat in here?

JULIET: There better not be. Romeo's scared of cats.

JOE: 'Cause some people came here to sleep. Don't need to listen to sick cats.

HE exits.

ARNOLD: Oh! That's not the effect I was looking for. Excuse me. (*HE turns around three times, claps twice and then jumps.*) All right I'm ready. No! Wait! I can't remember if it's good luck to turn right or left! (*HE turns around the other way three times, claps and jumps.*) "Oh Romeo, Romeo – wherefore art thou Romeo"

JULIET: Ohh! You're looking for Romeo, too!

ARNOLD: That can't be right. Oh no! I said Juliet's lines! Can I start over?

JULIET: I don't care what you do. I need to find Romeo! And he's obviously not here!

JULIET exits.

ARNOLD: I can't believe I did that! I was so bad I sent the director out of the room to look for another Romeo! What will I tell my therapist? (*He gets his cell phone to call his therapist.*) Hello? Can I speak to Dr. Freuder? It's Arnold. Arnold Bluestein. Yes.

It's an emergency. I just scared away another director. LISTEN! I DON'T CARE WHO SHE'S WITH – MY TRUST FUND IS RUNNING OUT SOON AND I WILL HAVE TO GET A REAL JOB! All right. I'll hold.

JOE: I'm not telling you again. If you can't keep quiet in here, I'll have you evicted!

HE exits.

ARNOLD: Who is that guy?

ARNOLD sinks down. ESME enters and looks around.

ESME: Hello? Anyone here? (*ESME searches the room and comes face to face with Arnold and screams. ARNOLD screams.*) Why are you following me? People are always following me! What do you want? I have no money! I won't give up my secrets! All right! I'm a spy! You got it out of me but I won't tell you anything else! ALL RIGHT! I work for Oscar – now split. I can't tell you any more under pain of death!

ARNOLD: Hello? Dr. Freuder? GET ME OFF HOLD! I HATE THAT MUSIC!

ESME: ALL RIGHT! I planted the music. But only because Oscar told me, too. STOP INTERROGATING ME!

ARNOLD: Are – you here – to audition?

ESME: *You just blew my cover! How'd you know I was an actress? Oh! You're good. You're really good! Where did you train? In Prague? I wanted to take my training in Prague but I couldn't get into that program. No! I was not good enough for Prague! I had to settle for Hoboken.*

ARNOLD: Hoboken?

ESME: It's sort of the "Spy School for Dummies." This is my first assignment.

ARNOLD: Assignment?

ESME: To infiltrate the *Romeo and Juliet Missile System*. You did it again! You made me give away state secrets!

ARNOLD: Yes. I'm still here. Dr. Freuder will see me in thirty minutes!

ESME: Dr. Freuder?

ARNOLD: Yes, I'll be there. Anywhere but here.

ESME: Do you have Dr. Freuder on the phone?

ARNOLD: Not any more.

ESME: She's been trying to "treat" me! Can you believe that? She says she wants to get rid of my illusion that I'm a secret agent! That is so not-happening!

ARNOLD: Yeah . . . well . . . I'll tell her you said "hello."

ESME: "Hello?" That's the secret code word! How'd you know that?

ARNOLD: Good-bye.

ARNOLD exits.

ESME: The other secret code word! It's a good thing I escaped from him! What's this? (*SHE picks up a piece of paper.*) "You are one scary cat. Have fun directing!" Directing? I like that! Send in the next actor, please!

ESME dons a beret and becomes "the director" as MELISANDE, the actress who stresses easily, enters.

MELISANDE: Excuse me, are you the director?

ESME: The Director? Oh! Yes, yes, I am the director.

MELISANDE: I am Melisande. Here is my resume. Do you know there's an odd guy sleeping in a cart out there? I don't mind. I mean – you're the director and if you like odd guys sleeping outside the door – that works for me. I'm a team player. I'll work with odd people. Do you want me to read from the script? I can do it standing on my head or in the middle of a somersault. Do you want an English accent or a southern one? How about New York? Set me a task and I can do it! And I really, really need this job. I will make coffee and bring it to you. And I bake cinnamon rolls. Do you like cinnamon rolls? I could bring them to rehearsal?

ESME: Cinnamon rolls? That's a code word, you know. It means to be on "high alert."

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MELISANDE: I can be alert. I can handle the pressure.

ESME: Hey, you're not from "the other side," are you?

MELISANDE: Do you want me to be? Are you pressuring me?

ESME: No!

MELISANDE: Then, I'm not. I'm on your side, my side, off-sides – whatever you would like. I've always been the lead in the school play. When we did a show in first grade for Health Week – I was the toothbrush! You don't know the stress! Six years old and I handled the lead. I never cracked. Never! I stood my ground.

ESME: You played a "toothbrush"? I'm sure that's code – for something.

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